

Challenges and Problems of Peace Education in Kyrgyzstan

Cholpon Chotaeva

American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

Abstract

Many people in Kyrgyzstan are not aware about peace education and therefore confuse peace and conflict studies with international relations. They do not really know that peace and conflict studies is a very broad interdisciplinary field, and peace education includes a variety of topics related not only to peace building and conflict resolution but also to citizenship, democracy, intercultural communication, nationalism and others. Kyrgyzstan is a multicultural country facing many challenges since independence such as interethnic conflicts, tribalism, religious tensions, border clashes, color revolutions. All those challenges raise the problem of training new professionals who can promote intercommunal peace and tolerance, resolve interpersonal and intergroup conflicts, prevent violence and discrimination. The paper is based on the findings of semi-structured interviews conducted among the professors and experts of peace education in Kyrgyzstan and personal observation. The findings will discuss the understanding of peace education by professionals, the courses, trainings and topics of peace education offered to students and trainees, the methods and techniques used by professors in their sessions, the effects of peace education on students and trainees, and the challenges and problems that peace education faces in Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: peace studies; interdisciplinary; peace building; conflict resolution; human rights

1. Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is a multicultural country that has faced many challenges after independence such as interethnic conflicts, tribalism, religious tensions, border clashes, color revolutions (Collins, 2006; Gullete, 2010). Those challenges raise the issue of training new professionals who can promote intercommunal peace and tolerance, resolve interpersonal and intergroup conflicts, prevent violence and discrimination, and finally bring positive changes to the society. Recently more courses related to peace education have been introduced at particular educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan and the first program of peace and conflict studies was created at the American University of Central Asia three years ago. However, the new program is not very popular among students. It fails in recruitment, as students do not understand, what professional careers they can pursue after graduation. In addition, there is a number of challenges faced by peace education in Kyrgyzstan such as the lack of professional instructors, the shortage of textbooks in Russian and Kyrgyz, the absence of adequate teaching methodology, the lack of institutionalization of peace education.

The paper aims to study the challenges and problems that peace education faces in Kyrgyzstan. The research question has been formulated as follows: What are the challenges and problems of peace education in Kyrgyzstan? The findings of the paper will be organized logically to address the research objective and research question. Therefore, the paper will discuss the meaning and understanding of peace education in Kyrgyzstan by teachers and professionals, the courses, trainings and topics offered to students and trainees, the methods and techniques used in classes and workshops, the effects of peace education on students, and finally the challenges and problems that peace education in Kyrgyzstan.

2. Methodology

Two qualitative methods were used in the data collection: semi-structures interviews and participant observation. The main method used was semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in Russian and English. Altogether five interviews were organized. The interviewees were the professors of peace education at local universities and experts of non-governmental international organizations engaged in peace building that organized and provided trainings for state officials, journalists, representatives of non-governmental organizations. Each interview lasted from 40 minutes up to one hour. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, then transcribed and analyzed.

The following eight interview questions were formulated for semi-structured interviews:

- How do you understand peace education? What do you think is peace education?
- What courses related to peace education have you taught? How long have you been teaching them?
- What particular topics and issues have you discussed in your peace education courses?

- What methods and techniques did you use in teaching those courses? Did you teach lectures, seminars, practical classes or others?
- How did your students respond to your teaching? Did they like your teaching or not? Why?
- What do you think are the positive effects of teaching peace education?
- What are the challenges faced by instructors of peace education?
- What are the problems of peace education in Kyrgyzstan

Another method used was participant observation, since the author of the paper is the coordinator of the first program of Peace and Conflict Studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and a professor teaching elective and required peace education courses for many years at different universities of Bishkek city.

3. Findings

3.1 Peace studies

Peace studies is a new field that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It was a response to the reality of the two World Wars, Cold War, Vietnam War, human and civil rights movements in Europe and the United States. Peace studies became a new academic field that studied the reasons and outcomes of large and small-scale conflicts as well as the preconditions of peace. The first undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Europe and the United States aimed to educate students in the culture of peace and resolution of conflicts. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War led to the switch from international to domestic politics, from international conflicts to intrastate conflicts. In 2000s, many other aspects such as development, poverty, environment, terrorism, religious extremism, gender rights, nationalism, democratization were included in peace studies, so it became a truly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, theoretical and practical, multicultural and cosmopolitan, pedagogical and research academic field (Barash & Webel, 2018).

Although different peace studies programs were created in the 1960s in Europe and the United States, peace education was unknown in the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities did not prioritize the development of social sciences for ideological reasons and those disciplines that were allowed as philosophy and ethnography were conceptualized in accordance with socialistic ideals and values. The situation changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union when many new programs were introduced in post-Soviet academia such as anthropology, sociology, political science, international relations and many others.

After 30 years of independence, many people in Kyrgyzstan are still not aware about peace and conflict studies and often associate it with the study of international conflicts and wars, thus confusing it with international relations and politics. They do not really understand that peace and conflict studies represent a very broad interdisciplinary academic field, and peace education includes a variety of courses and topics related to peace building, conflict

resolution, human rights, citizenship, democracy, gender equality, environment, intercultural communication, nationalism and others.

3.2 Peace education in Kyrgyzstan

Peace education is “the process of promoting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level” (Fountain, 1999).

Peace education is a very broad, multidimensional, holistic, interdisciplinary educational field that aims to teach how to build and maintain peace. Discussing peace education, interviewees mentioned:

Peace education is a very broad field that covers many different disciplines.

Peace education is the education related to peace studies. Peace education teaches students how to resolve conflicts and establish long-term peace in a society and the world in general.

At the same time, unlike their European colleagues, many professors in Kyrgyzstan understand peace education as primarily conflict studies, therefore focusing on conflict management and conflict resolution but not on the prevention of conflicts and building long-term sustainable peace in the country. They define peace negatively as the absence of war and do not pay enough attention to other important issues as intercultural communication, interethnic tolerance, citizenship, civil identity and civil rights (Webel & Galtung, 2007).

Peace education includes both long-term courses taught to college, undergraduate and master students and short-term trainings and workshops offered to adults: teachers, experts, state officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations. They can be of theoretical or practical nature related to different aspects of peace building, conflict resolution, intercultural communication, citizenship, human rights, and many others.

As many professors and experts pointed out, the government in Kyrgyzstan did not even realize the need of peace education unless the interethnic conflict broke out in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, a number of courses related to peace education have been introduced in higher educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan as well as various workshops have been organized with the financial support of international agencies and donors.

3.3 Courses, trainings and topics of peace education

Two groups of courses can be distinguished among long-term peace education courses taught to undergraduate and graduate students at the colleges and universities of Kyrgyzstan. The first group includes regular required courses on international relations, security and conflict resolution offered at the programs of International Relations, State and Municipal Management, Peace and Conflict Studies. The second group of courses mostly contains

elective courses that addresses such issues as ethnicity, nationalism, religion, gender, intercultural communication and others that are not offered on a regular basis depending on the availability of funds and credit hours. While regular courses are taught each year or each semester, electives can be taught occasionally. Among the universities that have introduced those courses, are the Kyrgyz National University, the International University of Kyrgyzstan, the Academy of State Management under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, the American University of Central Asia that hosted the first program of Peace and Conflict Studies.

At the same time, all professors and experts interviewed were also involved in teaching different short-term trainings and workshops to university teachers, state officials, journalists, representatives of local non-governmental organizations. The trainings and workshops were devoted to the issues of interethnic relations, conflict resolution, civil identity and others. It is worthy of note that the topics of trainings and workshops related to peace education in Kyrgyzstan are initiated and promoted by international donors. As one of the experts told in the interview:

...Donors prescribe some trends and we begin to follow them. If this is the way, then we will never answer the question, what should be the agenda in Kyrgyzstan to achieve a sustainable peace?

For example, following the 2010 interethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, all international agencies started giving funds for the trainings and workshops related to interethnic conflicts, from 2012-2013, religious extremism and terrorism, later border and water problems in the Fergana Valley. At present, the popular projects supported by international organizations are those related to the issues of identity and traditional values in Kyrgyzstan. That is, international donors prescribe the agenda and trends in peace education in Kyrgyzstan, while local experts and local governmental and non-governmental organizations follow them in order to receive those funds.

3.4 Methods and techniques of peace education

Peace educators in Kyrgyzstan apply both standard methods and specific techniques in their teaching and training depending on the topic and students involved. Among the standard methods used are lectures, group discussions, interactive activities, student presentations, case studies, written assignments, training techniques. As for specific tools, there are conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity method, system analysis, conflict mapping, conflict geography and others. For example, in conflict sensitivity trainings, students are assigned to find out the factors such as individuals, social groups or state institutions that divide or unite the society and serve as dividing or uniting factors. Often the same factor can be both dividing and uniting, for example, religion. At those trainings, students in Kyrgyzstan easily distinguish dividing factors but not uniting factors. As mentioned by the expert using conflict sensitivity method:

My observation is that in Kyrgyzstan, unfortunately, people find dividing factors very well. Mentally we are prone to conflicts and therefore we can see them, find them, love them...

Another specific method of conflict analysis is the method of system analysis that was developed by western peace builders. This method considers different elements in a conflict as interconnected but not separated from each other. Therefore, each conflict has a number of different reasons, conditions and actors.

One of the most popular tools in conflict analysis is conflict mapping or mapping of all factors affecting a particular conflict. Conflict mapping is usually visual tool that is drawn on a flipchart or a board. As soon as conflict analyzed, the solution has to be searched.

A new method gaining popularity among experts of peace studies is conflict geography. According to this method, conflict is caused and limited by a particular geographic region but not a country. The examples could be the conflicts in the Fergana Valley of Central Asia. Therefore, to manage a conflict, the historical and geographical background of the conflict should be studied and analyzed.

3.5 Responses of students on effects of peace education

Students and listeners respond differently to peace education courses and workshops. Most of them do not like to learn theories but prefer to receive practical knowledge. The reason is that the theoretical part of peace education is usually difficult to grasp. At the same time, when students are taught practical classes, they are not well-prepared for them and can hardly follow a professor. All students usually like classes, where a professor provides and discusses various case studies. Case studies serve as a good example of theories and demonstrate how theories can be applied in practice. As one of the professors mentioned:

Students are more interested in practice. But without teaching the theory, students are not prepared to understand practice. The theory is hard to grasp; therefore, they do not like it. But when we begin to discuss the cases after theory, then they follow them easier. For example, after the discussion of theories of realism, constructivism, students follow practical examples better.

Among the positive effects of teaching peace education courses to students at universities are the new knowledge received, understanding various theories and concepts of international relations, international law, global and regional security, peace and conflict studies, nationalism, intercultural communication, gender problems.

Practical knowledge and experience are usually learnt by professionals during various trainings and workshops such as those on the topics of religion and secular state, civil identity, interethnic relations, religious extremism, terrorism and others. They turn to understand that their actions are not meaningless but effective. They receive a hope that acting together, they can change the world for the better.

Teachers, experts, state officials, journalists, members of non-governmental organizations attending peace education trainings and workshops are often very grateful to learn new knowledge and methods that allow them looking at the reality from anew prospective. They are very thankful to receive the information related to peace, conflict, violence, war, terrorism, environmental problems, nationalism, democratization, conflict resolution. They

find the topics and courses very relevant and timely, useful and practical that could be applied in their personal daily life.

At the same time, students can learn various soft skills during peace education classes, courses and workshops such as conflict analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, team work, adaptability, empathy and others. People learn to control their own behavior in their daily life, put themselves on a different position of a conflict, get rid of common stereotypes, try not to judge and criticize others that ultimately improve their relationships with others, apologize if you say or do something wrong. In that way, one of the interviewees summarized:

Teaching peace education raises the awareness of students about the current problems and challenges faced by the contemporary society and the world and the tools of peace building, conflict resolution, nonviolence, nondiscrimination. Besides, they learn and develop the skills of communication, problem solving, conflict analysis, critical thinking.

3.6 Challenges and problems of peace education

Professors of peace education are mostly faced with a number of challenges. Besides, peace education in Kyrgyzstan has to deal with a number of problems.

First of all, peace educators find the lack of understanding among students, why they need peace education. This is especially true for monoethnic and monoreligious regions of Kyrgyzstan when the people of Kyrgyz ethnicity representing the dominant majority of the country do not understand, why they have to respect and ensure the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Kyrgyzstan and why Kyrgyz nation is based on a common solidarity of all citizens but not on ethnicity and religion.

Secondly, peace education is often seen as brainwashing by western values and western system of education. Those people raised in a nationalistic spirit since Kyrgyzstan became independent are reluctant to receive such an education. They regard it as the system of new imperialism by European countries and the United States and do not want to subordinate themselves to it. The rejection and hostility towards western theories and concepts also depends on such factors as age, level of education and institution where the individual studied before. As it was pointed out by an expert:

For many, it is unfamiliar system of education and people become defensive considering it as brainwashing by the West and the imposition of alien Western values. The youth raised in the nationalistic spirit does not accept such an education, they do not need such Western values... Then the antagonism emerges.

Thirdly, a Soviet mentality among the people of older generation is another obstacle for peace educators in Kyrgyzstan. The adults of 50-60 years old are still adjusting to the post-Soviet reality and it is hard to train them, as they are often rigid and not flexible in their perception of peace education. They believe that they have enough knowledge and

experience and therefore are reluctant to learn new concepts and skills, especially from younger professors and experts.

Fourthly, the lack of institutionalization of peace education in Kyrgyzstan represents the most important challenge. The government does not prioritize the institutionalization of peace education, as it does not realize its importance and need to incorporate it into the existing formal education at preschool, school and university levels. All initiatives related to peace education appear to be temporary. The lack of institutionalization of peace education is also negatively affected by political instability when each color revolution results in the change of political regime and constitution. Therefore, there is no strategic vision among the leadership regarding the mission and goals of formal educational system in creating the new civic community and bringing up new citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, there are not enough professors and textbooks on peace education at all levels of formal education. The shortage of professionals and materials in Russian and Kyrgyz affect the quality of teaching negatively. Most of peace educators are those who can speak English and read the literature in English. All information for peace education is mostly adopted from English language books and papers. Young people are reluctant to be taught in peace studies. They do not understand, what professional careers they can pursue after their graduation. They believe that they will not be employed with the diploma of peace studies. If they get employed, they will mostly work in low prestige and low paid positions such as social worker, police officer, state employee and others.

4. Conclusion

As peace education is a new field and a new type of education in Kyrgyzstan, it was not studied before by either local or foreign scholars. Soviets did not prioritize the development of social sciences for ideological reasons that finally produced an academic vacuum. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new social science disciplines of sociology, political sciences, international relations and many others penetrated the country and laid the foundation for the development of new interdisciplinary educational programs.

Meanwhile, peace education is still unknown for many people and even professionals in Kyrgyzstan. They understand peace education as international relations. They do not really know that peace education includes a variety of courses including human rights, citizenship, democracy, gender equality, environment, intercultural communication, nationalism. On the other hand, many experts of peace education understand peace education as primarily conflict studies, therefore focusing on conflict management and conflict resolution but not on the prevention of conflicts and building long-term sustainable peace.

Peace education in Kyrgyzstan includes both long-term courses taught to college, undergraduate and master students and short-term trainings and workshops offered to teachers, experts, state officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations. In terms of university courses, regular courses are those courses offered each semester or each

academic year, while elective courses are those that are not taught on a regular basis but occasionally.

The topics of trainings and workshops related to peace education in Kyrgyzstan are initiated and funded by international donors, sometimes at the expense of local interests. For example, following the 2010 interethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, all international agencies started funding the trainings and workshops related to interethnic conflicts, from 2012-2013, it was religious extremism and terrorism, later border and water problems in the Fergana Valley, presently the issues of identity and traditional values in Kyrgyzstan.

Peace educators in Kyrgyzstan apply both standard methods and specific techniques in their teaching and training depending on the topic and students engaged. Among the standard methods used are lectures, group discussions, interactive activities, student presentations, case studies, written assignments, training techniques. As for specific tools, there are conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity method, system analysis, conflict mapping, conflict geography and others.

Among the positive effects of teaching peace education courses and trainings are obtaining new knowledge, familiarizing with various theories and concepts in the field, getting practical experience, mastering soft skills such as conflict analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, team work, adaptability, empathy and others.

Professors of peace education are mostly faced with a number of challenges. First of all, it is the lack of understanding among students, why they need peace education. Peace education is often seen as brainwashing by the Western education system or European countries and the United States. A certain challenge represents training the adults of 50-60 years old who possess Soviet mentality, as they are often rigid and reluctant to learn new concepts and skills.

The lack of institutionalization of peace education in Kyrgyzstan represents the most important challenge. The government does not prioritize the institutionalization of peace education, as it does not realize its importance to incorporate it into the existing formal education. All initiatives related to peace education appear to be temporary. There is no strategic vision among the leadership regarding the mission and goals of formal educational system in creating the new civic community and bringing up new citizens in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, there are not enough professors and textbooks on peace education at all levels of formal education. The shortage of professionals and materials in Russian and Kyrgyz affect negatively the quality of teaching. Most of peace educators are those who can speak English. Young people are reluctant to study in peace studies. They do not understand, what professional careers they can pursue after their graduation.

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