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Peace education as a form of global citizenship education in universities in divided settings: challenges and prospects

Kevin Kester

Department of Education, Seoul National University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

ABSTRACT

Peace education has been practiced as a form of global citizenship education for several decades. Since the establishment of the SDGs in 2015, this overlap between the two fields has been further amplified amid enduring and escalating conflicts that now emerge as key components of the contemporary global order. Through ethnographic data collected in four divided and conflict-affected settings – China/Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland – this study examines how contextualized course syllabi and pedagogical practices of university educators in contexts fraught with division and conflict function to produce particular ideas about peace and global citizenship. It asks: Can peace as a form of global citizenship be taught in universities in settings where the legacies of war, division, and colonialism remain deeply rooted? Drawing on fieldwork, document analysis, and interviews with 40 faculty members, the study shows how university educators in these contexts support peacebuilding and efforts toward global citizenship through their work. Data is analyzed through the conceptual lens of post-critical (peace and global citizenship) education. Findings indicate that educators in conflict-affected contexts are divided on issues of peace, reconciliation, and citizenship. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for curriculum, pedagogy, and policy.

Introduction

This work begins with the premise of the local turn in critical international relations (IR) and peace studies (Cremin, Echavarria, & Kester, 2018; Galtung, 1983; MacGinty & Richmond, 2013), a turn that shifts the focus of interest from the analysis of states and elite political leaders toward the everyday practices and routine interactions of regular citizens. The local turn is well-suited to the study of peace and global citizenship because peace may be critically nurtured through people's everyday interactions – such as civil, democratic, and dignified exchanges – that shift the focus from statehood to political virtue, individual agency, and the reduction of divisive negative emotions (Esquith, 2025). By emphasizing these everyday practices, individuals are empowered to foster peace and global cooperation in their immediate environments, potentially in bold resistance to wider cultures of violence (Gaudelli, 2016). In this study specifically, the focus is on university educators who promote peace and global citizenship through university teaching. As higher education (HE) peacebuilding is a burgeoning yet under-researched area, especially in conflict-affected contexts (Dillabough et al., 2018; Millican, 2017), its growth raises a provocative question: can peace be taught in universities situated in societies where the legacies of war, division, and colonialism remain deeply embedded?

Honing in on the university classroom as a site in which everyday interactions of conflict and peace take place, for example, through curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and student interactions, provides potential insights into the role of HE in perpetuating conflict or fostering peacebuilding in divided

settings (Kester, Abura, Sohn, & Rho, 2022; Kester, Seo, & Gerstner 2024b; Millican, Kasumagi-Kafedžić, Masabo, & Almanza, 2021). In particular, this study examines how faculty course syllabi and pedagogical choices adapt and respond to external conflicts that impact on teaching and learning, and how HE may either perpetuate or mitigate such conflicts. This is all the more critical in contexts in which dehumanizing discourses of marginalized groups (e.g. 'us' versus 'them' or victim-perpetrator narratives) are common, a phenomenon on the rise in recent years with the re-emergence of populist and posttruth discourses, leading previously 'stable' contexts to – in some ways – resemble conflict-affected settings (Dholakia, Ozgun, & Atik, 2025; Greenwood-Hau, 2024; Zembylas, 2025). Thus, researching peace and global citizenship in/through HE within divided and conflict-affected contexts involves making curricula, pedagogies, policies, and interactions visible to critically question these phenomena in regard to peace and conflict. Such research holds implications for a variety of settings today. To be sure, peace education is a form of global citizenship education (GCED) because it promotes a cosmopolitan ethic of responsibility, intercultural understanding, and a commitment to peacebuilding across national and cultural boundaries. Rooted in foundational works and supported by UNESCO, it emphasizes addressing global injustices such as domination and oppression while fostering democratic values, empathy, and cooperative action in conflict-affected and interconnected global contexts (Toh & Cawagas, 2017; Torres, 2017).

The goal of the research, then, is to draw insights from the adaptable and responsive HE pedagogies for peace (and global citizenship) developed by university educators working for peace and justice in HE in a variety of divided and conflict-affected societies. As Figure 1 below indicates, peace remains elusive in settings of division and ongoing conflict. This 'wartime' message, which I received in Seoul in May 2023, pushed residents to urgently evacuate the city as it was under attack from North Korea. This message shows how pervasive and deep the threat of war impacts upon all aspects of contempoary life in these societies. Thus, the driving research questions for the study include:

- Can peace as a form of global citizenship be taught in universities in settings where the legacies of war, division, and colonialism remain deeply rooted, and what does this look like?
- How might discourses of peace and global citizenship in divided and conflict-affected contexts amplify or mitigate sentiments of disenfranchisement?
- How might education for peace and global citizenship engage productively with local and global dimensions of conflict?
- In what ways might peace and global citizenship education empower learners and communities?

To answer these questions, the research employed a qualitative comparative case study methodology with 40 university educators in four divided and conflict-affected contexts. This involved interviews, document analysis, and field visits to China/Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland for eight months in 2023-2024. Overall, the research highlights how contextualized course syllabi and pedagogical practices of university educators in contexts fraught with division and conflict function to produce particular ideas about peace and (global) citizenship. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I briefly overview the contexts of the study. Then, I examine the extant literature pertaining to peace and GCED and the teaching of peace in university settings around the world. Next, I overview the conceptual framework and qualitative methodology of the study before turning to the findings. Prior to concluding, I discuss the implications of the study in relation to curriculum, pedagogy, and policy for educators in diverse settings. In the end, the paper offers novel insights into curriculum, pedagogy, and policy for peace and GCED in university settings in conflict-affected contexts.
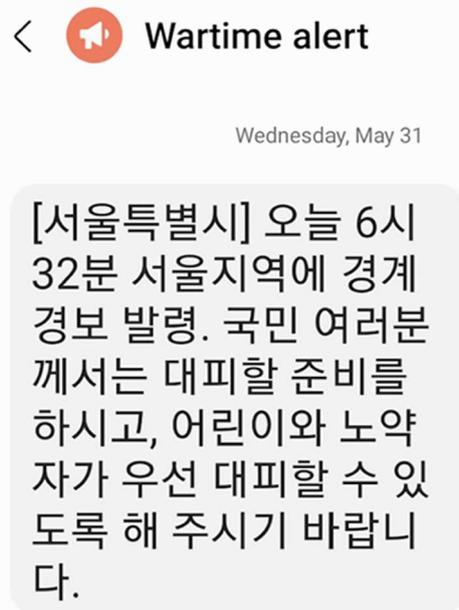
Figure 1. Wartime alert. (Wednesday May 31, 2023 [Seoul]: At 6:32am today, a warning alert was issued in the Seoul area. We ask citizens to prepare for evacuation and allow children and the elderly to evacuate first.)

Contested borders and invisible nations

The contexts of this study involve four case study regions – China/Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland – that have been selected for their ongoing efforts to address conflict and peace through HE in context-specific ways. While geographically and culturally distinct, each is shaped by enduring social and political divisions rooted in war (Kester, Park, Gerstner, & Seo, forthcoming), including the 1949 defeat of the Republic of China Army that forced the Kuomintang to retreat to Taiwan. The Korean War (1950–1953) established a lasting division between North and South Korea, solidified by the Demilitarized Zone. In Cyprus, Turkey's 1974 military intervention led to the island's partition, separating Turkish Cypriots in the north from Greek Cypriots in the south under a UN buffer zone. Similarly, Somalia's 1991 civil war led to the emergence of Somaliland in the north, a self-declared independent state.

As such, the conflicts resulted in the formation of several de facto states and each region remains politically fragile, though aspirations for reunification – or statehood – persist across all four contexts (Florea, 2017; Ker-Lindsay, 2022). Despite their divisions, these regions share key sociopolitical characteristics. In each case, the populations on either side of the divide were historically interconnected, shaped by shared colonial legacies in the twentieth century. China/Taiwan, North/South Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland remain largely ethnically and linguistically similar, and politically, all but China and North Korea function as democracies, with each region engaging in liberal economic practices. Even in Cyprus, there have been appeals to challenge the notion that ethnic divisions are insurmountable in the pursuit of a shared national vision (Hadjipavlou, 2007). Moreover, insights from the political economy of war – where states, corporations, and interest groups (including those within HE) finance military industries and deploy securitization discourses across contexts – emphasize that divisions extend beyond the state and democratic polity (Dholakia et al., 2025; Higgins & Novelli, 2020; Pugh, Turner, & Cooper, 2016). In other words, a variety of entities serve to profit from – and thus perpetuate – war, meaning that education and politics are only a small part of a broader ecosystem of armed conflict. Such parallels (alongside their divergences) offer critical insights into the potential role of HE in advancing peacebuilding and reconciliation (or not) within societies facing protracted conflict.

Higher education for peace and GCED in conflict settings

Peace education has been conceptualized as a form of GCED for some time. For example, key foundational studies in the field of peace education, written in the late twentieth century, explicitly link peace education

to global citizenship. Two of these key works are Betty Reardon's (1988) *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* and Elise Boulding's (1990) *Building a Global Civic Culture: Education for an Interdependent World.* Both texts emphasize a cosmopolitan ethic of responsibility toward global humanity. This foundational work has more recently been situated within the contemporary polarized political milieu (Fryer, 2019; Kester, Tsuruhara, & Archer, 2019). Moreover, UNESCO (1995) declares that

> it is necessary to introduce into curricula, at all levels, true education for citizenship which includes an international dimension … and respect for the culture of others at the national and global level and [that education] should link the global interdependence of problems to local action. (pp. 10–11)

Equally, Kim (2023) writes of the peacebuilding role of GCED in divided and conflict-affected Korea; and Torres (2017) explains: 'The first answer of why we need global citizenship education is that global citizenship education contributes to global peace … ' (p. 4). He continues:

> What are the main problems affecting global peace? Domination, aggression, exploitation, discrimination and oppression of people, families, communities, nations, and the planet are crucial elements to undermine progress, peace, and happiness on earth … Any political education nourishing the construction of a public sphere should recognize that overcoming oppression, domination, and exploitation is a central goal of any project of global democratic citizenship building. (Torres, 2017)

Charalambous, Charalambous, and Rampton (2021), too, write from the context of language education with Greek Cypriot teenagers across cultural and political divides between Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. They use linguistic ethnography to explore how learning the language of the enemy might support the undoing of intolerance and fear of the other. Charalambous et al. (2021) write, 'language education [i]s a space for normalising inter-ethnic relations after conflict', suggesting that such 'interactional practices' can 'contribute to the discussion of IR concepts like 'desecuritisation' and 'everyday peace'' (p. 388). Gift and Krcmaric (2017) then draw on liberal democratic peace theory to argue that 'leaders educated at Western universities are more likely to democratize than other leaders because Western education socializes leaders to prefer democracy and creates transnational linkages that alter the strategic calculus of democratization' (p. 671). Together, these works showcase the concern for global citizenship and intercultural understanding that peace educators have long advanced.

In conflict-affected contexts specifically, university curriculum and pedagogy take on a special timbre that differs from more stable contexts. In particular, as armed conflict is ongoing and a persistent threat in such settings, often exacerbated by a political economy of securitization and neoliberalization,[1] the topic of war and peace becomes existential (Davies, 2004; Tutkal, 2023). Here, literature points to limitations confronting efforts toward HE in conflict settings, including lack of adequate resources (e.g. human and material) and political tensions in wider society. For example, Harb (2008) argues in Iraq for the need for curricula to close the knowledge gap in science and technology curricula between Western universities and those in conflict zones; and Santos and Soler (2023) emphasize how threats of war and HE neoliberalization combine to create conditions of insecurity, precarity, exhaustion, and confusion. They explain that while the sudden emergence of a Colombian peace agreement in 2016 between the government and guerrilla groups led to new possibilities for peacebuilding nonetheless such initiatives were also placed within the dominant logic of neoliberal HE, thus constraining the transformative potential of HE even while seeking to transcend the political economy of war. Hajir and Kester (2020) challenge the very premise of GCED in contexts of armed conflict and international non-recognition, arguing that promoting human rights and global citizenship to people stripped of national citizenship and subjected to rights violations exposes GCED as fundamentally ill-suited to such realities.

For example, writing from the context of HE in Gaza, Jebril (2021) highlights barriers to mobility and internal factional conflicts Palestinian students face due to Israel's occupation[2] of the Gaza strip. The occupation limits opportunities for Palestinian students to study abroad, as the lack of recognition of Palestine makes it difficult for students to get visas to travel, as well as the debilitating effect the occupation has had on the economy. Moreover, as Jebril explains, the occupation has spawned different responses from within Palestine between Fatah and Hamas-backing groups. University settings are then divided between those that support Hamas and those that support Fatah. As Jebril shows, this division carries over into lectures and seminar groups creating fear and exclusion among students and faculty. Similarly, in Israel, Asali

Nuseibeh, Cohen, and Bekerman (2025) write of the constraints experienced by 19 Palestinian students studying in a major Israeli university in East Jerusalem. They conclude that the university's failure to sufficiently address issues of multiculturalism and the students' needs makes the 'university complicit in maintaining a cultural and epistemic hierarchy' (p. 211) within a broader political economy of the government's neoliberal and colonial policies. In Taiwan as well, Wang and Huang (2024) have shown through panel surveys and interviews with approximately 4,300 respondents that Chinese repressive action in Hong Kong between 2018 to 2020, and its military intimidation of Taipei, has strengthened Taiwan's citizens' identities as Taiwanese and away from identifying as Chinese. In Kenya, too, Johnson (2013) reveals that post-election violence 'pits students, faculty, and staff against one another' (p. 329); and Kester and Chang (2022) show how universities in Afghanistan and Somaliland increased armed security and 'erected sniper towers for defense' in response to terrorist attacks (p. 443).

All in all, several characteristics of HE in conflict-affected settings emerge across the literature, including: physical threats to the lives of faculty and students, the militarization of campuses, barriers to mobility, and dehumanization experienced by groups who lack representation and voice (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, & Smith, 2017). Yet, universities may also enact policies to support positive peacebuilding processes, such as counseling services, charity, and mediation efforts between government, police, health professionals, the elderly, and grassroots groups to 'cut across conflict lines' and 'support the public good' (Johnson, 2013, pp. 337–338). Pherali and Lewis (2017), for example, share a university peace education curriculum in Somaliland co-developed with local educators to train staff in conflict resolution and critical thinking skills, thus connecting the HE classroom with community action for peace. The present study enters this debate to offer new empirical evidence on HE peacebuilding from the conflict-affected settings of China/Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland.

Postcritical praxis

Linking the research back to the local turn in critical IR and peacebuilding, I draw on the emerging concept of postcritical thinking (Andreotti, 2012; Kester, Chang, Lim, & Hwang, 2025; Pashby, da Costa, Stein, & Andreotti, 2020). This concept builds on postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, and posthumanist philosophies to ground educational praxis in educators' lived realities (i.e. ontological, embodied relations, and everyday peace practices) (Esquith, 2025; Gaudelli, 2016). Rather than framing peace and conflict through an epistemological lens that identifies insufficient knowledge or deviant individual behaviors as the primary problem to be solved (Bekerman & Zemblyas, 2017), a postcritical approach emphasizes a different orientation. It highlights the cultural political economy underpinning conflict and peace, fosters embodied and epistemic reflexivity, and foregrounds relationality and reciprocity. In addition, it engages a hermeneutics of faith and understands criticality as inherently plural (Andreotti, 2018; Higgins & Novelli, 2020; Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2018; Zembylas, 2023).

For instance, Andreotti (2012) describes postcritical GCED as a space of negotiated possibilities grounded in lived experience, embodied relations, and reciprocity, rather than in the imposition of external (often Western) normative standards such as Enlightenment values or presumed universals. From this perspective, community is not a fixed entity but a set of contingent, contestable arrangements that remain open to dialogue and revision. Such an approach situates the possibility for transformation within and between groups and communities, in sharp contrast to earlier critical approaches that rely on universal standards of human rights, liberal democracy, and education as an unquestioned good, as well as the assumption that educators (or other external actors) hold superior insight compared to students and local communities.

The postcritical approach, by contrast, emphasizes co-presence – that is, a relational ontology – and vulnerability in relation to others (Bell, 2010; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020; Kasulis, 2002). In other words, it underscores the central role of relationships in shaping entities and even their very existence, with important implications for teaching in HE. Three key features characterize the postcritical: (i) embodiment in learning, meaning recognition of the role of emotions and affect – our capacity to affect and be affected – in learning; (ii) a hermeneutics of faith, which involves engaging with others in humility and trust rather than assuming the position of an expert depositing knowledge into passive recipients; and (iii) the plurality of the critical, which insists there is no single way to enact or

perform criticality (see Table 1 in the discussion section). Pashby et al. (2020) caution, however, that making sense of the postcritical can be challenging, since 'most people are overly socialised in neoliberal, liberal, and critical discursive orientations' (p. 157). Crucially, criticality remains central to the postcritical perspective. It does not abandon critique but expands it, bringing to the fore emotional, embodied, and reciprocal dimensions of research and teaching.

Methodology

To cross borders – physically and epistemically – I employ Sobe's (2018) 'crisscrossing method' and Silova's (2020) diffractive thinking. Both allow for interrogating phenomena from multiple angles. In particular, Sobe (2018) states, 'the challenge before us is to develop an ethical mode of comparison, perhaps even a politically progressive comparison, a comparison that respectfully engages with (as opposed to injures) epistemic and ontological diversity across the globe' (p. 339). Critically, Sobe's 'criss-crossing comparison' puts

> relationality at the center, sees research as an active process of crisscrossing, and aims to surface the entangled complexity of sometimes disparate educational actors, devices, dis-courses, and practices … .. It emphasizes reflexivity, relationality, and the active role played by the researcher in recognizing the translations and alchemical transformations that are sometimes involved in comparative activities. (p. 325)

Silova's (2020) insights complement Sobe showcasing the narrative aspects of the stories told in HE. Silova specifically shows the role of education as 're-situated in spaces that stand at the intersection of different worlds' (p. 144) 'bring[ing] different worlds into copresence with each other' (p. 145). In this sense, peace and GCED are co-present, bringing local peacebuilding together with global cosmopolitanism and educational responsibility in and across contexts.

Methodologically, the study involved ethnographic field visits to China/Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, and Somalia/Somaliland for eight months between July 2023 to February 2024, where I interviewed university faculty, collected course syllabi, and gathered fieldnotes (see Appendix 1 for the interview protocol). Forty professors participated in the study from across numerous social science disciplines, including business, education, geography, history, international relations, journalism, political science, and sociology, among others. Twenty men and twenty women participated from the ages of 30–88 years old. They taught in a variety of HE institutions across different regions of each context (see Appendix 2 for further details). Participants qualified if they: (i) taught courses relevant to peace and peace education, (ii) had students in class from the other side of the divide (e.g. Chinese students in Taiwan or Somalian students in Somaliland), and/ or (iii) had a personal interest in peace and peace education. This selection criteria and the diversity of participants was intentional to enhance maximum variation among respondents. Furthermore, as far as possible, participants from each side of the divide were included; yet, due to the difficulties of doing research in such settings, it was not possible to interview participants from northern Cyprus or North Korea. Access to North Korean participants was not feasible, and northern Cypriot participants, though invited, did not reply. Nonetheless, in the end it is a very diverse set of viewpoints from heterogeneous participants across the contexts.

Following data collection, data was then analyzed inductively for emerging themes within and across the settings (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The themes were additionally re-examined through a variety of theoretical lenses (see Kester et al., forthcoming), including for this paper: postcritical thinking (as described in the previous section). I followed the principles of Seoul National University[3] and UKRI/ UNICEF (2021) regarding ethical research in conflict-affected settings. This included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and beneficence, as well as considerations of relationality, reflexivity, and reciprocity as key design principles across the lifecycle of the project (Kester et al., 2024a). Finally, consistent with UKRI/ UNICEF recommendations, the results have been published open access to ensure accessibility for all relevant stakeholders in the research settings and beyond. I turn next to the findings.

Findings

In this section, I outline the three key themes identified from the data. These themes include: aspirations for international recognition juxtaposed with dissatisfaction with the language of 'peace'; ambivalence toward the current status quo; and tensions over teaching for difference or commonality. I explore these themes

using data from my field notes, interviews, and course syllabi with the 40 participants. I then discuss the themes through the lens of postcritical thinking. Quotes are italicized throughout to highlight the voices of participants. The quotes presented are in reference to peace education. Participants discuss their conceptualizations of peace and how they integrate these concepts into syllabi and classroom teaching, as well as nonformal education activities outside the university.

Seeking recognition and freedom

To the first theme, peace in conflict-affected states carries different meanings. In the case of Somaliland, it carries with it the idea of membership in the global community. Educators in Somaliland spoke of peace yet emphasized that Somaliland does not yet have international recognition. SML11, a Business professor from Erigavo, stated that *Somalilanders have no global citizenship*; and SML4, a Development professor from Hargeisa, said that education (i.e. *to get a diploma*) is *not just to improve my country, but also to contribute to other neighbors and the global rest of the world*. Thus, global citizenship on the path to international recognition and social stability was emphasized in Somaliland.

The same goes for China where participants spoke of the peaceful rise of the country, particularly in counterpoint to the West. Here, peace means a different path toward development, one premised for Chinese participants on the equianimous ascent of China. For instance, CHN1, a History professor from Nanjing, said,

> *you know China is quite big, not only big for the territory but also the big population … when a big country is rising there happens to be a lot of conflict, sometimes war. [But] I think a good education should be connected or related to peace;*

and CHN2, a Sociology professor from Nanjing, similarly stated,

> *we have this awareness to take nonviolent approaches to interact with conflicting parties. So if we can do this starting from the people's level and then go to … the diplomatic level, I think we can have better ways to handle conflict.*

Thus, the Chinese participants accentuated their efforts to teach for peace and nonviolence in regard to both domestic and international affairs.

Yet, in Taiwan, educators were skeptical of the concept of 'peace'. TWN4, a Sociology professor from Taipei, was especially dubious of the word. He stated,

> *conflict is actually kind of a necessary process, so if peace is defined as the opposite of conflict, I would say that such peace will always be superficial … . When peace is defined as the opposite of war, like especially when it comes to geopolitical conflict, I think it really depends on what you mean by peace. Because like we, Taiwan, are facing an existential threat from China. China just wants to annex Taiwan. Everyone wants peace, but you want peace by actually surrendering? Peace without justice is not peace at all.*

For TWN4, peace refers to autonomy and justice. This was further evidenced in his syllabus (see Figure 2), where he emphasizes active citizenship in *a process of permanent revolution* and *transformations* in which *contention and cooperation co-exist*. This brings me to the second theme.

課程概述**(Course Description)**
As a democratized, globalized and multi-ethnic society, contemporary Taiwan is rich in cultural diversity. Not only is Taiwan often influenced by international trends, but her domestic environment provides a fertile ground for social innovations; as a result, Taiwan's social fabric and cultural landscapes are undergoing a process of permanent revolution.
This course is intended to introduce economic, political, cultural, religious, gender, and other dynamics of Taiwan's society. The primary goal is to bring about an in-depth understanding of the contending forces that are constantly remaking Taiwan. While the focus is on the present, some historical topics are included for a grip on the preceding transformations in the postwar era. A survey on contemporary Taiwan's society necessarily sensitizes us to the complicated nature of social groupings. Differences in ethnicity, class, gender, region, age, sexual orientation, religious belief, and lifestyle give rise to highly diversified cultural expressions, among which contention and cooperation co-exist.

Figure 2. Syllabus extract (TWN4).

Ambivalence toward the status quo

The second theme that emerged was ambivalence to the status quo. Participants from Cyprus spoke about the hard work involved in promoting peace on the island, referring to the relative peace established after the 2003 opening of the 'green line' [analogous to Korea's DMZ]. This allowed for Greek and Turkish Cypriots to move back and forth across the island to interact with each other and further mutual understanding. Here, CYP7, an Education professor from Nicosia, argued,

> I think what needs to be done at this time is to sort of destabilize the idea that this is how the situation is and this is how it will remain. So sort of destabilizing the idea of the status quo;

and CYP4, a Political Science professor from Nicosia, stated,

> it's a choice, either you keep quiet and the status quo gets by, you know, or you make an intervention. And that was my position [to take action] as an academic, as a social and political citizen living in a divided and frustrated conflict.

She took action to promote mutual understanding between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and between Greeks and Turkish more broadly. CYP4 and CYP7 are arguing that action needs to be taken to further understanding between the various communities living on the island by bringing them together for dialogue, while also questioning whether the current division should go on or if more viable alternatives exist.

Yet, others saw things differently; CYP2, an Education professor from Larnaca, pointed out that

> change is scary … people feel uncertain if we start to talk about, 'Oh, what if we create a two state solution? What if we open up the border and let people go back and forth?' So sometimes it's easier to not do anything.

CYP2 is suggesting that it may be easier to keep the present status quo, without pushing for unification nor seeking recognition for the north. Hence, Cyprus, like the cross-strait context of China/Taiwan, requires a kind of strategic ambiguity in regard to peace and coexistence, where discussions of recognition and potential reunification are handled delicately in and beyond the classroom. In this regard, the maintenance of the status quo may at times be seen as a form of positive peacebuilding rather than negative peace, because necessary action is going into maintaining a frail and complex peace. This may indeed point to a limitation of a rigid negative/positive peace binary in peace studies (Boulding, 1977; Galtung, 1969) – which, as I will discuss later, post-critical pedagogy offers an alternative. In other words, although education may not be bringing about a robust and vibrant 'positive peace',[4] it is still de-emphasizing war (Kester et al., 2022).

Here, TWN6, a Journalism professor from Taipei, shared a story of how her students practice strategic ambiguity (and ambivalence to the status quo) in their interpersonal relations. She explained that they strategically navigate ambiguous national identities (i.e. being Chinese or Taiwanese) by redirecting attention away from national markers toward their local identity. She said,

> the younger generation is more open … If you ask any student, 'Who are you?', they might say, 'I'm a person living in Taipei'. He won't say, 'I'm a Chinese', 'I'm a Taiwanese'. They don't talk about the nation level identity; they just belong to the local. So, when the students introduce themselves, they say, 'I'm from Kaohsiung'. They say their identity is a city. I think it's more healthy.

This highlights the embodiment of strategic ambiguity by these youth.

Finally, KOR3, an Education professor from Seoul, emphasized coexistence and mutual understanding in a different sense – hers was oriented more toward the value of justice, as taught through GCED. For KOR3, peace and global citizenship are intricately interwoven as *values education*. She explained,

> values education means you put values on people. That means human rights education, sustainable development education, or global citizenship education … And if you ask me what is the principle or fundamental value that makes this vision work, then that would be justice. I put justice above all the values: above peace, sustainable development, or human rights. I put social justice at the top.

It is clear that KOR3's approach is fundamentally different than those from China/Taiwan, Cyprus, and Somalia/Somaliland. Her approach is premised more on an abstract notion of cosmopolitanism, as a value, rather than the analysis of specific disputes, although her emphasis on justice does resonate with TWN4's insistence that justice – not peace – should be the focus in HE peace teaching. KOR3's abstract orientation is further evidenced in her syllabus (see Figure 3). This brings me to the third theme of teaching for difference or commonality.

* Course Keywords		Global Citizenship, Global Citizenship Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Peace Education, International Organization
* 1. Purpose of Course	Korean	세계시민교육 및 지속가능발전교육의 주요 개념과 실천의 이해 세계시민교육 연구방법론 이해 교육개발협력 관련 정책과 현황 이해
	English	Understand the history and theoretical foundations of Global Citizenship Education(GCED), Education for Sustainable Development(ESD) Gain the skills and knowledge necessary to set up research projects on GCED and ESD Prepare for a critical analysis of educational development cooperation policies and projects on GCED and ESD
* 2. Materials and Reference		Teaching Materials: Abdi, A., Shultz, A, Pillay, L., Shultz, Lynette, & Pillay, Thashika. (2015). *Decolonizing Global Citizenship Education*. Rotterdam, Netherlands : Sense Publishers. Gaudelli, W. (2016). *Global citizenship education: Everyday transcendence*. Routledge. Reference: Torres, C. A. (2017). *Theoretical and empirical foundations of critical global citizenship education (Vol. 1)*. Taylor & Francis.

Figure 3. Syllabus extract (KOR3).

Teaching for difference or commonality

As indicated before, Taiwanese participants were dubious of peace discourse. They felt it to amplify their disenfranchisement in the global community by obfuscating inequality and injustice inflicted upon them by China. The same sentiment was expressed by SML11, who was skeptical of the notion of global citizenship. He stated, as Somalilanders are not recognized, *If the students of the Somali community understood the local citizenship, then they could understand the global citizenship*. On the other hand, SOM1, a Health Sciences professor from Mogadishu, embraced global citizenship. He stated, *Ultimately, my goal is to instill in [students] the values of empathy and global citizenship, preparing them to be active contributors to a more harmonious world* (see Figure 4 for an extract of SOM1's syllabus). For Somalian participants, global recognition of the Somali state reinforces their claims that Somaliland is a *breakaway territory* (SOM1). This contestation has only been amplified in recent global discourse as tensions rise between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. Yet, this deontological vision runs counter to the experiences and aspirations of the Somalilanders themselves.

CHN1, too, spoke of the potential of global citizenship – yet in a contrastive way than those before: he emphasized the 'common'. He stated, *We are people in the globe, in one boat … We should focus on commonality*. He extended the argument to contesting the centrality of the nation-state in modern politics: *Marxism, you know, China is Marxism. In the future of Marxism, I think, in the future, there will be no country*. TWN7, a Geography professor from Taipei, resonated with this. He stated,

Course Goals:

a. Understand the interconnected nature of global health.
b. Analyze key determinants and disparities in global health.
c. Evaluate the impact of social, economic, and political factors on health outcomes.
d. Explore strategies for addressing global health challenges.

Learning Outcomes:

a. Demonstrate understanding of key global health concepts, theories, and frameworks.
b. Analyze the determinants of health disparities and global health challenges.
c. Evaluate the role of social, economic, and political factors in shaping global health.
d. Propose effective strategies for addressing specific global health issues.

Course Content:

Introduction to Global Health: Definitions, historical perspectives, and evolution of global health, Key global health organizations and initiatives. Determinants of Health: Social determinants, cultural influences, and economic factors, Impact of globalization on health. Global Health Challenges: Infectious diseases (e.g., pandemics, emerging infections), Non-communicable diseases (e.g., cardiovascular diseases, mental health), Health Systems and Policies: Analysis of different health systems, Global health governance and policy frameworks, Global Health Ethics: Ethical considerations in global health research and interventions. Addressing health disparities and social justice, Strategies for Global Health Improvement: Global health interventions and programs, Case studies on successful global health initiatives, Peace and Global Health: The intersection of peace, conflict, and health. Case studies on the impact of conflict on health outcomes.

Figure 4. Syllabus extract (SOM1).

> *I would say the strong sense of nationalism is common for ordinary people. I think there's nothing wrong or bad or good with this. But the extreme nationalism could be really dangerous … I also think that Taiwan could be neither nation nor state. Taiwan could be a kind of 'experimental sovereignty.'*

In this way, both scholars (like TWN6's students above) are *de-centering* the state: one a subject of a powerful nation-state and the other a citizen of a de facto country; yet, as educators concerned with peace they move in a similar direction against state-centricity.

Though not all of the educators took this approach. SML2, an International Relations professor from Hargeisa, *re-centered* (his aspirations for) the state. He suggested the importance of education to help establish a national identity, social cohesion and mitigate grievances. He stated,

> *I believe that education can play a very critical role when it comes to stability and social cohesion. And basically, not all the education, but the quality education can lead to social stability … So in Africa there's a disconnection between the state and the citizen. So how can we connect again the state with the citizens? We can re-connect by providing those services, i.e. education, to the citizens. If we provide those services to the citizens equally, equitably, I think the peace and stability we are talking about will come.*

This statement in reference to the social contract for education points to the desire for a strong state and education system, juxtaposing the differing positions that the faculty have for teaching toward commonality or difference, for centering or de-centering the state (Toukan & Tawil, 2024). The result is that faculty in the context of de facto states, especially, tend to be particularly attuned to the sensitivities of transcending the role of the recognized state in international affairs. In such settings, appeals to commonality may be viewed as obscuring critical differences. This can lead some to resist cosmopolitan gestures and instead privilege cross-border approaches that preserve distinct political and cultural perspectives.

Discussion

All in all, the findings indicate that peace is aspired toward as a form of global citizenship via recognition of difference in settings that lack statehood (e.g. Somaliland and Taiwan). Many educators in these de facto states wish to emphasize sovereignty. Yet, educators in settings that are globally recognized (e.g. China, Greek Cyprus, and Somalia) emphasize commonality and unity. Hence, peace as recognition of difference or commonality are fundamentally different approaches to HE peacebuilding. Further, these competing interpretations of what peace is hold substantive implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and policy, where the themes point toward tensions over teaching the abstract or the particular, as well as new ways of conceptualizing the status quo, not just as a negative – but as a potentially positive – state.

These tensions over legitimate (or illegitimate) recognition and teaching for commonality or difference are understandably deeply affective (Jebril, 2021; Santos & Soler, 2023), pointing to the primacy of the postcritical ontological and emotional aspects of peacebuilding in conflict zones where educators on both sides of the divide(s) argue *passionately* for their position and against the others. Here, leaning into the postcritical means acknowledging and working with these emotions and this discomfort through engaging *feelings*, the visceral *embodiment* and reproduction of the conflict in ourselves and in our affective relationalities with others (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). The implication is clear: that the subjective construction of knowledge is an important starting point for a new way of knowing and relating to others (Kasulis, 2002). Importantly, this does not mean that knowledge, peace or violence are purely subjective. War and violence have many causes beyond misperceptions or identity conflicts. As noted earlier, certain organizations and groups actively profit from war and therefore have political and economic incentives to start or sustain it. Thus, psychological, cultural, political, economic, and educational dimensions intersect as drivers of violence and armed conflict – an issue made especially visible today in the era of populism and post-truth politics (Dholakia et al., 2025; Greenwood-Hau, 2024; Zembylas, 2025). This relates to the first point of the postcritical, a re-turn to the affective and embodied in learning (see Table 1).

The second aspect of the postcritical is related to a hermeneutics of faith. This means trusting the wisdom of learners and communities to address their own conflicts in context-relevant ways without imposition from outside (Reardon, 1988). Yet, outsiders can certainly support and work with communities toward social change (Boulding, 1990). That is, we should not start from the standpoint that learners and communities are ignorant of the social problems that plague them, and that they need to be saved (in the

Table 1. Post-critical curriculum, pedagogical and policy possibilities.

Postcritical possibilities / postcritical tenets	Example	Curriculum possibilities	Pedagogical possibilities	Policy possibilities
1) Re-turn to the affective, embodied, and transrational	마음(Ma-eum) (Kester et al., 2024b)	Begin with 'I'; center subjective experiences as source(s) of knowledge; teach the abstract (i.e. integrity) and the particular (i.e. intimacy) (Kasulis, 2002)	Interdependent teacher/learner-centered pedagogy; reflective activities; autoethnographic writings; make connections between the abstract and the particular	Co-construction of classroom and educational policies
2) Toward a hermeneutics of faith	Post-pessimisstic pedagogy (Davies, 2004)	Look for the positive; constructive engagement; aim to understand the arugment (i.e. empathize) before critiquing (Bell, 2010)	Conflict-sensitive education; affirmative and caring pedagogy; pedagogy of vulnerability (Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020)	Affirmative (as opposed to punitive and restrictive) policies
3) Multiple criticalities	Critical ontologies (Andreotti, 2018)	Localized examples in curriculum for relatability to learners; critical (media) literacy; political awareness and engagement with diverse perspectives	Context-relevant teaching; first-order and second-order reflexivity	Policies that embrace critical differences of bodies not just epistemological diversity

tradition of critical theory to presume to know what is *really* guiding things from behind); nor should we assume some sort of rigid epistemic insider/outsider-ness that prevents solidarity and collaboration. Instead, we should aim to first empathically understand others (Bell, 2010; Charalambous et al., 2021). Thus, this postcritical approach is humble, it's uncertain even, but it is committed to positive peace (i.e. nurturing attitudes, structures, and institutions that prevent and manage conflict nonviolently and foster the conditions for social justice). It is committed to working together to build new paths (Horton & Freire, 1988).

This hermeneutics of faith also points toward the potentiality of common ways of knowing; though, to be sure, there are two types of pedagogical commonality here that need to be distinguished, as their distinctions matter. The first is *a priori* commonality – the type expressed perhaps in CHN1's and SOM1's comments toward Taiwan and Somaliland. That is, commonality as a way of conveniently obscuring differences. The other approach to pedagogical commonality is *a posteiori*, that is, arriving at commonality through the process of making space to work together. It is this latter type of commonality that educational peacebuilding seeks to achieve, as it aims to foster mutual recognition, respect, and relations rooted in justice.

Finally, the third aspect of the post-critical in the data illustrates that there are a multitude of ways to practice criticality in education and research, not simply through a critical theory that claims superior knowledge of the world, but also by way of a post-critical approach that practices love, generosity, and humility (Andreotti, 2018; Pashby et al., 2020). Embracing the possibility of multiple criticalities (e.g. critical epistemologies and critical ontologies) in peace and GCED may help prevent from ideological blinders all the while grounding the learning in the ontological, and through a hermeneutics of faith. Before concluding, I return to the Taiwanese example. As TWN6 observed, her students deliberately refrain from invoking national identity markers, thereby distancing themselves from the state-centered roots of conflict and instead affirming alternative forms of local identity. While subtle, this practice can be understood as a form of everyday transcendence and peacebuilding (Esquith, 2025; Gaudelli, 2016) – not through the evasion of conflict, but through creative and adaptive responses that disarm tensions and invite open dialogue. In this sense, the post-critical expands the horizons of peace and GCED by foregrounding relationality, ethical responsibility, and dialogical openness as constitutive dimensions of a just educational practice.

Conclusion

In the end, the data shows how contextualized course syllabi and pedagogical practices of university educators in contexts fraught with division and conflict function to produce particular (and often competing) ideas about peace and global citizenship. From a post-critical perspective key insights here include the

need to affirm and embrace the good that is in the world today – often overlooked by critical approaches in search of education *for* global citizenship or education *for* peace. Yet, our peace and GCED cannot be education to guide learners toward an a priori (normative and instrumental) state that we seek to achieve. It must be an education founded on a post-pessimisstic ontology (Davies, 2004) and a humanizing pedagogy; in short, a post-critical praxis. In conclusion, this is not a call to abandon critical praxis, but rather an invitation to deepen and enrich it – by critically engaging with, and moving beyond, the Eurocentric Enlightenment constraints that continue to shape peace education and GCED today.

Notes

1. It could be argued that HE in most contexts today involves policies and practices of securitization and neoliberalization (e.g., see Christodoulou, 2024). Indeed, Novelli (2017) shows how imperial policies of militarization and securitization in the global South have returned to the 'West' to be implemented as interventions to counter violent extremism, such as the Prevent policy in the UK. Yet, a critical distinction should be noted: the practice of securitization policies in environments with more restricted rights and limited recourse for justice may amplify the possibility that such measures could lead to militarized security solutions (Kaunert & Sahar, 2021).
2. Although Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, some experts (such as Jebril) still regard Gaza to be under occupation as Israel controls maritime and air space (Darcy & Reynolds, 2010). Moreover, since October 2023 Israel has reoccupied much of Gaza in its ongoing war (Bar-Tal, 2025).
3. This research received ethical approval from Seoul National University (IRB no. 2306/004-005).
4. Peace refers to the absence of violence. Galtung (1969) further breaks this down into 'negative' and 'positive peace', where he contends that negative peace refers to the absence of war and armed conflict, while positive peace refers to the presence of attitudes, behaviors and structures that create and sustain a just society (e.g., recognition of diverse groups in society, egalitarian distribution of resources, and shared political representation).

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ORCID

Kevin Kester http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9025-3217

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview protocol

During this interview, you will be asked about your experiences teaching for peace, reconciliation, and conflict transformation in universities. I am interested in knowing how you conceptualize of a better more peaceful future society, what changes you think are necessary to get there, and how you employ aspects of higher education (e.g. curricular, pedagogic, and institutional policy strategies) to work toward creating that better future society with your students and colleagues. Please remember that the information you share during this interview will only be used for the purposes of this research. You may choose to not answer any questions you wish, or to withdraw at any time without consequence. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the study.

Interview
Preliminary questions

(1) What is your nationality?
(2) What is your gender identity?
(3) What is your age bracket?
(4) What is your highest level of education?
(5) What subject do you teach?
(6) Where do you currently work?
(7) What is your current position?
(8) How many years have you worked in your current position?

Substantive questions

(1) What is your vision for a better world and how does it inform your teaching?
(2) What type of peace are you seeking through education (e.g. security, justice, human rights, unification, intercultural understanding, gender equality)?
(3) Is there a philosophy or theory that drives your work?
(4) What courses do you teach that advocate for peace and unification? Would you be willing to share a sample syllabus that illustrates your practice?
(5) What attracted you to this work?
(6) When did you start thinking about doing this work?
(7) Did you have any early experiences in your life that contributed to your decision to work for peace and social change through higher education?
(8) Do you have a specific story to highlight the connections you make between higher education, peace and reconciliation?
(9) Are there any other factors that made you decide to teach for peace and justice?
(10) What do you think are the qualities and skills that are important for educators who advocate for peace and justice through their teaching?
(11) What are the challenges and opportunities you face in doing this work? Can you share a success story or failure?
(12) How does this work relate more broadly to your research, administration and other duties at the university? For example, what is your research area? What administrative responsibilities do you have? Do you have any other responsibilities at the university, or in your field, that allow you to work holistically toward peace and justice?
(13) Who benefits from such education for peace and social change?
(14) How do you 'scale up' your work to have an impact beyond the classroom (e.g. publishing, public forums, NGO work, etc.)?
(15) What do other countries have to learn from the experience of teaching peace through higher education in [China/ Taiwan, Cyprus, Korea, Somalia/Somaliland]?
(16) Do you have any questions or ending comments?

Once again, thank you for your participation and the insights shared today. I will share with you soon the transcript of this interview for your review. Additionally, prior to the completion of the study I will share the findings for any final comments you may wish to add. It is my hope that this collective process will help us to better know how university educators working in divided and conflict-affected contexts understand, encounter and respond to the challenges and opportunities of promoting positive social change through higher education.

Appendix 2. Study participants

Participant	Country	Gender	Region	University	Discipline
CHN1	China	M	Nanjing	China Case University A (Public)	History
CHN2	China	F	Nanjing	China Case University B (Public)	Sociology
TWN1	Taiwan	M	Taipei	Taiwan Case University A (Public)	Education
TWN2	Taiwan	F	Jiayi	Taiwan Case University B (Public)	Anthropology
TWN3	Taiwan	F	Kinmen	Taiwan Case University C (Public)	Asian Studies
TWN4	Taiwan	M	Taipei	Taiwan Case University D (Public)	Sociology
TWN5	Taiwan	F	Hsinchu	Taiwan Case University E (Public)	Sociology
TWN6	Taiwan	F	Taipei	Taiwan Case University D (Public)	Journalism
TWN7	Taiwan	M	Taipei	Taiwan Case University D (Public)	Geography
TWN8	Taiwan	F	Taipei	Taiwan Case University F (Public)	Psychology
CYP1	Cyprus	F	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University A (Private)	Education
CYP2	Cyprus	F	Larnaca	Cyprus Case University B (Private)	Education

Continued.

Participant	Country	Gender	Region	University	Discipline
CYP3	Cyprus	F	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University B (Private)	Education
CYP4	Cyprus	F	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University C (Public)	Political Science
CYP5	Cyprus	M	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University A (Private)	Anthropology
CYP6	Cyprus	M	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University B (Private)	International Relations
CYP7	Cyprus	F	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University A (Private)	Education
CYP8	Cyprus	F	Nicosia	Cyprus Case University C (Public)	Sociolinguistics
KOR1	South Korea	M	Jeonju	Korea Case University A (Public)	Sociology
KOR2	South Korea	F	Seoul	Korea Case University B (Private)	Political Science
KOR3	South Korea	F	Seoul	Korea Case University C (Public)	Education
KOR4	South Korea	M	Seoul	Korea Case University D (Private)	Anthropology
KOR5	South Korea	M	Seoul	Korea Case University E (Private)	Education
KOR6	South Korea	M	Songdo	Korea Case University D (Private)	History
KOR7	South Korea	F	Suwon	Korea Case University F (Private)	Education
KOR8	South Korea	F	Seoul	Korea Case University C (Public)	Education
SOM1	Somalia	M	Mogadishu	Somalia Case University A (Private)	Health Sciences
SOM2	Somalia	M	Bosaso	Somalia Case University B (Private)	Health Sciences
SML1	Somaliland	M	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	Education
SML2	Somaliland	M	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	International Relations
SML3	Somaliland	M	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	Liberal Arts
SML4	Somaliland	M	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	Development
SML5	Somaliland	M	Borama	Somaliland Case University B (Public)	Education
SML6	Somaliland	M	Borama	Somaliland Case University B (Public)	Education
SML7	Somaliland	F	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	English
SML8	Somaliland	F	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	ICT
SML9	Somaliland	F	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University C (Private)	Nursing
SML10	Somaliland	F	Hargeisa	Somaliland Case University A (Public)	English
SML11	Somaliland	M	Erigavo	Somaliland Case University D (Public)	Business
SML12	Somaliland	M	Erigavo	Somaliland Case University D (Public)	Law