Waging peace: The urgent how of teaching peace
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Abstract:
Teaching peace transforms crisis into opportunity. Higher education tends to approach Peace and Conflict studies by means of courses about war, national security, terrorism, violence and conflict. If one of the responsibilities of higher education is to help students flourish and teach them how to contribute to and lead their societies, then learning how to wage peace should be an even higher priority than learning how to wage war. In this paper universities are called upon to take their responsibility and design curricula that teach peacebuilding skills to students, framing young people as agents of change who can potentially prevent conflict.

This paper explores how voice enables youth to claim agency within divided societies, and asks what are the implications of this in terms of conflict and peacebuilding? The goal of this paper is to motivate universities to create prioritize Peace Studies programs that teach the skills present youth leaders need to take back to polarized societies and help heal post-conflict communities. It also provides illustrations of experiential learning that move students from passive recipients to active participants in both raising awareness about and learning peacebuilding skills.

1. Introduction

This paper calls upon universities to take their responsibility and design curricula that teach peacebuilding skills to students, framing young people as agents of change who can potentially prevent conflict. **It aims to ground the application of Peace Studies in the research question: How does voice enable youth to claim agency within divided societies, and what are the implications of this in terms of conflict and peacebuilding?**

What follows[1] is an analysis of the significance of young people's voices to International Relations. The research is framed in terms of human rights and human security, children's rights, and recognition theories. Its aim is to draw conclusions both about the nature of voice and agency, or power, and about how the framing of the present research in this area impacts the ability of the discourse to take into account the significance of listening to those who are marginalized.

Teaching peace transforms crisis into opportunity. Higher education tends to approach Peace and Conflict studies by means of courses about war, national security, terrorism, violence and conflict. If one of the responsibilities of higher education is to help students flourish and teach them how to contribute to and lead their societies, then learning how to wage peace should be an even higher priority than learning how to wage war.

The motivation for this is partially provided by the UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development which states that, "Building more peaceful, just, and sustainable societies starts with education" (https://www.unesco.org/en/global-citizenship-peace-education/recommendation. In addition there is the UNSCR 2250 (2015), urging "Member States to consider setting up mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes and dispute resolution" (https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm).

[1] Sections of this paper are based on De Graaf, 2018.

In terms of positioning, this paper builds on the literature in several social science fields, but especially peacebuilding (Richmond, 2002, 2010, 2011; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009), psychology (Murer, 2011) and sociology (Hart, 1997), as well as generational studies (McEvoy-Levy, 2001; Watson, 2009) and feminism (Enloe, 1989). Theoretical references are rooted in recognition theorists such as Honneth (2007), Arendt (2003) and Fraser (2008). In addition, human rights authors (Turner, 2006; Donnelly, 2003; and Ignatieff, 2001) have helped supply a framework based on human rights and human security, the concepts of which are further enhanced, explored, and understood by means of recognition theories. From these starting points the paper will explore secondary questions such as: In what ways do young people have a voice? If young people had more of a voice, would it make a difference? Does having a voice lead to power? If so, does this create a culture of respect for this voice, and in turn an increase in the speaker's ability to claim agency? Does increasing participation have an impact upon people's likeliness to resort to violence? Moreover, what do the answers to these questions mean in terms of the wider IR discourses that have sometimes marginalized such voices and the actors to which they belong? These aspects are important because they contribute to knowledge and frameworks for peacebuilding in post-conflict areas and the link between voice and violence may provide a key to reducing youth violence and indeed, preventing violence in general, and thereby provide means of preventing conflict. But most significantly, creating listening spaces and opportunities for co-creation, hearing young voices could contribute to a sustainable peace, envisioned by and cultivated by the very generation that must own that peace if it is to become lasting. Youth voice and agency are the answers to the urgent how of waging peace.

This paper also provides illustrations of experiential learning that move students from passive recipients to active participants in both raising awareness about and learning peacebuilding skills. The case studies discussed include Right2Education, a youth-led and youth-initiated non-governmental organization (NGO) where Amsterdam University College (AUC) students teach English and Dutch to people with refugee backgrounds; a *Human Rights and Human Security* class with reflective assignments

that identify students' own unconscious biases and inspires them to practice peacebuilding skills in relationships; and *Peace Lab* courses that takes students to Kosovo or Rwanda where they place themselves under the authority of local peacebuilders and further learn peacebuilding skills within a qualitative research skills fieldwork context. The final example is *Peace by Peace*, an online, free-access peacebuilding manual (https://www.peace-by-peace.com) that will be introduced here and elaborated on in the proposed *Peace by Peace* conference Roundtable 7 on Thursday with four additional conference papers (Celma Werthwein, J., 2025; Khare, S., & Sivrikaya, E., 2025; Paré, C., 2025; & Vodvárková, E., & Volbracht, E., 2025). The goal of this paper is to motivate universities to prioritize Peace Studies programs that teach the skills present youth leaders need to take back to polarized societies, help heal post-conflict communities and prevent future conflict.

This paper consists of the following sections and subsections:

2. Human rights and the liberal peace;

   Within the liberal peace;

3. Gender and generational concerns;
4. Youth and identity;
   a) Age, cultural contexts and agency;
   b) CRC and voice;
5. Voice and agency through a theoretical lens;
6. Agency, power and violence;

   Troublemakers and peacemakers;

7. Examples of agency;
8. Conclusion: Recognizing rights.

These sections explain how seeing, hearing and understanding more about the potential contribution of youth to peacebuilding could be framed by Peace Studies programs in higher education. By comparing and contrasting methods of creating listening and speaking spaces, by listing examples of youth agency in peacebuilding, by co-creating curricula and by examining the nature of young people's existing and

potential contribution to peacebuilding efforts (see www.peace-by-peace.com), it becomes possible to draw conclusions regarding the significance of incorporating youth as a category within existing theoretical frameworks. This may help solve problems such as youth violence, and open a listening space for young people by means of tools for helping build a sustainable peace, such as generational impact studies, so that policy in deeply divided societies might become more inclusive of young people.

Perhaps what is even more significant, however, is that new models may also be formulated for assessing existing policy frameworks (such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] [OHCR, 2014] as it applies to [EU] countries that have adopted it as law), and new means may be developed for measuring the effectiveness of the human rights regime vis-à-vis young people. The voices of youth may also provide a path to developing significant tools for designing future projects in post-conflict areas, assessing present ones and preventing future violence, as well as contributing to the more general research on expanding the rights regime for marginalized groups.

This is in keeping with the wider literature surrounding evidence-based research at the grassroots level that has already proven useful in providing a framework for peace (e.g. Sriram, [2007], Mac Ginty [2011], and Pugh [2005]). As Richmond notes (2010, p. 665), "Local agency has led to resistance and hybrid forms of peace despite the overwhelming weight of the liberal peace project. . . . in other aspects the everyday points beyond the liberal peace." Given the impact of the liberal peace on the existing rights framework, before considering the theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches that this paper takes, it is instructive to contemplate the liberal peace and its impact in more depth.

2. Human rights and human security

The word respect, from the Latin respicere ("to gaze at, look at, regard, consider"), suggests that you actually see the person who is standing beside you. This research attempts to unveil young people in such a way that they might be seen as those who have always been in our midst, but who now may be further heard and understood, as well as seen, so that out of recognition (and this will be examined more

closely through the lens of recognition theories), there might grow respect. The word respect, itself, means to face, or to look towards; to treat, or regard with deference, esteem, or honor; to feel or show respect for; and to pay attention to, or observe carefully. Human rights may be interpreted as resting on the need for human dignity, couched in respect. So, in what ways are young people afforded respect, really seen and heard? And in what ways are they not? The answers to these questions may be explored in Peace Studies programs that empower young people as they learn to exercise their agency.

According to McEvoy-Levy (2013), youth is defined "as those people who are customarily considered 'not yet adults' by their societies" (p. 296). This reinforces the concept that these definitions hinge on cultural expectations, and cannot be measured according to Western standards, despite the fact that they still often are.

> So, despite the greater power of adult elites to police the boundaries of political action, those who are "not yet adults" possess and utilize different forms of power as well, that they express through a range of armed conflict-related and strategic peacebuilding activities. (McEvoy-Levy, 2013, p. 297)

This introduces the idea that a space for youth agency is always there. The question is how such space is utilized, and the answer depends on the culture being studied, and upon its construction of childhood. According to McEvoy-Levy,

> International peacebuilding often seems to favor pacification within the general population, prioritizing the prevention of direct violence while not pursuing justice, attacking some forms of culture as violent, but not others, and leaving structural violence systems intact while promoting neo-liberal economics and western-style democracy.
>
> Youth-targeted capacity-building programs of economic development, health care, and conflict resolution training are, like other aspects of the "liberal" peace project, potentially subject to dynamics of orientalism and neo-imperialism. But, local, grassroots, "culturally sensitive" forms of peacebuilding also often reinforce elder power and exclude youth and their interests. (2013, p. 297)

As noted above, peacebuilding may be done in the name of future generations, but it rarely involves them directly in the decision-making processes. According to Richmond (2010), "The reinvention of IR and of peacebuilding entails a shift from international prescriptions to local resistance, to liberation, and so to emancipation" (p. 692). This local resistance may often be put up by the young people as they seek their own forms of freedoms, and in this way, young people can exercise agency, but it may

go unseen, or unheard. Examples include peer teaching, when young people lead and teach other young people. What also happens is that adults might interpret the agency in negative terms, within a context of violence alone, and not understand its full potential. For instance, they may see a child soldier commander and not realize that the intelligence, charisma, courage and leadership skills necessary for this position will also serve the needs of peacebuilding.

In this way, a vast store of potential peacebuilding capacity, led and realized by young people, goes untapped. There is a certain gap in the literature with regards to attention to and the documentation of the positive contributions of young people in society, which can evolve into an increasing "securitization" of the issue of youth (McEvoy-Levy, 2013).

However, within the liberal peace model, with the so-called securitization of the issue of youth, comes their increasing marginalization. They are listened to even less, their participation drops even further, as they are used as token participants in peacebuilding processes, at best, and may be spoken on behalf of, or may be even completely ignored and patronized, at worst. This discussion is addressed in more detail within a second paper for this conference[2], as various ways in which the "youth bulge" may have an "upside" are explored (De Graaf, 2025). In that paper I introduce a revised typology for examining the scale of tokenism, being spoken on behalf of, ignored, humiliated and marginalized. Too often young people are only seen in one of two lights: victims or perpetrators. But just as there are many shades of behavior among adults, so too, young people can display the entire spectrum of behavior. Sometimes the same young people who are seen as agents of violence, may play multiple roles, which include peacebuilding leadership. This potential needs to be developed and young people made aware of it.

Seldom are nonviolent (or violent) youth identified as full actors in peace settings, political constituents or participants in setting up frameworks for redressing

[2] Aurora International Peace Conference: The role of higher education in peacebuilding, Innsbruck, Austria, 17-21 February 2025

violence. Although urged to act as peacemakers, they are not often granted the skills or included in the responses to conflict in terms of governance and political measures (McEvoy-Levy, 2013). Highlighting this would be a significant part of Peace Studies programs in higher education.

The rhetoric that includes references to young people and their futures within a society adapting to changes they may or may not have brought about does appear attractive, but is rarely sustained. This pattern repeats itself through history, despite a growing awareness of youth agency.

One example occurred during the summer of 2013, when the cycle of excluding youth after revolutions repeated itself in both Egypt and Turkey. Youth took to the streets, but after their revolutions, the people in power were those leftover from the previous regimes. Within a global order that is supposed to consist of stable liberal democracies, the general assumption may be that if there are too many young people, they disrupt political stability. In this way youth are politically scapegoated for failed reconstruction, failed revolutions, and failed peacebuilding plans (McEvoy-Levy, 2013).

Contemporary peacemaking is different for every conflict and this often can be linked to the issue of power. Mac Ginty (2011) issues several warnings with regard to power and the liberal peace:

> Many orthodox and problem-solving approaches to revising the shortcomings of peace intervention seek to redistribute power. For example, they may seek to enhance local responsibility and encourage "local ownership" and participation. But such power redistribution is often marginal and does not involve a fundamental rethinking of the meaning and location of power. It often is a superficial exercise that encourages local actors to conform to norms and practices established in the global north. (p. 45)

Local ownership should include all segments of the population, especially young people, who have a vested interest in the future of their societies. How young people interpret power is linked to their sense of agency, as power and agency are closely related. This paper proposes that participation leads to voice, which leads to respect, which leads to agency and then to power. The following sections will attempt to unpack these concepts. Interpretations of local power may be completely different, or invisible

even, to outsiders' eyes. A prerequisite, however, is safety, but as with the term power, human security can mean different things to different people.

Within the liberal peace

Human security can be broken down into several categories such as personal security, political security, environmental security and community security. It provides a framework for further understanding the culture of human rights. This paper now turns to a discussion of human security and liberal peacebuilding and where young people fit within this paradigm. Learning about this in Peace Studies programs will further enable an exploration of how the potential of youth voice and agency may or may not be realized within current peacebuilding practices.

To start with, the role of individuality and the individual within human security and liberal thought needs to be explored. According to Begby and Burgess (2009), although the concept of human security is certainly rooted in individual rights and their political priority, human security is also a call to study the needs of concrete individuals in the practical settings of their lives. Wherever there has been prolonged conflict, certain material needs take precedence. These include: freedom from persecution and the threat of violence; and freedom from poverty, hunger, and sickness. But as human security marks a distinct broadening of the liberal agenda, it also accommodates the idea that the "needs of human individuals to be part of larger communities is among their basic needs, inasmuch as it is through membership in such communities that individuals derive their basic sense of self and the value-sets around which they organize their lives" (p. 99).

The role of the individual in liberal peacebuilding, and indeed in the post-liberal peacebuilding framework of today's world, is further discussed in terms of local contributions of everyday diplomacy. Richmond (2011) stresses that it is not enough to simply want to involve local populations, but rather a consideration for the "everyday" must also be paramount. He draws from examples of Bosnia, Kosovo and Timor-Leste to show that both a "deferment of and to the local, and a retention of powers amongst the internationals can be very problematic" (p. 108). In these countries, local tensions

slowed down or blocked reform, as did some international peacebuilding efforts. Richmond states,

> In all these cases attempts have been made to involve the local, while simultaneously depoliticizing it by failing to deal with everyday issues" (p. 108). Local actors see state-building as "undermining their right of self-determination and human rights; as portraying a lack of respect for their cultural norms; or as examples of either hegemonic or ideological Western conditionalities. These indicate serious dilemmas which the post-liberal peace might avoid via its concern for the everyday. (p. 108)

This can have serious ramifications for young people in these societies. As a marginalized group, when their voices are not heard, let alone taken into account or actively sought, then they may seek alternative ways of communicating. This is especially so in a post-conflict setting.

Richmond suggests that members of the international community could instead, "ask of disputants at the many different levels of the polity there might be, what type of peace could be envisaged, what and how care might be provided, and what is needed to understand, engage and support everyday life?" (p. 108).

This falls under the scope of moral imagination (Anderson, 1983; Johnson, 1993; Carolus, 2010; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009). But informed perspectives, especially among young leaders, could make valuable contributions to policy decisions on security, institutional building, democratization, rule of law, human rights, marketization and development. If this takes place within the context of responses to the root causes of the conflict, then peacebuilding occurs at two starting points, i.e. not just in stopping the violence, but also establishing a greater understanding of a local and everyday peace.

Richmond also refers to a conversation, and the importance of having the practice of discourse in place before a post-liberal peace might be realized. Implicit in this process is the need for both listening spaces and speaking spaces. In order for conflict to be prevented, it is important to include representatives of various local actors, including young people. Such an approach represents everyday issues and the solidarity of individuals, communities and social movements. Richmond states, "Recognition implies empathy, care, and thus, reconciliation, but the latter cannot occur before the former,

and little can be achieved without a contextual understanding of the everyday" (Richmond, 2011, p. 109).

Again, recognition, empathy, care, opportunities are all terms that take on a fresh perspective when considered through the lens of youth participation. It means asking the questions: Who are the local players? What is the everyday? Where are the young people, and what do they say? This will be further explored in the following section. Similar questions were asked about women in the 1970s, and this may be a point in the path of generational rights that runs parallel with the slightly more advanced path of gender rights.

3. Gender and generational concerns

The analysis of gender and the generational can be traced along similar directions. Watson (2008) explains the background of gender in IR, as a backdrop to marginalized groups in general, and young people, specifically. She makes the point that gender studies "paved the way for other critical analyses of actors and identities that have been marginalized from mainstream literatures" (p. 196), citing cultural feminists such as Cynthia Enloe:

> Based on the notion that the personal can be political, Enloe reveals that private choices can impact the global political system in significant ways and to ignore them means also to ignore a fundamental element of the international system. Indeed, factoring private choices may change how international politics is examined. . . . (p. 201)

Watson adds,

> Thus, work on gender has itself opened up a larger discourse regarding other marginalized groups. For example, race remains little discussed within mainstream IR, and issues of generations have only recently begun to be examined.
>
> . . . Crucially, gender allows an examination of the international system with a different lens, and a consideration of people as fundamental to IR as opposed to marginal to it – and this is perhaps the greatest lesson of all. (2008, p. 204)

As the marginalized, both as individuals and as groups, begin to appear on the edges of the IR field, they come into focus and their voices become heard, as was the case with women. This unveiling of a previously unseen perspective took place under the auspices of standpoint feminism. In tracing the path of standpoint feminism, similar

pitfalls and objectives may be identified on the road to greater enhancement and realization of youth rights.

I refer to standpoint feminism in this paper because it provides a potential path for generational studies that may run parallel with gender studies. Heywood (2011) quotes Tickner (1992) and describes standpoint feminism as a theory in which the world is understood from the unique standpoint of women's experiences. Standpoint feminists hold that what women sometimes experience at the margins of political life, grants them a unique perspective on social issues and insights into world affairs. This perspective is neither superior, nor more accurate than that of men, but it does provide valid additional insights into the complex world of global politics.

Standpoint feminism asks the question, "Where are the women?" In asking the question, the women appear. These range, for example, from the previously invisible contributions that women make, to shaping world politics—as domestic workers of various kinds, migrant laborers, diplomats' wives, sex workers on military bases and so forth (Enloe, 1989). This exercise widens our awareness and highlights the under-representation of women in leadership roles, at the national and international levels.

In similar ways, the literature around standpoint feminism points the way for highlighting the ongoing presence of young people, both in peacetime and war. In asking the question, "Where are the young people," they appear, as factory workers, children of diplomats, criminals, peacebuilders, students, consumers, child soldiers, voters, heroes and witnesses of genocide. Recent research has uncovered the use of children in a variety of roles, not just as victim and perpetrator (McEvoy-Levy, 2006).

In this way, we can begin to see more clearly the variety of roles that they play, whether in war (e.g., combatants) or in peace (e.g., peace movement marchers). In turn, once we begin to see them, we can begin to hear their voices. In this exploration of the positioning of young people's voices, it may be revealed that once young people participate, and have a voice that is heard, they gain power, and ultimately respect, and the world comes to understand and to include them in decisions that may affect their lives (a stipulation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC]

(OHCR, 2014). Also, just as gender issues once met and broke through the glass ceilings of neither seeing, nor hearing women, eventually entering into mainstream IR considerations, so too may generational issues prove to become yet another way to extend the disciplinary boundaries of IR, and thereby contribute to preventing conflict. This awareness needs to be taught to young people so they can better realize their potential as policy changers and contributors to peacebuilding measures in their respective cultures.

In another paper for this conference (De Graaf, 2025) the role of youth participation as a means of claiming agency is explored as a potential preventative measure for youth violence. Here though, in sections 5. and 6. the links between youth voice, agency and power and how these may or may not contribute to violence are considered. But the international legal manifestation of youth voice can be found in the example chosen by this paper, the CRC.

4. Youth and identity

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC) was adopted in 2000. When the role of children in conflict is discussed, it is often limited to child soldiers and armed conflict. Many assume this is the purpose of the CRC, to prevent forced recruitment of children in conflict situations. And although it has served as a basis for prosecuting warlords and other adults who have forced children to fight in wars, the CRC is also a foundation stone in international humanitarian law and international human rights law. As such, it is the most broadly accepted piece of human rights legislation in the world (Doek, 2011).

But the CRC is much more than a human rights convention for the protection of children. The recognition of the child as a human rights holder is reflected in, for example, the provision that young people are entitled to exercise their rights in accordance with their "evolving capacities" (Article 5). Furthermore, according to Article 12:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has issued detailed guidance for the implementation of these rights. All children, including those affected by armed conflict, should be provided with "meaningful" opportunities—which need to be understood as a process and not a one-off event—to exercise their right to freedom of expression, which "relates to the right to hold and express opinions, and to seek and receive information through any media," and their right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly—for example, forming student organizations. Young people should be considered not only as objects of protection but also as individuals who can be agents of change by exercising their human rights. Examples of this can be found in their participation in truth and reconciliation commissions in Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa.

Other rights are also important for the protection of children affected by armed conflicts—such as the right to have a birth registered and have a name, and the right to acquire a nationality and to know and be cared for by the parents (Article 7). (p. 11)

Although much of the above text highlights what often gets overlooked, what is significant is that children be allowed to form their own views, state these views, and that these views would be given weight—this is about voice and agency. Peace Studies programs would raise awareness about such concepts.

In any discussion of youth, it is necessary to acknowledge how the question of age also influences the issue of victimization of children. The notion that they are simply victims is sometimes irrelevant, especially in war-torn societies. What is relevant is responsibility. Brocklehurst (2006), cites Nordstrom (1999),

> It is both dangerous and unrealistic to look at the abuse of children, in war, in another country, in another context as if that were somehow different and more barbaric than the patterns of abuse that characterize our own everyday cultures, in peace and war.

Brocklehurst adds,

> . . . Responding to children as inert victims may further disable them. The major implication is that children should be active agents in negotiating their protection. Returning to an early issue of contained childhood, it is apparent that other aspects of survival, including children's resilience are only now being explored. (2006, p. 47)

In reality, however, often the legal instruments that are supposed to protect "youth" are ineffectual against the social, political and economic forces enticing them to participate during war (Kemper, 2005). Rule of law is difficult to apply because of cultural contexts, and the inability of the international community to enforce such measures. There is no bite behind the bark so to speak, no military body set up to punish those who break international law. Sometimes, as in the case of the Congolese warlord, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo (who was the first case tried by the International Criminal Court [ICC] and was brought up on charges of recruitment of children), criminals are arrested and brought to The Hague to stand trial at the ICC, but such cases are rare, and the trials complicated and prolonged. His Defense stressed the cultural context of his own upbringing as a youth combatant.

a) Age, cultural contexts and agency

Cultural contexts are key when addressing the issue of defining youth. Indeed, the word youth is a relative term, used to refer to different age groups, depending on the culture.

Part of the problem lies with the infantilization of certain areas of the world. Brocklehurst (2006) states,

> Focusing on the plight of the child is a technique frequently employed in the reporting of international news and foreign conflicts. Crises in faraway places intrude on our consciousness through the work of the media. The children whose faces and terror are zoomed in on, are part of what Erica Burman (1994) describes as the iconography of emergencies, or disaster pornography. Children's faces demand responses. . . . Pictures of starving children dominated the film footage of the Ethiopian famine in 1985. (p. 17)

But when young people are simply seen and not heard, this can be an act of robbing them of agency. According to McEvoy-Levy (2006), the active agency of youth in a variety of military, economic and social arenas is already visible as a means of creating and acting for peace. Yet these young people have little or no impact within conventional political arenas. Rather, those in power in these places are "adult elites who make

political decisions, sign peace accords, write history, and distribute aid. So, all of these spaces of youth interaction are also spaces of marginalized voices" (p. 145). Despite this silencing of youth political voices, young people still manage to construct their own identities, as well as narratives in their everyday interactions that involve themselves in and create politics.

In this way, although identities and agency may be something young people create for themselves, influenced by others, they may still make choices and shape their own lives, thereby realizing their potential as agents of change. The fact that young people are involved in so many overlapping spaces of war and peace argues for a more pro-active soliciting of youth voices during any peacebuilding project. As noted below, the actions of youth have important impacts at every stage of an armed-conflict and peace-building continuum, as they play roles in both conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

The contours of postwar society are influenced by the roles of these youth in social and economic life—their crime, poverty, homelessness, labor, fulfillment of the routine tasks of caring for others and traveling to school, and formal and informal peace-building work. As social, political, and economic agents, then, youth are a multidimensional force. But the roles that youth play in creating social understandings of conflict, through their actions and through their narrations of their actions, are not well understood (McEvoy-Levy, 2006, p. 149).

In many ways then, young people are pushed out to the edge and, in the end, they often remain at the edges of conflict and peace societies. But this does not mean they do not exercise agency. When a segment of the population is marginalized, shoved aside, ignored, sometimes violence is considered the only alternative, as it becomes an act of communication in its own right.

b) <u>CRC and voice</u>

Before violence, however, communication can often occur through voice. When having a voice is guaranteed, as is stated in the CRC, and in particular the voices of young people, in order for there to be agency, these voices must be listened to. How

might a society adopt measures enabling its young people to better speak up and speak out? Hart (1997) addresses conceptual issues such as the CRC as follows:

> The CRC offers two complementary views of children: less powerful and less competent than adults and therefore in need of certain kinds of protection, and oppressed or constrained and hence needing more opportunities for self-determination. It is also believed that giving children more of a voice in their own self-determination will improve the protective aspects of the CRC. (p. 11)

And yet, the identities adopted by young people also affect their levels of voice and agency. Hart says,

> Nevertheless, to the extent that children develop identities, a feature common to all of the theories is that identity is a social process rather than something uniquely within individuals. An understanding of the social world and an understanding of oneself are constructed in a reciprocal manner, influencing and constraining each other. (p. 28)

He warns that as identity patterns emerge with time, a few generalizations can be made, as cultural variations in identity and self-concepts vary on an individual basis. This means that any structures for participation that would enable youth voices to become better heard, must allow flexibility for children and adolescents to explore and develop their identities and actions in the world in ways consistent with their own cultures.

A young person's identity will contribute toward their ability to claim and receive both voice and agency. Young survivors of conflicts, however, have a unique spectrum of influences forming their identity. Part of one's identity involves seeing oneself as a person who can or cannot make a difference, and this helps determine the extent to which someone may bring about change. Having an identity—when a person knows where they come from—helps them know better where they are headed.

Language also plays a significant role in such framing (Fierke, 2010); the language young people use is a form of action that is constitutive of the world in which they live (Ignatieff, 2001). The field of IR includes extensive literature on the role of language in conflict (Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart, 2009; Wright, 1998), but significantly less on the language of peace (Schaffner & Wenden, 1995). This paper proposes that as young people speak their worlds into being, i.e. exercise agency, their ideas may be utilized in practical peacebuilding initiatives, as well as drawing wider

attention to youth and the social nature of their identity. Those ideas, however, can only be utilized if the voices of young people are actually listened to.

Listening is therefore a key element in this process. If the question: What do the youth say? is asked, it then becomes possible to listen to children's voices, to create a space for young people's voices in assessing policy, and to create a place where these voices are listened to. When the following question asked of young people is, What do you need? or How can we work together? then youth empowerment takes place.

An important aspect of this research is the exploration of how young people might participate in peacebuilding, might contribute to a more sustainable peace, or in other words, might speak peace into being. What are the consequences of decisions being made by adults working with young people when youth narratives are judged as attractive and expected, or disappointing, unexpected and dangerous or risky?

5. Voice and agency through a theoretical lens

The concepts of voice and agency, though buzzwords that are increasingly being discussed (Tripses, 2004; Cornwall, 2010), are in fact quite contested (Parpart, 2010). Agency can mean different things in different circumstances (Klugman, Hanmer, Twigg, Hasan, McCleary-Sills, & Santari, 2014; Parpart, 2010); and with regard to voice, although there is a great deal of discussion about marginalized voices, and efforts are being made to hear marginalized voices, (see, for example, Klugman et al. [2014] on amplifying women's voices; and see Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Shulte [2000] for the World Bank's collection of experiences of the poor), it is important to examine how this is done, and who is actually listening. If those with marginalized voices are merely being "allowed" to speak by others, then this only implies a continued state of gatekeeping. (See, for instance, Verloo's [2005] critique on the Council of Europe's approach to promoting gender equality.) As a result, voice and agency remain contested due to the questions concerning who has a voice and who has agency, both of which depend on the power structures that exist—whether from a local, national, or even personal perspective (Bordieu, 1979; 1986; 1991; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Bordieu & Wacquant, 1992). Moreover, whether or not a voice has power depends not only on

having the ability to speak, but also on the opportunity to be heard, something again that is contingent on the listener (Dreher, 2009), and on the potential power wielded by that listener. This paper maintains that only certain voices are listened to, and only at certain points. The focus of this section is namely on the voices not heard, and the systematic denial of recognition.

When focusing on unheard voices and the systematic denial of recognition, it is important to consider "recognition theory" (Honneth, 2014). This section will utilize recognition theory to build the theoretical framework that underlines this paper. Recognition theory is significant in the human rights literature because it begins to address the question of which groups are most marginalized and why. This also will be discussed, relating to questions concerning voice and human rights. Hidden transcripts (of youth) can be considered as a method of resistance (Scott, 1990), and resistance as a demonstration of agency, or power (Moore, 1998). This section specifically looks at the vulnerability branch of recognition theory. Vulnerability is important because children are often seen as actors without agency, and a consideration of vulnerability and under-recognized people leads to questions of voice. The research then turns to a discussion of power and how voice can be used and whether it is hidden or not. In other words, what people are saying and what they are not saying all tie in with how voice is used as a way of coming up against power. Hidden transcripts can subvert standard power structures if the so-called powerless create their own contexts for voice and agency. Given young people's vulnerability, they often find different ways of resisting, and in this "local" process, it is important to realize that private resistance is a form of exercising agency (Scott, 1985; Hollander, & Einwohner, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2014).

This examining how voice can be used to exercise agency, the linking of voice, agency and hidden transcripts is an original way of bringing together the already existing research on these topics. This includes the importance of what is not being said, both among young people, and among adults concerning young people. This research asks, is there a distinction between voices not found (in that subjects have yet to learn to speak up) and voices not heard (the systemic denial of recognition)? This builds on and can be

embedded in a discussion about power, including ideas of social and cultural capital in the form of resistance (Scott, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; & Wacquant, 1992).

When young people are listened to as individuals, claim a voice, are given a voice, or become no longer voiceless, they exercise greater agency and cross the bridge from victim to survivor, passive to active, taker to giver.

Vulnerability theory (Turner, 2006) brings together the concepts of human rights, marginalization, agency, vulnerability and recognition. Turner stresses the importance of human rights and defends their universalism. He notes that "[v]ulnerability defines our humanity" (p. 1). . . and that "[h]uman rights can be defined as universal principles, because human beings share a common ontology that is grounded in a shared vulnerability" (p. 4). . . . "In this sense, human rights doctrine is a revolutionary creed, since it makes a radical demand of all human groups, that they serve the interest of the individuals who compose them" (p. 8).

Turner explains how the field of sociology examines the social structures that create decision-making contexts, within which people are either able to exercise agency or are denied agency by circumstances outside of their control or even knowledge (p. 12). He explains the physical and moral vulnerability that all people share, regardless of status, race, or age. This vulnerability is exacerbated by conflicts at any level (pp. 16-17).

Turner bases his vulnerability theory on four fundamental philosophical assumptions: the vulnerability of human beings as embodied agents, the dependency of humans (especially during their early childhood development), the general reciprocity or interconnectedness of social life, and finally the precariousness of social institutions (2006, p. 25). This positions the moral issue behind human rights as one of recognition—how to motivate people to recognize other people as humans worthy of their respect, concern and care.

Turner's vulnerability theory is but one manifestation of recognition theory within the human rights framework that provides a better understanding of the link often made between young people and civil conflict and crime (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). The use of

recognition theory can offset negative youth stereotypes. Other potential contributing factors to young people being viewed as troublemakers include characteristics of new wars, such as high levels of unemployment and the exclusion of uneducated and unskilled young people from the post-conflict peace economy. Taking these and other factors into consideration reveals how critically recognition theory underpins the idea that mutual recognition will require mutual reflection and respect (Turner, 2006).

With regard to mutual reflection and respect, young people everywhere both struggle with and embrace a wide spectrum of influences around them, ranging from the effect of divorced parents who have caused them to move, to globalization, which brings previously foreign words, products and ideas to their doorsteps via the internet. But the issue of vulnerability with regard to voice and agency, remains a challenge for youth, as some events that shape lives are beyond the control of individuals, such as conflict. Both these events and the individuals caught up in them need to be recognized, acknowledged and listened to. This is how agency and voice work together, especially for young people.

6. Agency, power and violence

Arendt (1970) argues that violence is recognized as having a practical character. It is a means, whereas power is an end, presupposing the collective will of a group. In order for violence to occur, therefore, there must be a violation of a person physically, or in terms of their integrity, autonomy, or dignity. So violence affects persons' bodies, while power affects actions (Bordieu, as cited in Smith, 2008).

Bordieu addresses the concept of social capital in the form of resistance (1986)[3], as well as the notion of distinction (2002). When power is denied, this causes those excluded to unite as a group defined by their very powerlessness. Wacqant and Bordieu (1992) describe the

> "field of power" as the relations of force that obtain between the social positions which guarantee their occupants a quantum of social force, or of capital, such that they are able to enter into the struggles over the monopoly of power. (p. 229-230)

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Ranciere (2004) emphasizes how the political struggle is, rather than a rational debate between multiple, interests, more and at the same time, a struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner. To have one's voice heard means having the so-called excluded demonstrating in favor of their very right to be heard and recognized as an equal partner in the debate (1152/2656).

Bordieu (1986) also shows how the use of education can enable agency among youth by increasing their cultural capital and thereby their (potential) power. This is an important point for the purpose of this paper, namely to convince institutions of higher education to prioritize Peace Studies programs.

Bordieu's research into explanations of unequal scholastic achievement among children of different social classes reveals a social structure "sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital" (1986, p. 17). Bordieu states that the so-called "scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family. Moreover, the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up" (p. 17). This does not so much refer to the provision of bursaries, or scholarships, as to the home environment required to succeed academically.

In addition, violence often may be a response to shame of some sort. This confirms a major tenet of this paper, in that marginalized groups also use violence as a form of communication and a means of a last-resort type of agency. As young people realize that they do in fact have control over their lives, then a world of options may open to them, many of which offer an alternative to violence. These choices provide opportunities for exercising agency, and when young people claim this agency, there are implications in terms of conflict and peacebuilding. Perceptions of youth as being problematic affect their agency, thereby limiting any positive contributions they might make toward sustainable peacekeeping.

Troublemakers and peacemakers

Peacebuilding strategies that do not take into account or educate about the multiple roles and needs of young people in a post-conflict society severely weaken their potential for achieving sustainable peace. To view young people as only victims or perpetrators ignores the other political roles they might play, such as soldiering, and social roles, such as maintaining families. There are various motivations and roles of youth, and complex analysis is necessary when assessing the strengths and weaknesses

of any post-conflict reintegration program. The context needs to be established in a case-by-case manner. McEvoy-Levy (2006) states, "To build peace in a post-accord environment, it is vital to engage youth in positive ways, enable them to assume a positive role in civilian society, and integrate them to communities" (pp. 27-28).

It should be kept in mind that young survivors of war may have been militarized, been exposed to experiences of death, either through witnessing it firsthand or through committing acts of murder, and may have experienced widespread exposure to other such atrocities. In addition, they may have learned leadership skills and may know how to communicate effectively. Employment and saleable skills training increase dignity and prospects for a better life. Young people can also fulfill roles "as leaders, advocates and activists, and as agents of social change, as well as peacebuilding" (McEvoy-Levy, 2006, p. 213).

When young people's plights are improved, society as a whole often benefits. This can also occur at the level of societal healing. McEvoy-Levy provides the example of generational healing and emphasizes the role of young people as critical thinkers.

> Three generations of Holocaust survivors, the questions that successive generations ask, and the dialogues they investigate about the past, can have a healing effect for those involved. This is a contention borne out by the studies in this volume – the role of the next generation in asking critical questions is central to their role as conflict transformers. (2006, p. 287)

The key question here is how to realize this potential. The following section provides a potential blueprint for youth participation, helping answer the research question of this paper, namely how voice enables youth to claim agency within divided societies and what shapes this might take within Peace Studies programs.

7. Examples of agency

This section includes examples higher education may use in order to raise awareness about students as agents of change.

As previously mentioned, Article 12 of the CRC grants all young people the right to participate, or have a voice, in matters that affect them. Although most countries in the world adhere to the CRC, what it outlines in terms of giving youth a voice, and how this plays out in actual practice are often two disparate realities (Franklin, 2002). The

question as to why youth have not been included in the policymaking that affects their lives needs to be asked since possible answers may help to shed some light on what the next steps forward might be, in terms of greater youth inclusion. This is one of the aims of this paper.

Curnan and Hughes (2002) discuss the Community Youth Development (CYD) movement, another example of what this paper calls youth exercising agency. The CYD states that it is grounded in equality and justice, compassion and sustainability. The approach attempts to focus on the interdependence among people, families and communities globally. They advocate something that falls in line with recognition theory, and view the creation of better social, economic, psychological, environmental and physical health for all young people rather than the "diagnosed problem" model of treatment. The latter fails to look at the whole person, the individual within the context of families and communities. "Youth are seen as a collection of problems instead of as future parents, neighbors, and workers who need maximum adult involvement, teaching, and encouragement to grow and be productive citizens" (Curnan & Hughes, 2002, p. 4).

This is a neoliberal dilemma as neoliberalism is about the individual, but not about that individual's specific characteristics. An example cited by Curnan and Hughes (2002) and confirmed by the following examples is how the entire community benefits when young people's needs are met in an improved manner.

There are global examples that illustrate how youth who have survived conflict have skills that are desperately sought after in the realm of peacebuilding. This moves the paper closer to an exposure of how young people in divided societies might play multiple roles simultaneously, and of how youth agency and youth voice can contribute to a more sustainable peace.

Post-conflict young people are often only considered in IR as lacking skills or employment opportunities (Watson, 2009). Rather, there are myriad ways in which young people can acquire the same more specifically practical and career-oriented skills, including Peace Studies programs like the one described below, initiatives co-created with students so that they took ownership of the learning taking place.

A past season at AUC

On a more local level and within the community of Amsterdam University College (AUC), students co-created diversity policy following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2021. Although priorities have shifted lately, there used to be a recognition that diversity is a means of enriching all parties, and if academia learns to hear what is not being said and strives to recognize those previously not present, all parties benefit. The trick to diversity might just include concepts such as humility and active listening—peacebuilding skills.

Teaching Peace Studies opened discussions that explored the potential of greater academic engagement in local communities and recognizing that through giving, one is often more than repaid in terms of research and greater awareness. AUC students experience deep learning through experiential learning as they understand different perspectives and gain intercultural competencies—all important skills for the 21st century. Diversity engagement further enhances diversity structural awareness. All of this falls under Peace Studies.

Between 2015 and 2022 there used to be several initiatives at AUC encouraging equal opportunity in education. They included:

1) Diversity Award Programme (DAP scholarships) for students from the African diaspora and South American backgrounds, awarding scholarships;

2) Working with community-based organizations such as mosques, churches, and youth empowerment groups in Zuidoost (Bijlmer), and cooperating with their leaders (imams, pastors and principals) in raising awareness about opportunities in tertiary education and AUC, in particular;

3) Community projects for AUC students worth 6 credits where they learned how to teach and mentor Havo/VWO students in Bijlmer through a community initiative called Weekend College (high school students attending tutor sessions on Saturdays);

4) Working closely with a local NGO called Stichting Diversity, and their network in Amsterdam Zuidoost and Amsterdam Oost as part of a program aimed at raising awareness about people of different backgrounds in Amsterdam;

5) Establishment of Diversity and Outreach (DO) group among students, which operates as a focus group, bringing to light diversity issues such as teaching practices, marketing materials, events, etc. and developing policies of greater inclusion;

6) Academic advisors (tutors) assigned to each student and a student life officer position to come alongside students and provide (extra) support, whether academically or otherwise. For example, the student life officer provides a series of workshops for first-years on topics such as mental health and consent;

7) AUC used to designate several high schools in Amsterdam with which we exchanged ambassadors (faculty and students) to raise the profile of best practices and listen to ways AUC can better serve students from these different backgrounds;

8) The initiative Right 2 Education (R2E) (see https://right2education.squarespace.com) has introduced over 3,000 students with a refugee experience to AUC by means of Dutch classes, English classes, auditing classes, a buddy system for social activities, and homework support sessions. Mutually, these "guest students" have provided conversational Arabic classes. A third of AUC's student body (300 out of 900) used to be involved in R2E.

9) Applicants with a refugee background, as well as other disadvantaged histories, used to be given extra attention during the admissions process. There was a recognition that a student's potential is not necessarily revealed in their test scores and grades, and room is given for other criteria and potential for excellence. Once at AUC, listening spaces were opened up so their needs can be better met.

10) The establishment of a 0.3 fte staff position of Outreach Coordinator, who had among her tasks, the goal of increasing AUC's contacts among high schools in less-privileged neighborhoods, with the aim of pointing their VWO students toward AUC;

11) Homework coaching and mentorship by AUC students at Zeeburgia football club expanding into a big-brother/sister program called Equal Playing Field;

12) Jeugdlab, Leeslab, Kooklab student initiatives where AUC students used to teach fun science experiments to children in the Indische buurt—this has expanded to include reading and cooking lessons about nutrition.

Through AUC community projects such as Jeugdlab, Right2Education, and through working with partners like Stichting Diversity and Zeeburgia Football Club, AUC students mentored middle school and high school pupils, pointing them toward higher education when they might not otherwise have considered this option. At these initiatives, opportunities for children with immigrant backgrounds were given access to more equal opportunities, and AUC students learned intercultural competencies.

My *Human Rights and Human Security* course lays a foundation for engagement with such next-step initiatives. It is where theory meets practice. In that course, students do a reflective project where they identify people groups they don't necessarily spend time with, for whatever reason (parents' jokes, inconvenience, etc.), then they hang out with someone from that background for at least four afternoons.

When I was in senior management at AUC, my visits to local churches and high schools and partnering with community leaders such as imams and pastors helped establish long-term relationships of trust, while raising awareness of additional options that help young people reach their full potential. This resulted in a growing recognition that often what is given, gets given back in even greater measures.

What we discovered is that when students engage in the community of Amsterdam, whether with refugees, as mentors for youth from immigrant backgrounds, or as homework coaches at a football club, the result can be transformative for both the community and the students, as an awareness of each other's different perspectives becomes a co-creation.

I also designed *Peace Lab Kosovo* and later, *Peace Lab Rwanda*. These were qualitative research methods fieldwork classes. I took AUC students to those countries so we could learn from local peacebuilders how to help heal our own deeply divided societies. However, after ten years, these classes have been discontinued.

8. Conclusion: Recognizing rights

Without voice, there is violence (De Graaf, 2025). Even though young people, and the potential to safeguard their futures, remain a staple of the rhetoric surrounding the need for peace in deeply divided societies (Magnuson & Baizerman, 2007;

Oberschall, 2007), in reality their presence, and the potential that it represents, is often overlooked (Bray, 2010; Burman & Reynolds, 1986). Since the Second World War, the international human rights regime has assumed an increasing significance, with human rights and human security becoming paramount (Donnelly, 2003) in many of the policies that states purport to follow. As a result, a wide variety of UN resolutions exist – including the CRC (UNICEF, 2014) - that cover a plethora of rights issues, such as sexual violence, refugees, political, personal and community security. The postwar liberal framework is based on protecting human rights, and it seems to propose that the individual is paramount (Freeman, 2011), but in reality, we see that many groups are marginalized, and often whole segments of a state's population, such as women and young people, have their rights being recognized only late in the day. Thus, for example, sexual violence in wartime has only become a focus of research for human rights legislation during the last 20 years (Ishay, 2008). There are many contributing factors as to why these rights only became acknowledged at such a late date (Darby, 2009), including who has voice and power within the post-liberal world (Richmond, 2010) and who does not, as well as the distributive paradigm of justice (Young, 1990). Specifically, the minimal amount of recognition received by these issues is indicative of an emphasis within IR scholarship on the perpetrators of violence, rather than on its victims (Watson, 2008).

Although the CRC is the most widely accepted piece of human rights legislation in history (Franklin, 2002), in reality such widespread acceptance only serves to highlight the inadequacies that continue to exist in the international human rights regime among marginalized groups in general, and for children and youth, in particular (O'Neill, 1988). One key area of examination is the way in which we recognize the abuses that have taken place, and continue to do so, part of which has been addressed within the UN liberal peace methodology regarding the notion of truth and reconciliation. Much attention has been given to processes of truth-telling, a measure that enables those who have been affected by conflict to tell their stories, and hopefully process their trauma. Effectively, the human rights regime appears to advocate for the legitimacy of listening

to the voices of those involved in human rights violations (Wilson, 2001), making voice a central tenet within the liberal peace.

This diversity of perspectives is the responsibility of universities to teach. Just as there is such a thing as corporate social responsibility, so there is a social responsibility borne by higher education. There is much talk of our societies becoming polarized and leaning more and more towards the far right. Making Peace Studies and the education of how to disagree with respect, how to make deeper understanding the goal instead of convincing others of your point-of-view—these skills are lacking in our societies and need to become part of the required curriculum, not just an elective.

An examination of the educational impact of the *Peace by Peace* project (De Graaf, 2025) reveals how can we connect academia and society through Peace Studies programs. Service learning is threshold learning. It gifts us with a means of connecting academia and society. My other paper for this conference considers service learning as a peacebuilding tool, how peacebuilding is a means of achieving equal opportunities in education. Peace Studies is community engagement. It is civic engagement. For example, *Peace by Peace* uses the youth peacebuilding community as a lab.

At Roundtable 7, Thursday at 11, this and other papers will be presented outlining this Peace Studies initiative at AUC. In that co-created research by students, the impact of Peace Studies initiatives is demonstrated at several levels: thematically, theoretically and in terms of student and global impact as well as from the perspective of youth peacebuilders. It is but one example of the power of Peace Studies and how the co-creation and giving back and forth of peer learning grants confidence and a sense of purpose to young people as they learn to exercise agency and become changemakers in their own societies.

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