



# The Role of Participatory Children's Media in promoting Dialogues for a Culture of Peace: An Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi had said, "If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children." (Young India, 19-11-1931) As every individual is responsible for contributing towards a culture of peace and nonviolence and mutual co-existence, it would be imperative to encourage children and adolescents to develop capacities to contribute to dialogues and constructive conflict resolution skills. These are important ingredients of today's life skill education. Further, in the backdrop of today's hypertechnological communication environment as children and adolescents are exposed to different tools of communication right from a very young age and are able to contribute to various media platforms, it would be essential to help develop their capacities to construct media messages which are dialogical in nature, promotes mutual respect and understanding, and overall contributes towards a culture of peace. This paper would examine how by participating and taking the lead in developing media platforms, children and adolescents, as part of media literacy programmes, are able to encourage dialogue for peace. The paper would also examine how integration of nonviolent communication in participatory children media platforms can help in the amplification of peace orientation amongst young people.

**Keywords:** Media literacy for peace, child media initiatives for dialogues, nonviolent communication

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"We are here Santhali, Muslim, Dalit, Brahman, Kol in our homes, but simply students in our school and to our teachers. Every week we have Sahitya Sabhas, where we learn new things about our culture and about those of our friends; we sing and dance with each other and share our lunch....we appeal to you not to let the demons of division enter your communities or neighborhoods and follow the principle that we are following here in our school with unity through friendship, understanding, and integration" (The Peace Gong, September 2012; cited in Kundu, 2014).

The class X students of Anandalaya School, Madhupur, Jharkhand, India who were child

reporters of The Peace Gong, the children newspaper used the spaces provided by the media platform to share their views on issues of tolerance, mutual respect and love for people from different communities. As can be noted from their story in the children's newspaper, the students also initiated dialogues in their community with adults on pressing issues of their society. For instance, they pointed out, "The students and our seniors felt that promoting mutual respect for each other was

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important to promote peace between communities. Children and young people have a great role as peace messengers and catalysts for imbuing respect for different culture and traditions. The students plan to organize more interactions to further tolerance and non-violence” (Class X students of Anandalaya School, September 2012).

When provided with a participatory media space, and having skills in media literacy, children and adolescents can contribute to discourses and constructive dialogues on different social issues and for a culture of peace. This idea was amplified by Rumana Mehdi (cited in Kundu, 2016). Rumana Mehdi (Kundu, 2016) noted, “Today’s generation is much more sensitive; the more the exposure, the more they are forced to think, reflect and react critically. So young people who acquire communication and media literacy skills can use these dexterously and contribute to the culture of peace and nonviolence in a greater way. Also, by developing capacities to use different forms of media, especially the new media, young people can connect with other youth in different communities and globally and initiate dialogue.” Rumana further argued, “The problem arises when young people are not exposed to positive and nonviolent communication efficacies. The cultural differences, the deep-rooted stereotypes and lack of understanding of each other’s practices take primacy and sow seeds of conflict.”

Young people like Rumana who was then part of The Peace Gong’s child reporter’s team as they working with children from different cultures across the globe observed that children and adolescents did have the capacities to initiate intercultural dialogues and come out of traps of cultural stereotyping. Children’s participation in peace-building and taking part in dialogues for mutual coexistence as articulated by the students of the Anandalaya School has been part of discussions globally. Divina Maloum (2021), who won the 2019 International Children’s Peace Prize award, has been organizing peace campaigns and working with different stakeholders at community level to encourage children especially girls to participate in peace-building and local governance. She has

initiated a movement, Children for Peace, involving children and especially girls in Cameroon and a few other African countries which work in peace-building, gender equality and child rights issues. Delving on her experience, and the experiences of many children with whom she works, Maloum (2021) stresses, “I believe all children can be peace-builders,”

Further, as Rumana observed that with the proliferation of the new media, acquiring skills of media literacy education along with nonviolent communication is imperative for young people to contribute towards dialogues and also offer counter narratives to hatred and intolerance. This reflection of Rumana underscores the essence of promoting peace orientation amongst young people and exposing them to the strategies of nonviolent communication so that they can effectively participate in different media platforms and help in creation of understanding between different cultures. The role of the media in this regard was pointed by UNESCO (2009) on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day as it stated, “The media have a demonstrated ability in fostering mutual understanding by communicating across divides, thus bringing competing narratives together into a shared story.”

By examining different writings and initiatives of children and young people, the paper will explore the significance of inculcating the values of nonviolent communication and constructive conflict resolution in media education programmes for children which would enable them to contribute to peace-building and dialogues.

### **Children’s media platforms and their role in promoting dialogues and a culture of peace**

Sugg (2014) discusses how different participatory media projects can help girls get more involved in influencing how their communities are run. She shares examples from West Africa where young people were involved and encouraged to identify on what day wanted to talk about in their communities. Then these young people who had

been given training in media production were motivated to create different types of media to explore the priorities of their communities. "The young people then used their productions to make decision-makers better aware of young people's thoughts, needs and rights," Sugg adds.

Talking further on the participatory nature of the new media, Sugg (2014) further argues on how the rise of social media has led to diverse opportunities for adolescent girls to build social networks, engage and take action along with their peers. She notes, "Online networking can enable girls to advance their interests by participating in local, national and global movements for change. Girls from as far afield as Indonesia, Georgia, Jamaica and the United States have collaborated online as part of SPARK– a 'girl-fuelled activist movement to demand an end to the sexualisation of women and girls in media'."

In this context, Roy and Kundu (2017) also argue, "Developing new media and digital literacy skills is one of the approaches to empower youth to use their knowledge to reach out to people for peace and a nonviolent society in the milieu." They underline how young people who acquire skills of digital and media literacy develop capacities to creatively participate in the public sphere and show traits of active citizenship.

Meanwhile corroborating with Sugg, Ramsheena (2015) explains how practical media literacy programmes enables young girls like her to reach out to the community and volunteer for social causes. Ramsheena, who was in school then and the Editor of The Peace Gong talks about how young people's participation in media production enables them to reach out to the community and learn about the lives of the marginalized and the excluded. Sharing her own experience of being a child reporter, Ramsheena notes, "My media literacy training taught me the values of peace and non-violence, and we all got to know how great volunteering is. We now know the seriousness of the issues in the world, and through our Shishu Panchayat (Children's Forum) try to seek solutions. Students who are positive media literate can understand conflicts and underlying causes, as

they are taught to read between and behind lines as well as to think about the possible solutions." She underlines how training in media literacy and being part of a child media initiative has helped young people like her to take the lead in initiating dialogues on critical issues of the community with not only their peers but adults also.

In the same context, Gupta (2015) arguing on why exposure to communication and media literacy trainings were important for young people to be able to engage in dialogues notes, "To ensure peace and nonviolence, and motivate young people like us to be committed to nonviolent actions, communication and media literacy training are important. It will enable us to initiate dialogues, and use our skills to advocate for peace and resolve conflicts amicably, and promote mutual respect."

Again, Masood Sidhu (2015), then a child reporter with The Peace Gong and was working on using nonviolent communication in dialogues with young people from different cultures, noted in her interview with Geeta, another young person: "I tell you if we all love each other, there can never be any dispute," Geeta told me as she showed me how she performed aarti, 'And you doubt when they say Hindus & Muslims love each other?' Both of us agreed that the goal of all young people like us was to work to build a 'true human society' where differences in culture and traditions were not an impediment but strength for global peace and nonviolence. We were in one voice that more than ever before, we young people had a responsibility to become 'peace warriors' to challenge divisive forces and end conflicts in our societies."

Masood Sidhu expands her understanding of how young people who are trained in nonviolent communication and its use in media literacy programmes can be effective in changing mindsets and stereotyped cultural traditions. She talks how it can help in weaning away young people from climate of hatred, intolerance and stereotypical world view. Delving on her own experiencing of being part of a child media initiative for peace, she underscores the 'need to assimilate principles of deep respect, understanding and acceptance of each

other's positions to avoid conflict in communication (Kundu, 2016).

Development of media literacy programmes amongst children from diverse communities as pointed out by Masood Sidhu and encouraging them to experiment and develop different media products which mainly reflects messages of peace, respect and understanding has assumed significance globally given the negative energies many young people are getting drawn to. In this context, Nagaraj and Kundu (2013) talk about a framework of media and information literacy that can promote a culture of peace. They use the perspectives of Mahatma Gandhi and senior Gandhian, Natwar Thakkar on the centrality of emotional bridge-building and mutual respect in the communication praxis to argue their case for such a framework (2013).

Amplifying the ideas shared by Ramsheena, Gupta, and Masood Sidhu is a report of the UNICEF on engaging adolescents across borders in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for sustainable peace and development (UNICEF, 2021). The report talks about how adolescents were trained to develop radio programmes on tolerance across borders, and how both 'Tajik and Kyrgyz schools distributed a newspaper developed by adolescents from the two countries'. According to the report, "The media activities built trust and understanding of the adolescent's peacebuilding efforts among parents, caregivers and other community members. This helped secure greater support for adolescents to join in cross-border activities, which was critical for overcoming reluctance among many adults for cross-border engagement by young people." This initiative of the UNICEF highlights the essence of media skills in contributing to inter-cultural dialogues and engagements across borders.

Roy and Kundu (2017) cite another case study of how development of media skills amongst young people helps them to engage in dialogue with other youth across borders. They share a dialogue of then The Peace Gong Editor, Kanupriya Gupta (Class XII) with Oumaima, Rachida Amina, Khalid and Abdellatif all students of Homman Efatouaki Middle School in Eloudaya region of Morocco on

the occasion of the launch of Salam Aleikum, the school magazine. Kanupriya was interviewed by the Moroccan children. In response to the Moroccan students, Kanupriya pointed out, "Children have the purest hearts. They have the ability to alter the world to establish peace. You have learnt a lesson. You have been given a tool in your hands, i.e., communication and media. Media is a very powerful way of expressing your thoughts, exploring the society, knowing about world, fighting the problems faced by every household and finding peaceful solution to conflicts. It's a process. We are connected with it in some way or the other. But now you are a part of the media. You are a reporter ready to take up issues in your community. You have a chance to voice your problems. You have the power to ask a question you have been longing to ask. You have the right to stand up. Congratulations! You have entered the place where age does not matter. What alone matters is truth and purity. You have the opportunity to wake the world up from its slumber. May every corner of the world reply to your call with a 'waleikum as-salaam'. So dear friends come up and become peace warriors."

A significant initiative put together by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in collaboration with Ciudad Don Bosco has been the Youth-led Peace and Reconciliation in Colombia: A Transformational Approach which aims to contribute to the ongoing peace-building and reconciliation process in Colombia by strengthening resilience and conflict prevention capacities of at-risk youth, families, marginalized communities and the broader society. Different communication tools are being involved to not only involve the young people but also used for the realization of the goals of the initiative. According to UNITAR, "A key aspect of work in support of the Colombian peace process is the principle of approaching youth empowerment from a holistic perspective, designing the interventions to equip youth themselves, their families and communities as well as youth counterparts (educators, teachers, social workers, psychologists) with a wide range of instruments and tools" (<https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/peace/our-portfolio/youth-empowerment/>)

youth-led-peace-and-reconciliation-colombia-transformational-approach-0).

For instance, the first component of the initiative, Pintando el Futuro (Painting the Future) is aimed at strengthening the capacity of local communities to help prevent the (re-) recruitment of children as soldiers and support the reintegration of former child soldiers. The universal languages of images are used in a big way. According to UNITAR, comics have been developed to communicate and 'support basic protection and prevention strategies among children, young people and the broader population in conflict-affected areas where children are at risk of being recruited or re-recruited'. The comics are also used to communicate with former child-soldiers giving them a pathway to re-establish their human rights or reintegration in the mainstream.

Meanwhile, Sakamoto and Murakami (2013) talks about cross cultural dialogue and learning by young people as part of the CultureQuest project in Japan. They point out, "In this project, students and children who have been introduced to Media and Information Literacy, established their culture quest projects by searching for cultural experts who knew the target culture and people, exchanging ideas with others using the Internet, producing media as a project, and making presentations". For instance, they talk about a culture quest project between Japanese and Cambodian students. The students were involved in Skype communication, developed video letters and then collaborated to develop picture stories together.

Skills in media literacy, the opportunities to produce media products and initiation to orientations on peace and nonviolence can help young people take the lead in engaging in dialogues across generations. Intergenerational dialogues are significant to frame perspectives on peace and nonviolence and can help people across generations to come together to contribute towards a culture of peace. For instance, the child reporters of The Peace Gong entered into a dialogue with senior Gandhian, N Radhakrishnan on the need of a global movement to bring together children and youth for peace. Radhakrishnan articulated on how children can play an effective

role in bringing together elders and youth in dialogues for peace and nonviolence. He felt that across the world, elders are now increasingly recognizing the potential and abilities of children to facilitate dialogues not only in homes and schools but also in the communities. He observed with media and communication skills, children can effectively contribute to dialogues and resolution of conflicts (Roy and Kundu, 2017).

Initiation of young people to the world of peace and nonviolence and their use of media helps them to co-create innovative ideas and concepts. For instance, Soni and Singh (2018) describe how the Peace Gong young reporters got involved by working with their peers not only from India but other countries to develop a concept of nonviolent footprints. It is a concept which can help individuals to self-reflect and measure the acts of nonviolence during the course of their daily lives. They explain how the child reporters entered into dialogues with seniors and experts to understand their views before developing their framework of nonviolent footprints. Underscoring that if our nonviolent footprints are to be expanded, Soni and Singh point out why the seeds of nonviolence should be sown right from infancy and should be part our thought process and action from our childhood itself. "Through our nonviolent footprints we can bring a new perspective to our attitude, behavior, expressions, ideas and thoughts in a way that we can involve our energies with calmness and learn to absorb nonviolence in its truest sense," they added.

The expansion of the capacities of children to use nonviolent communication in construction of media messages can be gauged from the perspectives of young participants from a series of workshops conducted by The Peace Gong. (Kundu, 2018/19). The participants experimented with how language and choice of words were the key in the construction of media messages for emotional bridge-building. Kundu shares the observation of Soni, the then Editor of The Peace Gong and a class XII student who summarized the lessons learnt from the workshop by the students:

Nonviolent communication teaches us to be compassionate and also to develop inner peace. Children should nurture the art and science of nonviolent communication right from a young age so that they can develop relationships based on mutual respect and empathy....By practicing nonviolent communication we can explore alternatives to violence portrayed by today's media. As peace communicators, it should be our responsibility to contribute towards a global nonviolent planet.

Finally, the use of communication- verbal and nonverbal by children and their channelization into positive action can have significant impact in the society. An innovative experiment of using symbolic communication to spread the message of peace was taken up by a school student from Libya, Sajeda Al-Sharief. Mahatma Gandhi has been one of the important leaders of world history who had creatively and effectively used fasting as a means of his nonviolent communication and nonviolent persuasion. Gandhi used fasting as a technique of symbolic action in his endeavour to influence political policy and social attitudes. The aim was to create emotional impact which in many situations was difficult to create through speeches or negotiations. Taking leaf from Gandhi's fasting as an approach of symbolic communication, Al Sharief, a school student (2019) who initiated 'Fasting for Peace' in Libya noted, "I firmly believe that fasting is a powerful tool of nonviolent action. Through fasting, we can draw attention to our concerns. Fasting has a time-honored place in all religious tradition, but it is also a noble strategy in nonviolent change. By observing fast, I firmly believe that we can not only embarrass the forces of hatred using the amazing principles of nonviolence but also coerce them to shun violence. Fasting, to me, is a powerful tool of communication and we are spreading the message of peace and harmony through it."

## CONCLUSION

The chapter delved at length on the need to introduce media literacy programmes amongst children so that they critical capacities to not only understand the media but also develop their own media platforms.

Such media platforms can play important role in furthering of dialogues not only amongst peers but across generation on issues of peace, nonviolence and mutual co-existence when the children are exposed to nonviolent communication, nonviolent conflict resolution and overall to the entire canvas of peace and peacebuilding. Based on the discussions in the preceding section and the authors own extensive work in the field, here are some ideas which could be taken up at global level so that the participation of children in peace media initiatives and their contribution to constructive dialogues can be encouraged:

1. Integration of nonviolent communication in media literacy programmes can help children construct messages of peace and nonviolence. This needs to be part of training programmes and also mainstream text books on media education in schools. For instance, the Central Board of Secondary Education, India in its text book, Mass Media: Being Media Literate for students of classes VI-VIII has included a chapter on nonviolent communication.
2. Critical communication planning should be part of media literacy programmes. Through this students would get exposition on how to use nonviolent communication in different communication campaigns and community initiatives.
3. Integration of mediation and conflict resolution trainings in media education classes can help students to develop skills in using dialogues and mediation for resolution of conflicts.
4. Exposure of children who are part of media education programmes to develop counter-narratives to many negative promotions in the social media. A large number of children get affected to such negative propaganda, so when they start shaping counter narratives themselves with positive messages, it contributes to the culture of peace.

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