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Peacebuilding through education in Northeast Asia: a critical reflection on a peace education common curriculum guide project

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ABSTRACT

This article critically appraises the Common Curriculum Guide for Peace Education in Northeast Asia developed by the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) under the auspices of UNESCO. The authors – who drafted the Guide – reflect on the development process, which involved researchers and educators in and beyond schools in China, Japan and South Korea, three countries entangled with historical conflicts and sociopolitical tensions. The article takes the project as a case to explore (1) how to overcome the paradoxical constraints of working within/beyond nation-states in/through a UNESCO project; (2) how static cultural conceptions in the region limit the possibilities of peacebuilding; (3) how issues of censorship affected the project, including the concern of practicing critical peace education in censored contexts and (4) how to navigate between a common curriculum and the need to contextualize it to local settings. Findings are theorized through the lens of peace education as a global common good, leading to various interpretations of the acceptance and resistance to regionally developed guidelines for practicing peace education in and across national contexts. The article concludes by drawing implications for peacebuilding through education for other regions beyond Northeast Asia.

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Introduction

Peace education in East Asia is a vibrant field. Schools, universities, civil society organizations, and international agencies in China, Japan, and South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) operate many peace education programmes to learn lessons from wars of the past (Tanigawa, 2015), to send citizens overseas for volunteer aid projects (Gibson, 2011), and to promote efforts towards reconciliation and unification (Kim, 2020). A recent review on education for peace in the Asia-Pacific reveals “a wide geographical and thematic distribution of research contexts where peace and international understanding education is in practice in the Asia-

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Pacific region today” (Eom & Kester, 2022, p. 6). As war, climate change, economic recessions, geopolitical conflicts, mass migration, and refugee crises continue to affect the region, these peace education programmes seek to offer transformative responses. Indeed, peace through education is a key goal of UNESCO’s contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which connect this goal to broader issues such as climate change, sustainability, gender equity, and civic engagement.

However, some scholars show the darker side of peace education initiatives that within these contexts peace education may take on a nationalistic tone. Scholars in China have explained that national defence education for peace takes priority, claiming that “if you want peace, you must prepare for war” (APCEIU Ed., 2021, p. 30). Yi and Jung (2019) find that peace education in Korea takes a similar turn towards national security interests, where in earlier years, peace education in Korea was framed as a form of anti-communist education (Lee, 1990), and in more recent times it oscillates between national unification education and education for peace (Kang, 2018).

Ho and Barton (2020), too, highlight ongoing tensions in the region, determining whether justice or harmony should be the guiding principle of civic pedagogy. While justice emphasizes rights and the rectification of injustices, harmony prioritizes the cultivation of positive relationships – among individuals and between humanity and nature. However, they caution that an uncritical emphasis on harmony – one that neglects or suppresses conflict – can be detrimental. In response, they propose the notion of *critical harmony*, which intentionally integrates a substantive perspective by acknowledging and engaging with conflict and tension, affirming diversity and difference, and striving to balance competing voices (p. 276). Thus, the scholarship indicates varying interests concerning the teaching of peace, global citizenship, and East Asian national identities. Embedded within these competing discourses are tensions with ethnocentrism, statist orientations, and contestations towards efforts of building solidarity across communities and contexts.

Moreover, efforts towards peace through education are often not immediately apparent in a review of the extant literature. Primarily, this is because many peace education programmes are not named as such; instead, they operate under other names, such as democratic education (Kang, 2002), global citizenship education (Hong, 2020), multicultural education (Nakaya, 2018) or international education (Yi & Jung, 2019), to name a few. Indeed, many peace education programmes that promote intercultural understanding may be found under the additional monikers of conflict resolution education, moral education, or citizenship education (Cremin & Bevington, 2017; Ho & Barton, 2020).

Meanwhile, from a pedagogical standpoint, scholars are split. Some have argued for common curricula (Danesh, 2008), interactive and democratic pedagogies (Snauwaert, 2020), and common standards (Carter, 2008) in the promotion of peace through education, while others have opted for context-specific postcolonial approaches (Kester et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2018). Additionally, contemporary debates in the peace and education literature in and beyond East Asia include: constraints and affordances that intercultural interpretations contribute to educational understanding for peace (Cremin, 2016; Dietrich, 2013); challenges in navigating between local, regional, and global interests (Romano, 2018); issues of censorship in/through education and peacebuilding (Hook,

1979) and the state-centrism of peace education theory and practice, even perhaps especially within the UN system (Kester, 2020).

Given these emerging concerns within the field, we turn to reflect on our own participation in a 2-year cross-national project to develop a common curriculum framework for peace education in Northeast Asia (hereafter referred to as NEA) (APCEIU et al., 2023). The questions guiding this inquiry include: (1) How might it be possible to overcome the constraints of the paradox of working within and beyond nation-states in/through a UNESCO project? (2) How do static cultural conceptions in the region limit the possibilities of peacebuilding? (3) How did issues of censorship affect the project, including the concern of practicing critical peace education in censored contexts? (4) In what ways did the curriculum framework designers navigate between a common curriculum and the need to contextualize peace and education to local settings?

We find that through our reflections we faced many of the same challenges in this project that are also outlined within the extant literature, yet we posit that there are possible points of transformation. Our reflection herein will focus on both of these. As an overview of the article, in the next section we will describe the background to the project. Then, we turn to describe our reflective methodology followed by our reflections. The reflections have been organized into four key areas related to each of the driving research questions. Before concluding, we discuss the four areas through our analytic framework of the global common good.

Background to the project

Building peace through education is one of UNESCO's key missions. Established in 2000 through an agreement between UNESCO and the Korean government, the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) has been promoting peace through education for international understanding, which was recently renamed global citizenship education (GCED) under the SDGs (Banta, 2017).

In 2021, APCEIU conducted a study to explore the current landscape of peace education in the NEA region to provide policy recommendations to states and educational institutions to enhance and strengthen its implementation. Highlighting the geopolitical, sociohistorical and educational uniqueness of the region *and* the vast difference in approaching, interpreting and practicing peace education across countries, the study (APCEIU Ed., 2021) proposed the creation of a common curriculum guide aligned with UNESCO's vision of comprehensive peace education. Specifically, the common curriculum was envisioned to provide peace educators in the region with the common goals, meanings, contents, methods, and learning outcomes of peace education pertinent and responsive to the needs and contexts of NEA while also encouraging greater collaboration and exchange among states and educators in the region.

To support the collaboration and writing of the Guide, APCEIU partnered with significant NEA organizations, including the UNESCO Beijing Office, UNESCO Chairs at Nanjing and Kyushu Universities, the Peace Education Commission of the Peace Studies Association of Japan (PEC PSAJ), Japan Association for International Education (JAIE), and the Korean Society of Education for International Understanding (KOSEIU). An Expert Working Group (EWG) comprising six peace education experts from China, Japan, and Korea, along with a drafting team (the authors of this article), was established.

The Guide's development involved extensive online and offline consultations over 2 years, including sub-regional workshops in Seoul (August 2022), Fukuoka (March 2023), and Nanjing (September 2023), engaging over a hundred educators, administrators, and researchers. Consultations with the EWG and pilot testing with over 30 educators, including UNESCO ASPnet and GCED Lead Teachers, ensured relevance and practicality. Structured into four chapters, the Guide addresses the context and definitions of peace education in NEA, philosophical and pedagogical frameworks, practical learning objectives, methods, and resources, along with regional and global case studies. Two appendices offer diverse definitions of peace education and practical lesson plans from NEA educators, enhancing the Guide's practical applicability.

Reflective method and analytical approach

To add insights into the construction of the Guide (APCEIU et al., 2023), in this article we reflect on our involvement in the creation of the common curriculum. In education, personal reflection combined with theorization has emerged as a critical methodology for transforming professional practice in recent years (Cremin, 2018; Vickers, 2022). It explores the intersections of the personal and professional, leading towards new policy, practice, and pedagogical possibilities (Norris et al., 2012). We further strengthened our reflections through a collective dialogue (Blalock & Akehi, 2018). As Yazan and Keles (2024) suggest, dialogical reflection destabilizes the researcher-participant binary, positioning the researcher as both subject and object of examination. The reflection herein also enabled a contextual perspective on the discursive production of the Guide under specific institutional, societal, and regional conditions.

Specifically, we wrote the article in three stages from April 2024 to March 2025. First, from April to July, we identified unresolved questions from our experiences and responded in-depth. From August to November, we read each other's comments, offered provocations, posed further questions, and revised our reflections. In the final stage from December to March, we re-examined these responses through the analytical framework of the global common good (Bosio & Torres, 2019; Gaudelli, 2016; UNESCO, 2015, 2021). This reflective process offered insights possible only through collaborative, dialogical, and contextual reflection.

Our analytical framework in the article is peace education as a global common good. This framework draws on UNESCO's (2015) conceptualization of the common good as "a central concern for sustainable human and social development... It highlights the importance of exploring alternative approaches to human well-being and the diversity of worldviews and knowledge systems" (p. 83), calling for "renewed ethical and moral foundations" (p. 83). UNESCO (2021) further signifies the common good as "a form of shared well-being that is chosen and achieved together", suggesting that education should be "experienced ... [and] governed in common", a "shared activity" connecting people rather than serving dominant groups (p. 13).

Gaudelli (2016) further explains that the "common good" should transcend the Western emphasis on "individual, economic achievement" towards inseparability and interdependence (p. 133). For Gaudelli, GCED as a global common good involves practicing *everyday transcendence* through "mindfulness about how the world is present in all material and relational interactions", shifting perspectives "from isolated to integrated, disconnected to

interconnected, and separate to inseparable” (Gaudelli, 2016, pp. 162–163; see also Bosio & Torres, 2019, who highlight global peace as “an intangible cultural good and a treasure of humanity”, p. 748). This analytical framework of the global common good deepens our reflections. Next, to further strengthen our reflections, we briefly introduce our positionalities to enhance the trustworthiness and analytical quality as is recommended for reflective dialogical research (Absolon & Willett, as quoted in Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 97). We share our positionalities – and the findings to follow – in alphabetical order.

Positionalities

Jeongmin, a native of Korea, serves as a project leader at APCEIU. Her academic background spans political science, education, and anthropology. She is deeply passionate about social justice and democracy, both in her scholarly work and practical endeavours. She pursued her postgraduate studies in Canada and the United States, and her role at APCEIU has enabled her to engage in numerous international projects, collaborating with partners from over 30 countries. With such a diverse background, and as a native Korean speaker working in English, she often finds herself navigating and “translating” across various cultures, systems, and contexts.

Kevin is a North American academic with a transnational background, currently working in Korea where he has been for more than 12 years. He focuses on the areas of comparative education, education and conflict, peace education, and decolonial theory. Over two decades, he has taught at secondary schools and universities in Japan, Korea, UK, US and Somaliland. His diverse local and international experience, along with his disciplinary expertise, shapes his transnational, transrational and decolonial approach to peace education.

Sicong was born and raised in the peripheral south of China before furthering his study on citizenship education in the UK and Japan. Having lived in Japan for more than a decade, he gained a comparative perspective to reflect on Chinese schooling and observe the interplay of education and politics in China and Japan, two countries entangled in war memories, political conflicts, and negative public sentiments towards each other. His view of peace education in NEA is shaped by his personal experiences of living between cultures and societies and is grounded in his professional commitment to education for democratic citizenship and social justice.

Findings

We now turn to the findings, where we respond to each of the research questions one by one. Our responses are followed by an analysis of each query.

(1a) How might we overcome the constraints of the paradox of working within and beyond the nation-state in/through a UNESCO project?

Jeongmin: In addressing peacebuilding and peace education, a paradox emerges from the fundamental structure of UNESCO, which is composed of member states and relies on their support to foster a culture of peace; yet, creating a genuine culture of peace often requires challenging the authorities and positions of these states and their national(istic)

identities. Further complicating matters, education remains a centralized state apparatus, particularly in the contexts of China, Japan, and Korea, exerting hegemonic power over its organization. Nevertheless, it is also essential to recognize that education encompasses diverse domains of practice and stakeholders within itself and beyond, positioning itself as a site of contestation. Therefore, a UNESCO project can and should navigate this space with balance, compromising for efficacy on the one hand and pushing boundaries for transformative education on the other.

When contextualizing this challenge within China, Japan, and Korea, it becomes evident that strategies may differ in each country, contingent upon the extent to which challenges to nationalism are tolerated within each society and its educational system. Therefore, identifying specific entry points that allow for meaningful contestation and leveraging these opportunities is essential. That is why it was critical to invite educators and experts from each country for the development of the Guide, as they could provide a range of strategic possibilities to challenge dominant ideologies within their specific contexts while also assessing the potential risks these challenges might pose to the project's overall success.

Kevin: As Jeongmin indicated above (and Sicong addresses below), a challenge of working on such a project is its inherent embeddedness within a state-based orientation, as a product of working within the UN system. Indeed, the core unit of comparison that consistently arose in meetings was the state, i.e., China, Japan, and Korea. Yet, even the concept of the state itself was insufficient, as only particular states could be included. For example, Mongolia, North Korea, and Taiwan were left out of inclusion in the conversation. Certainly, those present in the meetings sought to bring these contexts into the discussion, yet still they lack representation in the final published version of the Guide. As the common curriculum explains, "Although the Guide aspires to address NEA, it covers only China, Japan, and Korea. The intention is not to exclude certain countries, but practical considerations made it difficult to adopt a wider scope on this occasion. The three countries dealt with here serve as a useful basis for considering the challenges and prospects for peace education across NEA" (APCEIU et al., 2023, p. 9).

There were attempts in our conversations to move the needle from state boundaries towards other jurisdictions, such as cities, to attempt to transcend state limitations. This may be considered an attempt at everyday transcendence through small actions, which might have offered a more salient point of comparison that could have included the other contexts, for example, between Hiroshima, Nanjing, Pyongyang, Seoul, Taipei, Ulaanbaatar, or Vladivostok. This could have, in part, circumvented the state-centric orientation and opened the discussion of peace to wider local levels. Moreover, it should be noted in relation to GCED that many of the participants in the project – such as myself and Sicong – may identify as transnational citizens (i.e., not living in their country of birth), thus already in some ways transgressing state lines and redefining the relations of peace from the nation-state to transnational communities. Hence, at once, the project was limited by its state-centeredness but also seeking to be more transformational.

Sicong: Two keywords, precarity and process. A paradox is derived from UNESCO's nature as an international organization with nation-states as members but having limited power over them. Member states are not obligated to follow or promote UNESCO's educational initiatives. The impact of this curricular Guide on public schooling in the concerned states is structurally limited and, even if endorsed by national authorities,

might be overshadowed by prioritized national interests and frameworks. This precarious status may leave teachers, educators and other social actors attempting to implement the common curriculum in an uncertain, vulnerable position. While there should be more social space for citizens and groups to advocate, promote and practice it in democracies (such as Japan and Korea), whether it can be accommodated with their top-down national curricula remains to be seen in everyday “contestation” (to use Jeongmin’s word) in school teaching and learning. The prospect becomes more daunting in the case of an authoritarian state (i.e., China), where the government tightly controls and regulates what, how, and even when and where to teach and learn.

Given the entrenched national systems and foreseeable restrictions, this regional project might have achieved more than producing a common curriculum, as it also actualized a multilevelled, collaborative process involving partners across China, Korea and Japan and manifested in local workshops across the region as introduced earlier. Connecting the local with the regional, these local workshops enabled local participants to meet and communicate across state borders. A challenge in this local-regional collaboration was how to ensure a coherent understanding and avoid losing nuance in the translation process during writing and discussion. The project alleviated this language challenge by involving bilingual or multilingual coordinators and actors.

(1b) Analysis

Our three perspectives highlight key tensions in UNESCO’s regional peacebuilding project in NEA, offering complementary but distinct insights. Jeongmin focuses on the paradox of working within an intergovernmental organization like UNESCO, which must balance state interests to foster a genuine culture of peace – often requiring it to challenge national ideologies and identities. Kevin examines how national state structures limit the project’s transformative potential, stressing the tension between state-based frameworks and the desire for more localized, cross-border grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. Meanwhile, Sicong emphasizes the project’s collaborative nature as a key achievement. Despite constraints from national education systems, regional cooperation enabled stakeholders to share experiences, building connections that transcended national boundaries. These perspectives underscore the complexities of peacebuilding within state-centric organizations such as UNESCO, highlighting the value of engaging diverse stakeholders across borders in pursuing peace as a common good across NEA (Gaudelli, 2016; UNESCO, 2015).

(2a) How do static cultural conceptions in the region limit the possibilities of peacebuilding?

Jeongmin: Culture is inherently dynamic – historically constructed, ever-changing, and contested. As Fortun (2009) notes, it is “something continually under construction ... made in time and space, through processes of inscription” (p. vii). Yet, static conceptions of culture dominate daily life, politics, and education, reinforcing essentialist identities and hindering critical examination of dominant discourses. Peacebuilding, however, requires learners to see themselves as part of multiple, overlapping communities, capable of building solidarity and critically reflecting on cultural norms. To be transformative,

peace education must explicitly integrate the dynamic, pluralistic nature of “culture(s)” into its content.

The Guide addresses this indirectly through its treatment of “identity” (2023, p. 46), framing it as “open, fluid, multiple, and changing” and promoting “regional identity” as a constructive, inclusive source for peacebuilding. This shift “away from narrow ethnocentrism”, promoting “broader, more inclusive conceptions of identity” (2023, p. 46) is vital for peace education and education overall.

Although internal diversity is often overlooked, as Kevin and Sicong argue below, some teachers integrated it into lessons, challenging ethnocentric ideologies and addressing minority discrimination (APCEIU et al., 2023, pp. 121–127). Still, dominant groups are often framed as the invisible norm, reinforcing the “us vs. them” binary. Interestingly, this is partly amplified by English translations: while Korean (or Chinese/Japanese) often omits subjects, English requires pronouns like “I/we/they”, unintentionally invoking a sense of othering. This linguistic nuance reveals the complexity of culture, highlighting the need for a non-essentialist understanding of culture *and* acknowledging it as an embodied practice. It also supports Sicong’s point on recognizing domestic cultural minorities in peace education.

Kevin: As with the discussion above, the tendency of many participants to situate their responses within the confines of state boundaries, that is, as representatives of their home state and culture was difficult to overcome. The conflation of state, nationality, and culture especially is challenging, i.e., that culture is often interpreted to mean a single (hegemonic) national culture. While global citizenship and international perspectives were discussed across the meetings, they were often embedded within an ethnonationalist discourse of the home country (i.e., dominant culture) as the point of reference. Internal diversity within the states was rarely interrogated.

Hence, such conceptualizations may reify static cultural conceptions in the region, such as comparisons between assumed static ethnonationalist concepts of China, Japan, and Korea rather than embracing plurality within and between the contexts. A useful pedagogical approach instead would be to look towards plurality, diversity, and change within each setting. As Sicong mentions below, static cultural concepts undermine complexity (i.e., diversity and peacebuilding) and may exclude perspectives from minority groups, thus furthering a sense of marginalization.

Sicong: Again, two keywords, complexity and minority. NEA is often simplified and stereotyped as a Confucian cultural sphere, which overlooks intra-regional diversity and inter-regional influences in history and now. This Guide attends to the cultural complexities in the region. It reminds us of the need “to avoid essentialist or culturally determinist visions of ‘Asianness’, and to acknowledge that those shared ideas have always been contested, challenged, and interpreted in diverse ways” (APCEIU et al., 2023, p. 27). As Kevin notices, the use of state names as categories in the narration and organization of the Guide, out of the intention to juxtapose Korea, Japan and China, might be ineluctable. But the risk is that it might convey an illusion of ethnic and sociocultural homogeneity in each state. Indeed, there are few mentions or explanations of cultural minorities within the states in the Guide. The absence of perspectives of domestic cultural minorities is arguably common in the discussion of peacebuilding and peace education in this region. Peace education needs to consider the ethnic and cultural minorities often sociopolitically

and educationally marginalized in nation-state narratives, such as those in China (Vickers & Chen, 2024).

To avoid peacebuilding at the expense of cultural minorities, peace educators need to resist what Benhabib (2002) called the “reductionist sociology of culture”. They need to challenge and avoid essentializing culture as a primordial property of groups, reifying cultures as distinct and bounded from one another, portraying culture as homogenous rather than heterogeneous and diverse, and fetishizing or seeing culture as immune to critical deconstruction. Furthermore, culture is a politically contested construct (Chen, 2024a). Peace educators need to consider how to respect culture while being able to understand and question the politics behind it.

(2b) Analysis

Our three perspectives engage with the role of culture in peacebuilding and education in East Asia, each offering a distinct but complementary view. Jeongmin sees culture as dynamic and hybrid, shaped by historical forces and ongoing change, resisting static, essentialist definitions. For her, culture is both constantly evolving and contextually situated. She also stresses that culture is an embodied practice as well, highlighting the importance of recognizing both dimensions in peace education. Kevin broadens this view by emphasizing the internal diversity within each country. He argues that peacebuilding should not treat national cultures as singular or fixed but recognize the multiple experiences and perspectives within each state. By adopting a more global and cross-cultural lens, peace education can then better understand how local, regional, and transnational factors shape cultural narratives.

From the perspective of the global common good, this highlights how peace and peace education is a “shared activity”, allowing peoples from different ideological, political, cultural, and economic backgrounds – within and beyond a country – to come “in contact with others and with the world” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 13) towards social and political action. This challenges the singular state, with an essentialist conception of culture, as an apparatus serving dominant groups’ interests. Sicong further develops this idea by highlighting the absence of cultural minorities in mainstream peacebuilding discussions, advocating for the inclusion of marginalized voices. He urges that peace education reflect how these groups experience culture, politics, and peace, rather than promoting a hegemonic national narrative. Together, we stress the need to move beyond essentialist views of the state and culture, advocating for a focus on its complexity, plurality, and the political struggles embedded within it. Peace education should embrace culture as evolving, contested, and interconnected across borders.

(3a) How might issues of censorship affect peace education, namely in relation to the common curriculum project, including the concern of how to practice critical peace education in censored contexts?

Jeongmin: Self-imposed censorship can be a strategic choice to ensure broader acceptability and accessibility, but it limits critical peace education. Developing a regional Guide is especially complex and often contentious in NEA, where historical disputes and rigid educational systems constrain critical discourse despite official rhetoric of “critical thinking”. Educators must navigate between what is deemed acceptable and the need to

challenge dominant narratives. In this context, self-imposed censorship becomes a practical compromise, making the Guide more inclusive and implementable – crucial since peace should be a shared concern. Without such caution, materials risk rejection. For instance, Seoul's local education office created materials critiquing Korea's role in the Vietnam War to counter nationalistic ideology. As the common curriculum Guide highlights, critically examining one's own country's role in conflict fosters nuanced understandings of violence and identity (APCEIU et al., 2023, pp. 36–39). However, conservative backlash halted publication. Similarly, APCEIU's 2004 resource book, featuring a Japanese-authored lesson on comfort women, was never officially published due to diplomatic complaints from Japan.

The challenge is to ensure that self-censorship does not stifle transformative change. Peace demands bold shifts in thought and action, even when strategic, self-censorship limits context-specific content. Since peace education must engage difficult topics, censorship remains a major obstacle to its effectiveness.

Kevin: Censorship began explicitly with the exclusion of several countries (i.e., Mongolia, North Korea, and Taiwan) from the project. Implicitly, it operated more subtly through the adopted approaches to peacebuilding through education, namely whether one took a critical peace education approach towards addressing systemic social problems – and the teachers' and students' roles within these efforts towards social change – or if instead it operated at the level of individual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. The latter approach allows for subtle forms of (self-)censorship by redirecting the focus of social problems and peacebuilding from system-level challenges (e.g., war, militarism, poverty, patriarchy, racism, and anthropocentrism) towards personal characteristics and perceived individual deficiencies (e.g., peace- or war-oriented dispositions). For example, (self-)censorship was present when participants held back on unpopular perspectives because of concerns of national or political contention. Examples here might include human rights violations in and across each of the countries. As Jeongmin elaborates above, such (self-)censorship may have been towards strategically enabling the project to proceed; yet other approaches to more critical peace education must be envisioned and enacted to contribute to more socially just peacebuilding education.

Sicong: Two more keywords, criticality and self-censorship. Being critical is integral to global citizenship, according to UNESCO. However, this requirement is often avoided when UNESCO's GCED initiatives are localized in Asia and sidelined or completely missing in Japanese and Chinese national curricula (Chen, 2024b). Korean national curricula are more progressive by explicitly promoting critical thinking, which, however, is still short of being applied to examining public policies and social issues. This Guide takes criticality seriously. It reflects on the multidimensional nature of peace in the NEA contexts and includes "informed and critically literate" as a learner attribute and critical thinking as a learning method.

Critical peace education can be undermined by censorship, which dictates views on controversial issues and even prohibits discussion altogether. The Guide does not address the threat of censorship to critical peace. Indeed, the project experienced self-censorship, as some stakeholders advised avoiding political criticism out of fear of obstruction from national authorities. This experience echoes back to Jeongmin's viewpoint that self-censorship might be employed as a tactic to circumvent political interference and allow peace education initiatives to be published and practised in a region involving

authoritarian and/or conservative regimes. However, the question remains to what extent compromise should be made or, as Kevin reminds us, in what respects critical peace education should stand firm, especially at a time when academic freedom in Asia is increasingly under threat (Gueorguiev, 2023).

(3b) Analysis

In this section, we reflected on the complexities of developing peace education materials in NEA, focusing on challenges with (self-)censorship, and the need for a critical approach to peace education. Jeongmin highlights the tension between creating a curriculum that challenges existing historical narratives and the political risks of backlash. She argues that including sensitive topics, such as wartime atrocities, is crucial for a nuanced understanding of history but is difficult in a context where these issues are politically charged and tied to national identity. Kevin adds to this by discussing subtle forms of (self-)censorship. He distinguishes between two approaches: one addressing systemic issues like war and poverty (i.e., critical peace education) and another focusing on individual behaviours (i.e., psychologized peace education), which avoids confronting structural problems (Kester, 2018; Kester & Misiaszek, 2024). Kevin suggests the latter, by emphasizing personal traits over societal change, inadvertently redirects attention from systemic injustices and may undermine peace education's ultimate goal of fostering caring and collaborative (international/regional/local) communities. Sicong further stresses the importance of criticality in peace education, arguing that it must address political systems and social structures while considering diverse sociopolitical contexts in NEA, from authoritarian regimes to democracies shaped by conservative forces.

These perspectives highlight the delicate balance between promoting critical peace education and navigating the political realities of state-controlled education, where the authorities may censor certain topics to maintain the oppressive, unjust status quo, often under the pretext of culture, tradition, safety, security, and order. Addressing ethical challenges of (self-)censorship while fostering critical engagement for human rights and social justice remains central to peace education as a global common good (Bosio & Torres, 2019).

(4a) How did participants navigate between a common curriculum and the need to contextualize peace and education to local settings?

Jeongmin: Teachers participating in this Guide acknowledge both its value and challenges. A key challenge is the rigid national curricula in Korea, Japan, and China, which limit flexibility due to fixed subject areas and learning objectives. While teachers often feel constrained, however, some flexibility exists, especially for elementary teachers in Korea and Japan, and kindergarten teachers in China, who can reorganize class sessions and subjects as homeroom teachers. For example, recent initiatives in Korea encourage teachers to creatively restructure curricula across various subjects, units, and learning objectives. The growing emphasis on student-centred, experiential learning helps bridge the gap between the Guide and the prescribed curriculum, while trends in community-based learning allow integration of local issues, fostering contextualization and social engagement. To address the rigid, subject-oriented curriculum, a Korean teacher presented a whole-school programme to tackle school violence

and promote reconciliation, aligning with the Guide's emphasis on fostering a culture of peace through school-wide practices, not just in specific lessons (APCEIU et al., 2023, pp. 130–135). However, a challenge remains in implementing the “critical” aspects of the Guide, especially in the Chinese context, requiring further pedagogical insights and practical guidance.

Kevin: Participants in the project consistently reflected on the intersections between local curriculum, regional, and global practices in peace education. It is a key contribution of the Guide that it attempts to – and succeeds in many ways – to regionally contextualize international norms of peace and education. As explained thoroughly in Chapter One of the Guide, the project was careful to clarify that the common curriculum is a regionally grounded framework of principles, good practices, and sample lesson plans (APCEIU et al., 2023, pp. 8–12), but is not a set curriculum in itself to be borrowed and implemented without consideration for the local context. The Guide states, “This common curriculum encourages learners to imagine a regional community while recognising the need to keep this regional identity inclusive, open and negotiable” (p. 10).

Moreover, the Guide is also not simply a global normative document of expressions by state and local leaders concerning their visions for peace and education. Instead, it is an empirical articulation of peace education on the ground by more than 100 educators across the region, as explained in the Background section. This approach sought (and continues to seek) to prevent a top-down imposition of peace education or uncritical borrowing of global peace education frameworks for local settings. In the end, the project offers a set of negotiated strategies and approaches to peace and peace education across the NEA region, avoiding culturally relativist and hyper-nationalist interpretations of peace and education.

Sicong: Two keywords, connect and accommodate. With no intention to regulate or dictate peace education in the region, the project was designed to introduce and promote peace teaching and learning from a regional or comparative perspective, which goes beyond the state lens, keeps in step with global agendas, and connects local experiences and practices. This is why the Guide strategically proposes and includes a broad list of learning objectives (APCEIU et al., 2023, p. 44), topics (pp. 47–49) and methods (p. 50). This might overwhelm and confuse local educators about where to start and whether all needs to be done under limited time and resources. Anticipating these potential difficulties, the Guide also dedicates a substantial portion to introducing successful peace education cases in local societies (pp. 51–59) and including diverse, multi-language teaching and learning resources for local use (pp. 62–78). It also contains a variety of lesson plans and programme design examples (pp. 94–147) to illustrate how to localize and accommodate the Guide with existing national curricula. Students and teachers are encouraged to draw on existing local and national resources and activities to promote regionally or globally oriented peace education. Indeed, many learning topics in the Guide – such as empathy, respect for others, and cultural diversity – are also found in the national curricula in the region (Chen, 2020). The ways that teachers use the Guide alongside national curricula warrant further exploration.

(4b) Analysis

Our perspectives offer complementary and divergent views on the challenge of creating peace education materials that are both regionally relevant and globally informed.

Jeongmin emphasizes challenges and possibilities for contextualizing peace education in each of the three national contexts. Kevin focuses on the regional adaptation of peace education in NEA, highlighting that the project successfully balances global peace education norms with local contexts. He stresses that the curriculum Guide is not a one-size-fits-all model but a flexible framework tailored to regional needs, allowing for adaptation rather than imposing global standards. Sicong, on the other hand, addresses the practical challenges of implementation. While acknowledging the value of the Guide, he points out that its broad scope could overwhelm educators, particularly in resource-constrained settings. He argues that the Guide must balance ideal peace education goals with the realities of limited time, resources, and local educational practices, suggesting that clear prioritization is needed for effective implementation.

Small, everyday actions (i.e., everyday transcendence) in turn present significant opportunities for practicing NEA peace education, “moving from diagnosis and denunciation into action and policy implementation” (Bosio & Torres, 2019, p. 752; Gaudelli, 2016). Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities around developing and practicing critical peace education across NEA, navigating the tensions between local, national, and global contexts, norms, and the practical constraints of embracing a regionally conceived common curriculum.

Discussion and conclusion

This concluding section presents key theoretical and practical implications arising from our analysis. The exercise of creating the Guide provided an important impetus for constructing locally relevant materials through a regionally led process. The process modelled recent calls in the field of peace education for localizing and decolonizing practices and materials (Hajir & Kester, 2020; Kester et al., 2021; Williams & Bermeo, 2020; Zembylas, 2018). Furthermore, the project sought to reflect efforts to match the means of peacebuilding with the end objectives – a collaborative, intercultural, and dialogical process that prefigures efforts to support local and regional peacebuilding (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020). This process also necessitates an emphasis on the relational aspects of peacebuilding (Ho & Barton, 2020).

As the literature shows, to the first point on localizing and decolonizing peace education, there are competing perspectives with some peace educators supporting greater efforts to decolonize the field (Aldawood, 2020; Zembylas, 2018), while others emphasize standardization and universal practices (Bwanyire, 2016; Carter, 2008). There are additionally those who are sceptical of efforts towards decolonization as potentially undermining critical historical perspectives on peace and conflict (Vickers, 2020). The APCEIU project sought to hold all three of these approaches in concert with each other by recognizing the strengths of each: that calls for standardization offer important *minimum standards* and good practices across NEA, while also recognizing the critical importance of contextualizing peace education practices to specific educational settings and not shying away from critical interrogation of global power relations. For instance, the employment of regionally relevant concepts drawing on critical Confucian perspectives – such as self-restraint, deference, and humility – and other indigenous ideas concerning peaceful relations could further contextualize practices (APCEIU et al., 2023; Ho & Barton, 2020). Furthermore, to avoid a binary perspective on whether to standardize or localize and

decolonize peace education, the third perspective offered a more nuanced approach. Here, we call on peace educators in the region to go beyond binary good/bad approaches to peace education and to embrace more complexity (Kester et al., 2022).

The second point on prefiguring regional peace through collaborative practice was exercised through the various meetings (online and in-person) throughout the course of the project. For example, the project recognized that educators should integrate a dynamic and open conception of culture and identity into their teaching, and that it is important to acknowledge that learners do not enter into the educational setting as blank slates – they bring their prior knowledge, experience, and cultural identities into the classroom (Freire, 1970); therefore, APCEIU sought to facilitate workshops that explored these dynamics of peace and peace education to co-create guidelines and sample teaching materials together.

It is additionally important in the maintenance of cultures of peace to understand that culture is not just socially constructed, but can also be deeply embodied, manifesting not only in individual's identities and social institutions but also in one's aesthetics, tastes, dispositions, habits, morality, and emotions – and learned and expressed through not only ideology and values, but also through language, art, literature, historical narratives and even unconscious bodily experiences (Cremin, 2016). This dual nature of culture creates an ongoing tension between cultural conditions and practices, shaping and reshaping collective experiences, in classrooms and beyond. Therefore, for peace education to be truly transformative, it must address this tension in its content and pedagogies. It cannot succeed if it merely tries to transmit “normative” values. Rather, teaching and learning should be understood as ongoing processes of self-recognition and self-negation, struggles, unlearning, negotiation, contestation, and transformation, whether they be intellectual, emotional, or spiritual (Dietrich, 2013). To be sure, while peace education alone cannot resolve political and military conflicts more broadly across East Asia – especially those rooted in national and international issues of culture, economics, and geopolitics – it can still play a vital role. By helping individuals critically unlearn cultures of violence, peace education can foster the development of compassionate, engaged citizens. In doing so, it lays the relational foundations necessary for building a sustainable culture of peace.

As the Guide highlights, these peacebuilding processes involve different power dynamics, multiple identities, and multiple processes of identity formation and transformation. This contentious process becomes salient and should be taken with particular care when it involves groups of learners with vastly different “cultural” backgrounds and in regions with sensitive and contested histories. As Ho and Barton (2020) emphasize, “a critical version of harmony . . . requires societal criticism and acknowledges differences of opinion” (p. 280). Learning for peace in such settings may involve strong emotions both positive and negative. It can sometimes involve affirmation or negation, pain or joy of discovering new perspectives, frustration or excitement, and the challenges of navigating differences. Hence, matching the means and ends of peace education entails connecting the personal and political (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), and working through difficult histories and affective relations together, even – perhaps especially – when this involves directly engaging (constructively) with conflict.

Finally, to link all this back to where we began, we conclude with Ho and Barton's (2020) work on critical harmony. As we have highlighted throughout the paper, they

problematicize harmony by highlighting it as a common goal in the region but with distinctly different interpretations. Importantly, they emphasize the *relational* nature of harmony and peacebuilding by leaning into contentious public issues, such as housing and gender identities. For them, this relational aspect means that, “As members of a community, people assume responsibility not only for themselves but also for their families and societies . . .” (Ho & Barton, 2020, p. 277). They draw on Li (2006) to clarify that peace requires conflict and tension. They argue “that critical harmony is ‘not mere agreement without difference; it is not meant to preserve peace at any cost . . . it does not rule out strife but uses strife in order to achieve greater harmony’” (Li, as cited in Ho & Barton, p. 281). We also see critical harmony as emphasizing and negotiating relations between parties rather than focusing on an abstract concept such as peace, drawing especially – through engagement with Ho and Barton’s work – on Confucian forms of harmony and other indigenous concepts which are culturally relevant to East Asia.

All in all, the project and resulting Guide prioritizes just relations between actors as a form of peace in practice to cultivate harmonious and equitable societies by empowering individuals (Gaudelli, 2016). As discussed herein, the collaborative nature of this project and the co-creation of the Guide itself represent an action-oriented step beyond theory, demonstrating how peace education works as a lived practice across differences, embodying the very values and attitudes it seeks to promote. Although some teachers expressed feeling constrained in their capacities to implement peace education in their context, the process and content of (co-)constructing this Guide illustrates the pedagogical possibilities for enacting peace through everyday transcendence.

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