

Analysing UNESCO's education for peace and sustainable development curriculum in Myanmar through a postcolonial lens



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Abstract

Since the 1990s, a model of peace education focusing on attitudinal and behavioural change has been implemented globally in conflict-affected contexts. This article examines the content of UNESCO's 'Education for Peace and Sustainable Development' (EPSD) programme delivered in Myanmar through the lens of Santos' (2016) 'Epistemologies of the South.' The analysis reveals potential limitations of the EPSD programme in two areas: 1) it features often-used conceptions of peace and sustainability with limited integration of local epistemologies, and 2) it emphasises individual behavioural change for sustainable development without paying sufficient attention to structural factors. This article argues that these limitations risk creating blind spots that may unintentionally marginalise local knowledge systems. This article, therefore, proposes opportunities for developing an ecology of knowledges that integrates both well-established and locally embedded conceptions in the effort of peacebuilding in Myanmar while also balancing the focus between structural and individual analysis to better understand sustainable development.

Key Words

epistemicide; EPSD; peace education; Myanmar

Introduction

In April 2024, UNESCO Myanmar launched a peace education curriculum for Myanmar teachers on its Myanmar Teacher Platform. The curriculum comprises various courses under the Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (EPSD) theme. While such peace education programmes in other conflict-affected contexts have received scholarly attention due to their emphasis on attitudinal and behavioural change (Higgins and Novelli, 2020) and potential epistemological limitations (Zembylas, 2018), it is pertinent to understand the implications of the EPSD curriculum for peacebuilding in Myanmar.

This investigation adopted the concept of the 'Epistemologies of the South' – referring to the worldviews held by people oppressed by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Santos, 2016). The article begins by highlighting the implications of colonial legacies on knowledge systems in Myanmar. It then provides a review of the conceptualisation of the Epistemologies of the South. After explaining the research approach, the article presents two key takeaways from the critical reflection of the findings: 1) the limited integration of local epistemologies in conceptualising peace and sustainability, and 2) the emphasis on individual behavioural change with insufficient attention to structural factors. It is then followed by an analytical discussion of these takeaways.

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The colonial context of Myanmar and its epistemological implications

Examining an international education intervention in Myanmar through a postcolonial lens is particularly relevant given the country's colonial history. Myanmar was annexed by the British in 1886 following three Anglo-Burma Wars: 1824-26, 1852, and 1885 (Lwin, 2000). The colonial administration has left lasting impacts that continue to shape various aspects of contemporary Myanmar society, including knowledge production and broader societal processes. One prominent example is the British imposition of rigid classifications of ethnicity, where more fluid identities had previously existed (Ng, 2022). To facilitate colonial rule, the authorities engaged in 'an immense process of knowledge production that made an alien landscape and population knowable and thereby governable' (Ng, 2022., p. 44). Through extensive categorisation and enumeration, the British solidified differences between ethnic groups, creating fixed boundaries that had not previously existed. This colonial taxonomy not only defined who belonged to which ethnic category but also established hierarchies between these categories, privileging some groups while marginalising others.

In the sphere of schooling and education, the impact of colonial administration is even more pronounced. The colonial administration has rendered a hierarchical and multi-tiered education system that created deep divisions based on the language of instruction and control (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2019). These divisions were shaped through the four types of schooling in colonial Myanmar: 1) vernacular schools (either Burmese or a recognised local language) operated by local authorities, 2) monastic schools (mostly in Burmese) independently run by monasteries, 3) vernacular/English schools mostly run by the colonial administration, and 4) English-only private schools run by the church. While the schools adopting English were supported by the colonial administration, thereby privileging Western ways of knowing, the vernacular and monastic schools – repositories of local knowledge and pedagogical traditions – were relegated to a lower status and considered the only educational option for lower socio-economic classes (Cheesman, 2003). As such, colonial administrations have left lasting imprints on knowledge production in Myanmar's education landscape, where local ways of knowing struggle for recognition and legitimacy.

Peace education and 'epistemologies of the South': A theoretical framework

Peace education 'refers to teachers teaching about peace: what it is, why it does not exist and how to achieve it' (Harris, 2004, p.6). In particular, transnational organisations have widely implemented a form of peace education that focuses on attitudinal and behavioural change in various conflict contexts (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Higgins and Novelli, 2020).

Along with its adoption in many settings, peace education has faced critical examination. Some scholars advocate for a reconfiguration of it through critical pedagogy and social justice education (Bajaj, 2008). Others have identified potential limitations in its approaches, particularly regarding Eurocentrism (Zembylas, 2018), its implementation by the 'Northern, white, academic elite' (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, p.27), and the risk of pathologising the conflict-affected societies by focusing on individual behaviours rather than structural factors (Higgins and Novelli, 2020).

To rethink contemporary peace education, this article draws on the theoretical concept of 'Epistemologies of the South,' developed by the Portuguese sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2016). For Santos, colonialism did not disappear with the end of the historical-geographical occupation but persisted through the domination of knowledge systems. He explored how the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems persists in contemporary contexts, a process he terms 'epistemicide.' Santos introduces the concept of the 'abyssal line' – a divide between visible (recognised) and invisible (marginalised) knowledge – facilitates epistemicide. Scientific knowledge from the Global North, positioned on one side of this invisible line, is privileged; while Southern ways of knowing, on the other side of the abyssal line, are rendered invisible or invalid. In response to this situation, he proposed recentring attention on what he called the 'epistemologies of the South' through:

'the ways of knowing from the perspectives of those who have systematically suffered the injustices, dominations and oppressions caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy' (Santos, 2016, p. 18).

Santos does not reject Northern scientific knowledge completely. Rather, he proposes

creating an 'Ecology of Knowledges' that includes diverse wisdom traditions through 'intercultural translation,' identifying similarities and differences among epistemologies to develop a more inclusive conceptual framework. Hence, he envisions an ecosystem where different knowledge systems can coexist. This theoretical lens provides a valuable tool for examining how EPSD curricula engage with diverse knowledge systems in Myanmar.

The research approach

This investigation, which extends learning from a larger body of work (see acknowledgments), employs a curriculum analysis method: a systematic approach to examining educational content, identifying the worldviews of curriculum developers and understanding the implications of these perspectives (Posner, 2004). It aims to address the question: What particular knowledge, concepts,

and theories related to peace and sustainable development are presented or absent in the EPSD curriculum delivered by UNESCO Myanmar?

The methodological approach involves three phases. All courses under the EPSD theme were initially reviewed, resulting in a preliminary selection of eleven courses relevant to the study. They were then thoroughly examined to finally select three courses which address the theoretical understanding, concepts and knowledge of peace, and sustainability. They are 1) Building a peace culture in the classroom, 2) Introduction to sustainability, and 3) Types of stories and understanding sustainable development. The content of the three courses was then analysed by using abductive coding (Thompson, 2022), initially building on the preliminary codes from the literature of Santos' framework and reflexively refining the analytical process based on insights and patterns from the data.

Table 1. An overview of the analysis of EPSD curriculum materials

| Course | Units | Overall Objectives |
|---|---|--|
| Building a peace culture in the classroom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding Peace Understanding Conflict Education for Peace Teachers as Peace Builders Supplementary Peace-related materials for Classroom Use | To enable teachers to build a safe learning environment and to help provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become part of a harmonious, just, and conflict-resolving society. |
| Introduction to sustainability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is Sustainable Development? Four Pillars of Sustainable Development and their Relationship Backgrounds of the Sustainable Development Goals | To provide teachers with essential knowledge and skills for integrating peace and sustainable development topics into classroom lessons and extracurricular activities. |
| Types of Stories and Understanding Sustainable Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types of Stories Selecting Stories with Peace and Sustainable Development Themes Teaching Methods that Incorporate EPSD in Storytelling | To help teachers identify various story types, and develop strategies for incorporating peace and sustainability themes into narratives. |

The coding was then interpreted through postcolonial perspectives, building on Petrina's (2022) proposal of exhibiting implications of a curriculum in terms of: 1) What knowledge was privileged? 2) What knowledge was marginalised or absent? and 3) The opportunities for epistemic inclusion. As such, this article treats a curriculum as a politically contested sphere (Apple, 2018), where a particular knowledge is recognised, validated and privileged while others are marginalised. This situates

the discussion about reimagining peace education in Myanmar in the wider postcolonial literature, which urges decentring Eurocentric knowledge; recentring the local knowledge, concepts and practices; and epistemic and curriculum justice (Hajir and Kester, 2020; Naidoo *et al.*, 2020; Santos, 2016). Below is an examination of the EPSD curriculum through a postcolonial lens.

Critical reflections on findings

The following tables summarise the key findings across three courses highlighting what knowledge has been privileged and what is undervalued:

Table 2. Summary of key findings across the EPSD courses analysed

| Course | Knowledge Present | Knowledge Limited or Absent |
|--|---|--|
| Building a peace culture in the classroom | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Galtung's peace theory• Lederach's conflict transformation model | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Indigenous peace concepts• Local/cultural practices for conflict resolution |
| Introduction to Sustainability | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A classic definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local concepts and practices toward sustainability |
| Types of Stories and Understanding Sustainable Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some local stories as content• Individual/ behavioural transformation focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Structural analysis |

Limited integration of local epistemologies

The EPSD curriculum primarily draws upon well-established and often-used theoretical frameworks to conceptualise peace and sustainability. The course 'Building a Peace Culture within Classroom' (UNESCO, 2024a) aims to conceptualise peace through Galtung's (1976) three approaches to peace: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. It distinguishes peace into negative peace (the absence of physical violence) and positive peace (the elimination of structural violence). The curriculum classifies violence into three types: physical, structural, and cultural. It then shifts to discussing how to resolve conflict by mapping the levels of conflict transformation as personal, relational, structural, and cultural based on Lederach's (2015) transformative peacebuilding approach. It also tries to localise those theories by using relevant examples and events which consider current socio-political issues to help the participants understand application of the theories.

While these frameworks and their articulation offer valuable insights and help Myanmar teachers comprehend a broad range of conceptions of peace as developed in Anglo-Saxon literature, the curriculum ignores the knowledge and understanding of peace that is grounded in Myanmar's diverse society. For example, the Buddhist ideas of inner peace and the cultivation of metta-karuna (loving kindness-compassion)

suggest everyone is interdependent, which lays the groundwork for resolving conflict and addressing sufferings among individuals in Myanmar society (Nomnian, 2008). The absence of these concepts represents a missed opportunity to provide much-needed attention to local worldviews, only to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies that are disconnected from cultural nuances and knowledge traditions of the Global South.

Similarly, the course 'Introduction to Sustainability' primarily utilises the definition of sustainability from the Brundtland Report, as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (UNESCO, 2024b; WCED, 1987). It also discursively frames the importance of sustainability and ultimately advocates that it is the only alternative to redress the problems Myanmar society is facing. This is evident in course materials, as illustrated in a dialogue about environmental and social issues in Yangon:

'Why are there more and more poor people although the city [Yangon] seems to be rich? Why is development good for some and not for others? I heard that sustainability and sustainable development are trying to solve such kinds of problems. I don't know how it is trying but I think sustainability is very important for our future' (UNESCO, 2024b).

The quote seems to reflect the fact that the idea of sustainability does not originate from Myanmar

society and is imposed from outside. The developers of the course appear to have had limited intercultural dialogue with existing worldviews already held by people in Myanmar. To draw upon the spiritual relationship of Myanmar's diverse communities with their environment is potentially a more effective way of enabling learning that is relevant and respectful to local knowledges of sustainability. For example, in the Buddhist community, 'Samyag Ajiva' (Right Livelihood) emphasises earning a living without harming others, viewing humans as interconnected with nature rather than superior to it (Hanh, 1999). This principle encourages livelihoods that benefit humans, animals, plants, and the Earth; it also recognises collective responsibility for environmental impacts. For the Karen community, the concept of 'Kaw' represents a territory system that functions as a unit of social and ecological governance (Paul, 2018). It is based on a spiritual-relational ontology and creates a framework for environmental governance that mediates Karen communities' interactions with their lands, waters and forests. Situating the discussion on the spiritual relation of a human community with its environment is not to romanticise local worldviews but to spotlight the existence of local worldviews of sustainability, which may well differ from a 'sustainable development' approach that treats the environment, primarily, as capital.

Emphasis on individual behavioral change with limited structural analysis

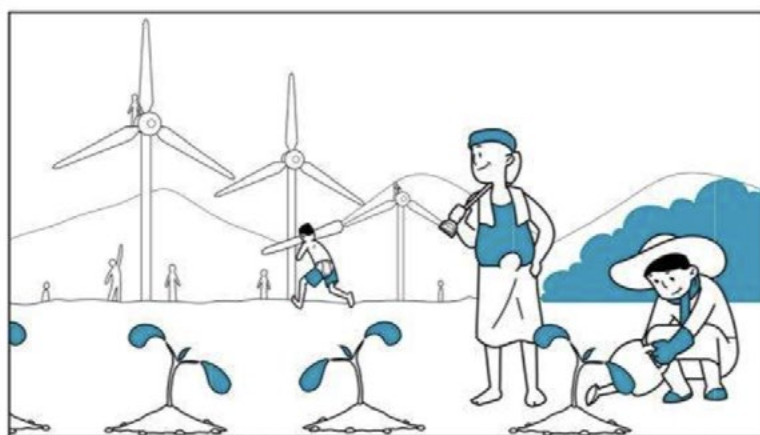
The course 'Types of Stories and Understanding Sustainable Development' tends to frame sustainability primarily in terms of individual behavioural change (UNESCO, 2024c). To demonstrate, one story illustrates how a village achieves environmental sustainability by altering its agricultural practices using renewable energy and promoting community-based tourism. Some of the visual illustrations in the course (see Figures 2 and 3) tend to suggest that environmental challenges stem primarily from individual practices and can be solved through behavioural modification.

Figure 1. A picture used in one story of the course titled 'Types of Stories and Understanding Sustainable Development' (source: Myanmar Teacher Platform)



Translation of the caption: As the business progresses [in the village], deforestation increases and natural resources decrease, challenging the [sustainability] of the village.

Figure 2. A picture used in one story of the course titled 'Types of Stories and Understanding Sustainable Development' (source: Myanmar Teacher Platform)



ရွာသူရွာသားတွေက သူတို့ရွာရဲ့ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်နေတဲ့ စီးပွားရေးမှာ ရေရှည်အတွက်ရေးရွတ် အလေ့အကျင့်တွေ ထည့်သွင်းဖို့ နဲ့ မြေအကန့်အသတ်ကို လိုက်နာပြီး အသုံးပြုပြီးတိုင်း ပြန်လည်စိုက်ပျိုးပေးဖို့ ကို ဆွေးနွေးကြပါ တော့တယ်။ ဂေဟစနစ်နဲ့ သဟဇာတဖြစ်တဲ့ လယ်ယာစိုက်ပျိုးရေးနည်းလမ်းတွေကို လက်ခံကျင့်သုံးတဲ့အပြင် ပြန်လည်အသုံးပြုနိုင်တဲ့ စွမ်းအင်တွေအတွက် ရင်းနှီးမြှုပ်နှံလာကြပါတယ်။ ပြီးတော့ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရဲ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုနဲ့ သဘာဝအလှတွေကို ဖော်ထုတ်တဲ့ ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းတွေလုပ်ဖို့လည်း အားပေးတိုက်တွန်းကြပါတယ်။

Translation of the caption: *The villagers discussed the integration of sustainable practices in their businesses. Not only did they adopt farming techniques that are relevant to the ecosystem, but they also invested in sustainable energy. Additionally, they encouraged community tourism, which promotes Myanmar's natural beauty and cultural heritage.*

Such visualisations tend to suggest that the changing ways of living and conducting business are the primary reasons for deforestation and natural resource exhaustion and that merely changing farming behaviours, using sustainable energy, and community tourism could bring environmental sustainability. While these individual actions and local-level practices are important, this framing appears to ignore structural violence (Galtung, 1976) that is situated within unequal global capitalist structures contributing to environmental challenges and intersecting with Myanmar's unique context. Consequently, it silences critical local knowledge and undermines the agency of the learner in challenging wider structures that influence social and economic processes.

It is also important to note that the EPSD curriculum does make positive efforts to incorporate some local content. For example, the 'Storytelling for Peace and Sustainable Development' course includes materials from the Third Story Project¹, a local educational initiative that develops stories in Burmese and other Myanmar languages. One example is the 'Lisu New Year Tree,' which is a Kachin folk tale explaining why Lisu people plant trees as part of their New Year celebrations, conveying messages of collectivism and environmental stewardship. This relatively small portion of the overall curriculum could be expanded.

1 <https://www.thirdstoryproject.org>

Figure 3. A visual illustration from the story ‘Lisu New Year Tree’ (source: Myanmar Teacher Platform)



Translation of the caption: *Once No Nee [a Lisu woman] arrived back at the village, she planted a tree at the front of every house, leaving no house without a tree.*

Discussion

Examining the EPSD curriculum through the framework of the ‘Epistemologies of the South’ reveals both limitations and opportunities for creating a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding in Myanmar. This section discusses two key themes: 1) developing an ‘ecology of knowledges’ that honours diverse epistemologies, and 2) integrating structural analysis alongside individual approaches to balance the understanding of sustainable development.

Towards an ‘ecology of knowledges’

The predominant reliance on decontextualised theoretical frameworks in the EPSD curriculum creates what Santos (2016) describes as an ‘abyssal line’: a divide through which certain knowledge systems are privileged while others become invisible. This is not to suggest that concepts such as Galtung’s (1976) notion of ‘positive peace’ or the UN ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ are unhelpful nor to deny the value of insights offered by these theoretical frameworks. Instead, I would argue that there is a risk of missing opportunities for rich intellectual dialogue when these frameworks are operationalised without significant engagement with local epistemologies.

This article, therefore, suggests developing an ecology-of-knowledges approach, which would decenter well-established peace theories and recenter Myanmar’s diverse epistemological traditions to eventually place them in an intercultural dialogue. Comparing and contrasting epistemologies would be a way to develop an inclusive conceptual framework. As such, the EPSD curriculum would increase its relevance and nurture the process of upholding epistemic justice (Santos, 2016). To reiterate this claim, the following table maps out some potential local concepts for cultural translation, and how such integration of local worldviews would contribute to enriching the theoretical discussion of the EPSD curriculum (although it is by no means an exhaustive list of local concepts related to peacebuilding and sustainability in Myanmar).

Table 3. Ideas of peace and sustainability native to Myanmar and their potential epistemological contributions

| Course | Opportunities for Inclusion | Potential Contribution |
|---|--|--|
| Building a peace culture in the classroom | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Integration of diverse understandings of peace and community-based reconciliation practices (such as inner peace and metta-karuna) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">relational approaches to conflict transformation and interdependence |
| Introduction to Sustainability | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Integration of local worldviews pertaining to sustainability (such as Samayag Ajiva and Kaw) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">collective responsibilityhuman-environment-spiritual relationship |

Importantly, an ecology of knowledges requires the recognition of epistemological diversity within Myanmar itself. By situating the discussion on widely familiar concepts from Buddhism, such as metta karuna and Samayag Ajiva, there is also a risk of domestic epistemological dominance through privileging a Buddhist perspective at the cost of other cultural traditions of knowing and living. In this sense, the goal should be to create a space for dialogue that acknowledges worldviews of culturally diverse communities in Myanmar. To this end, it is equally important to critique the authoritative Burmanisation agenda in Myanmar’s political processes (Walton, 2013), and facilitate pluriversality to incorporate diverse ways of knowing among non-Buddhist and non-Bamar communities. This approach aligns with Nzahabwanayo’s recent (n.d.) assertion that peace education has a greater impact when locally existing worldviews and concepts are incorporated. The EPSD curriculum’s inclusion of local stories demonstrates a step in this direction, but a more comprehensive approach would involve deeper engagement with diverse epistemologies at the conceptual level.

Balancing individual and structural analysis to better understand sustainable development

The tendency in the EPSD curriculum to emphasise individual behavioural change for environmental sustainability fails to acknowledge that environmental problems are ‘wicked’ – a social policy term for problems involving many players with conflicting values, ‘where the proposed solutions often turn out to be worse than the symptoms’ (Churchman, 1967, B-141). Higgins and Novelli (2020, p.12) describe

this as ‘pathologising society’ to blame people’s behaviour and attitude for the problems around them, without considering the structural factors. The curriculum could benefit by integrating the structural dimensions of the environmental challenges without rejecting individual agency. It should explore how local environmental challenges connect to global structures, examine how colonial legacies continue to shape resource distribution, and recognise community-based resilience practices. This approach would balance the learners’ understanding of sustainable development by allowing them to critically engage with wicked environmental problems while still affirming the important role that teachers and students play in creating positive change.

Conclusion

This article examined UNESCO’s EPSD curriculum in Myanmar through Santos’ (2016) ‘Epistemologies of the South’ framework. It identified valuable contributions of the curriculum as well as potential limitations in its approach. The analysis revealed two areas for critical engagement: 1) greater integration of Myanmar’s diverse epistemological traditions and 2) increased attention to structural dimensions alongside the focus on individual agency. These limitations may create blind spots that unintentionally privilege certain knowledge systems while marginalising others. This article, therefore, suggests opportunities for creating a more inclusive ecology of knowledges: a system which values both global frameworks and local epistemologies, recognising Myanmar’s diverse context. Such an approach would move beyond the simple addition of local concepts, to an intentional reconsideration of how knowledge is constructed, validated, and exchanged. On a related note, this may require

future research to conceptualise the local notions of peacebuilding and sustainability in Myanmar and to explore how teachers can navigate diverse epistemologies within their classroom practices for peacebuilding. Moreover, the article encourages the integration of increased structural analysis of sustainability alongside its current focus on individual agency. This will balance the learners' understanding and help them critically engage with sustainable development issues. The EPSD curriculum could further enhance its relevance and effectiveness in this way.

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