

Fear and Hope in Peshawar

Inclusive Security

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Peshawar is my city.

If you try to imagine what it's like there, peace is probably the last thing you'd think of. Peshawar, Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan, is one of the most dangerous and unstable regions in the world. It's where, late last year, militants attacked the Army Public School, killing 150 children. It's where, in recent years, 40,000 civilians and around 4,700 security personnel have died as a result of roadside bombs and drone attacks.

It's also where I run my own school for boys and girls. In this school, I have created a peace education curriculum – the first of its kind in all of Pakistan. It's a curriculum that has helped me cultivate my school as an enclave of tolerance . And it's one I'm confident can scale across the country, and even around the world.

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The idea for the curriculum came in 2009 when, as a result of the bombings that had become a near daily occurrence, I saw my country and province transform around me. Many men, women, boys and girls had begun to suffer from psychiatric disorders (and many still are). Then and now, girls in my school tear the limbs off their dolls, acting out

the mayhem around them. My youngest students, in a heartbreaking expression of feelings they cannot articulate, often draw pictures of guns and ambulances and dead bodies. As they say, war is hell.

Like my students, I was and am often afraid. But fear is a strange bird: if you let it take hold of you, you are lost forever. But if you face it down, it runs away. I made the second choice. Back in 2009, the question I asked myself was how I could destroy fear. I knew I had to defeat it with something that I was good at: teaching.

My sister, who runs the biggest organization on conflict transformation in Islamabad, Pakistan, gave me the idea to work on peace education. After a fruitless search for peace-focused curriculums on Google, I decided to create my own. In the first weeks I taught two topics – diversity and tolerance – and elected two students from each class as the “peace angels.” They were tasked with resolving conflicts of smaller scale within the class and help teachers in running the peace education projects smoothly. They were also to help in monitoring art and sports competitions.

Within weeks, I saw that the students were becoming calmer. They began to question the teachers about the causes and effects of the ongoing conflict, and how could they put an end to it. I could also see that even some of the students who had been particularly aggressive and uncooperative were becoming more tolerant and respectful of each other’s views.

But that wasn’t enough. I wanted to adapt and improve the curriculum – and I wanted to convince other educators around the country to use it, too. One of my first steps towards improvement: engaging mothers. After all, they play a crucial role in the mental and physical growth of their children. I formed a “Mothers Group” that comes fortnightly to the school and introduces the students to a guest speaker – also a mother – who has been affected by terrorism. As she shares her story with the students and answers their questions, the students come to understand how people suffer because of someone’s hatred or intolerance.

I also reached out to local madrassas which are considered by many to be nurturing grounds for extremists. We invited the madrassa students to join us for a Literature for Peace week, where renowned writers, poets and columnists came to read excerpts from their writings about peace and tolerance. These students, along with children from my school, also went to a church on Easter to broaden their understanding of religions outside of Islam.

Today, I'm hard at work innovating my curriculum and advocating for the inclusion of peace education in the provincial school curriculums throughout Pakistan. Although it hasn't yet been included, we've made progress: In my province, pictures showing men holding guns or swords have been removed from school books. On the title pages of those same books, peace messages – like “ we want peace on our soil”– now appear.

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This is a great start. But how do we finish the job of countering the fear – and making sure that children all over Pakistan, and the world, are learning messages of peace early on? We need to make peace education compulsory at all levels of school; perhaps this could even be a facet of a country's National Action Plan, which is a legislative framework that promotes women's roles in peace and security, adopted by 48 countries around the world so far. And those of us in the field need international support – in particular, support from leaders who control peace negotiations and others who make policy affecting security in countries and communities undergoing conflict.

We need this international support now more than ever; just one peace curriculum cannot alone extinguish the fear in my country. Recently while I was traveling away from home, my daughter told me that my son did not eat his lunch at school that day because he was afraid that the extremists would attack as they did at the Army Public School. Of course, his fear is not unfounded. As we are seeing increasingly around the world, even in places thought to be stable, no one is safe.

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A handful of extremists are playing with our lives. Many more of us are peaceful, and yet we have not been able to control the menace of violence – perhaps because we are not all acting as one force. The international community needs to rise and act together to condemn armed conflicts and all kinds of war. Collective efforts are what's required to destroy fear and put an end to violence.