

OVERCOMING SCHOOL VIOLENCE: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL OF UNESCO ASSOCIATED SCHOOLS IN BRAZIL, CANADA AND MOZAMBIQUE

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Abstract

UNESCO Associated Schools (ASPnet) hold great potential for addressing issues of violence whether at the school or community level or beyond. This study of ASPnet schools in Brazil, Canada and Mozambique suggests that these schools' focus on strengthening the mechanisms of democracy, inclusive citizenship, and conflict transformation that creates a particularly effective dialogic space for critically and collectively engaging with conflict. The study contextualizes the UNESCO ASPnet projects in relation to creating a culture of peace, provides current data collected through interviews with over 100 school teachers, administrators, parents and students. The investigation suggests that UNESCO ASPnet schools provide ways of overcoming violence and transforming conflict through attention to human rights, democracy, respect for diversity, and global perspectives on sustainability and world issues.

Keywords: UNESCO Associated Schools; School violence; Education in Brazil, Canada and Mozambique.

Resumo

As Escolas Associadas da UNESCO (PEA UNESCO) tem um grande potencial para lidar com questões de violência tanto na comunidade escolar como em outros espaços. Este estudo das escolas PEA UNESCO no Brasil, Canadá e Moçambique aponta que o foco dessas escolas em práticas de democracia, cidadania e resolução



de conflitos cria um espaço dialógico privilegiado para o engajamento crítico e coletivo em situações de conflito. A pesquisa contextualiza o Projeto de Escolas Associadas da UNESCO em relação à criação de uma cultura de paz e apresenta dados coletados com mais de 100 professores, gestores, pais e alunos. A investigação conclui que o PEA UNESCO oferece alternativas para a superação da violência e para a transformação de conflitos por meio da atenção aos direitos humanos, democracia, respeito à diversidade, perspectiva sustentável global e problemas mundiais.

Palavras-chave: PEA UNESCO; Violência escolar; Educação no Brasil, Canadá e Moçambique.

Introduction

The search for alternatives to the problem of violence in schools has been the study focus of many researchers in Brazil and the world in recent decades (Abramovay, 2004; Davies, 2004; Debarbieux & Blaya, 2002; Noleto, 2004; Toh, 2002). The increase in the number of students in schools coupled with the low quality of education and the aggravation of social issues worsened by the expansion of the neoliberal model of globalization has meant that school-related violence is ever more visible, both nationally and internationally. The challenge for educators is to find social and educational projects that base their teaching practices and reflections on overcoming violence in schools. Against this backdrop, this paper questions to what extent the proposal of the UNESCO Associated Schools (ASPnet School Project) can be seen as a pedagogical alternative in overcoming school violence in the local and global context.

In order to answer the question above, this article is divided into three parts. The first part contextualizes the ASPnet project and addresses its capability to promote a culture of peace in schools, the second deals with issues relating to research conducted in UNESCO associated schools in Canada, Brazil and Mozambique, and the third and final part discusses contributions that the ASPnet project can bring to overcoming school violence, from a local and global perspective. The article concludes that the concept of education for peace adopted by the program has the potential to generate a transformative action in situations of school violence because it favours the



promotion of human rights, respect for cultural diversity and the development of a sustainable school environment, where each community member has to adopt a leading role in promoting social justice.

The UNESCO Associated Schools Project and the Promotion of the Culture of Peace

In a period marked by the spectre of a possible third world war, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the Associated Schools Program (ASPnet) in 1953. Since its inception, ASPnet had as its main purpose the promotion of a culture of peace in schools of all UN member countries. "The education for a culture of peace includes promoting understanding, tolerance, solidarity and respect of national identities, racial, religious, gender and generation differences, among others, stressing the importance of cultural diversity" (Noletto, 2004, p.18). In this context, the UNESCO associated schools should adopt teaching practices aimed at promoting peace, international cooperation and democratic values (UNESCO, 2003).

"I think that being a UNESCO school does allow a school to focus on being a contributing member to society and it allows a school to focus on the bigger picture, the bigger world, and gives kids exposure to things other than their narrow world. Being a UNESCO school allows us to open up those doors; it encourages them to see beyond themselves and garner that sense of community that I don't think a typical school creates." (School Principal, ASPnet School, Canada).

With the adoption of the Goals of Education for All (UNESCO, 2000), UNESCO has determined that ASPnet schools must also take a leadership stance in the fight for quality education for all, contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and help eliminate global poverty (UNESCO, 2003). From this perspective, improving the quality of life and education of children and young people living in poverty is fundamental in order to create a culture of peace because it reduces conflicts and injustice often caused by social inequality, racism and exclusion.

"People that come here say they always feel welcomed. They are met with smiles from staff and students, the artwork is beautiful. People get a feeling that it's a very peaceful place." (Teacher, ASPnet School, Canada).



Since the problem of school violence is historically generated by and linked to social issues dependant on each context, it cannot only be analyzed from the perspective of education, but also from a social, cultural and political one (Debarbieux & Blaya, 2002). Given the complexity of factors inherent to the process of internationalization of the global society, where new global players directly influence the process of creating and implementing educational policies at the global, national and local level (Martens, Rusconi, Leuze, 2007), it is important to understand that the answer to the problem of school violence cannot be sought only from the nation state, but also from other institutions and international organizations that have as one of their key institutional goals to contribute to the improvement of educational and social situations on the global stage, as is the case of UNESCO. Mundy (2008) points out that this institution is certainly one of the most influential international agencies in the educational sector since the postwar period, with significant impact both in policy and in implementation of new curriculum proposals on the global arena. Noletto (2004, p. 9) notes that "UNESCO contributes to the definition of a public policy that addresses youth and their multiple needs, playing a pioneering role in spreading the culture of peace and the transformation of pedagogical practice."

The UNESCO Associated Schools is another initiative of this institution that aims to promote a kind of education that shines the spotlight on the defence of local and global peace among people of different cultures, religions, genders, races and ethnicities. Currently, there are about nine million member schools, located in approximately 180 countries. Brazil is part of the project since its inception and currently has the largest number of partner schools in the world, about 300. Both Canada and Mozambique have about 30 accredited schools each.

The educational approach of the ASPnet Project is to make the curriculum more creative, inclusive, and dynamic and at the same time by promoting educational and social principles of the UN and its multilateral agency agreements between member countries (UNESCO, 2009). The Project argues that their schools should provide quality education that aims to promote inclusion, freedom, justice and human development in order to meet the demands of contemporary education for children and young people around the world. Their practice has to be concerned with sustainable development and education of responsible citizens that are aware of their role in both local and global community (UNESCO, 2009). The concept of quality education of the ASPnet project is guided by four pillars of education for UNESCO (Delors, 1996): *learning to be, learning to learn, learn to do and learn to live together*. The concept of



global and democratic citizenship adopted by the program emphasizes that schools should contribute in a such a way that everyone has access to their rights. Each citizen must do their part in the fight for guaranteeing human rights and a more humane, ethical and fair world.

The Strategy and Action Plan of the ASPnet Project for 2004-2009 (UNESCO, 2003) suggests that every associated school has to adopt innovative and creative ways to make the curriculum and learning more dynamic and closer to the students reality. In addition to recommending that the school works with themes of school life, UNESCO suggests that ASPnet schools develop related activities associated with the following central themes: a) ASPnet and the priorities of the UN, b) peace and human rights, c) intercultural learning, and d) sustainable development. The UNESCO Associated Schools Program plans to make schools exercise their social function, in order that educators, students, and communities strive to find, collectively, alternatives to major social issues such as school violence. "When UNESCO invests today in a culture of peace, the anchor of this search is the right to education as closely related to the achievement of peace. It is through education that is possible to form the most democratic mentality". (Noletto, 2004, p. 17).

UNESCO does not provide funds for the partner schools. However, ASPnet directs that schools should be organized into network structures, seeking to establish partnerships with other member schools, organizations and public or private institutions, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The idea is that such partnerships create alternatives that ensure the financial, educational, and technological support necessary to sustain the projects developed by member schools. Thus, the educational leaders / administrators involved with the program, at local, regional, national and international levels need to take a proactive model of educational leadership / administration that encourages the participation of all social and political actors with the school process. This concept of educational leadership seeks to join forces with all actors involved in order to prevent school violence from becoming a destabilizing factor that prevents learning and democratic relations in school. This perspective includes educational governance policies and practices that are part of a complex process of decision-making at the local, regional, national and international level. Understood as a public good, quality education requires that all groups and community members be engaged in the fight for its defence and democratization. The idea is that they need to recognize that there are other forms of knowledge beyond the



confines of its walls, requiring dialogue also with non-formal and informal knowledge in the fight for a more inclusive education that is also free of violence.

Conceptualizing Non-Violence and Peace Education

Studies in the area of school violence indicate that the most successful experiences in confronting this problem arise in the context where schools leadership is effectively democratic, grounding their policies and actions in education for peace, human rights, respect for differences, and having the interests of students and teachers at heart. Clements (2001) writes:

“The challenge facing peace education [is] to think of new ways of doing politics and of building moral conventions that will generate action spaces for all peoples to begin solving the big problems that affect the globe.” (p. 10).

Education that challenges violence and transforms conflict requires attention to conflict transformation, pedagogical practices, and procedural designs (Davies, 2004; Toh, 2002; Shultz, 2009) through the expanded policy of peace education to include discussions about violence against others, democracy and human rights, and the links between personal, local, national, and world peace (Savolainen, 2010). Expansive participation in these transformations is important because it makes everyone feel part of the learning process and increases the conditions of citizenship for students and teachers, especially in the case of public schools in the most marginalized communities. Education for non-violence and peace requires that we educate against exclusion. Lederach (2004) reminds us that in order to transcend violence we need to learn / relearn the

“capacity to imagine ourselves in a web or relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lives beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.” (p. 5)

Education that can transform conflict and violence requires that learning becomes democratic and everyone learns to learn and live together in an integrated and dialogical way (Abramovay, 2004). Schools that fail to adopt this educational perspective face more obstacles in offering quality education because they end up collaborating with the loss of interest of teachers and students for learning and



exacerbates other social problems present in the school community. It contributes with the deepening of situations of violence and jeopardizes the citizenship of students and teachers. The challenge is to make school be seen by children, youth, teachers, and parents as a safe area for socialization, learning, dialogue, and partnerships and not as a prison or dictatorial space where a few rule, and thus the majority do not see any alternative but to obey or rebel against them. Abramovay (2004) notes that:

“The effects of violence directly impacting the lives of schools, establishing uncertainty and tension in daily school life [...] The impact of these violent situations is to transform the school climate and the weakening of relations focusing on the quality of teaching and performance of students.” (p.45).

In defending the provision of education for a culture of peace, ASPnet schools may be an alternative for schools that are confronted with violence or even for those who rely on prevention projects in this area.

Associated Schools in Canada, Brazil and Mozambique: Research, Impacts and Limitations

Based on the analysis of results from three studies on the ASPnet schools conducted in Canada, Brazil and Mozambique, this article questions the potential of this UNESCO educational program as an alternative to overcome violence in schools, since its ultimate goal is to promote an education that advances the culture of peace in a global dimension. These three investigations were characterized as qualitative and used the techniques of semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation for data collection. The first two studies, conducted between 2008 and 2009, investigated the educational and social impact of the program in public schools in Canada and Brazil. In this context, we studied ten ASPnet schools in Canada and five in Brazil. Altogether, we interviewed over one hundred participants, with local, regional and national ASPnet leaders, teachers, community members, and parents. The third study was conducted in Brazilian and Mozambican ASPnet schools and it investigated to what extent the implementation of the UNESCO project in these countries has offered an innovative way to educate citizens to live in a democratic, just and culturally diverse society. Most of the research data was collected from teachers, administrators, students, and parents of two schools from each country (Brazil and Mozambique). One school was private and the other was public. In addition, we interviewed



representatives of UNESCO national and international representatives of ministries and departments of education in each country and members of civil society organizations. In this third research project, we used the same data collection techniques as in the previous two.

The results of the three investigations showed that the impact of the ASPnet Project is very diverse across the contexts of Canadian, Brazilian and Mozambican schools. A significant difference is that while most member schools in Canada and Mozambique are public (over 90% of accredited schools), in Brazil, more than 70% of schools linked to the ASPnet project are private. In terms of national administration of the project in Brazil, the program has always been under the coordination of private schools owners, while in Canada and in Mozambique the overall coordination is the responsibility of an official representative of UNESCO, connected directly to the national government.

Although none of the three studies was solely dedicated to the analysis of the issue of school violence, this theme appeared prominently in the data collected, especially when the participants were questioned about what were the challenges of the investigated schools in promoting quality education and citizenship. Participants expressed a range of concerns related to creating a safe space for learning and an educational focus that would lead to improved social realities. Worried about issues of violence, most respondents considered that education for citizenship must educate citizens who are committed to promoting a culture of peace personally, locally, nationally, and globally. This finding was even more evident in Canadian and Mozambican contexts, although the former focused more on global peace while the latter was more concerned with national and local peace. The results also pointed that the promotion of quality education cannot be achieved in school contexts marked by violence.

In Canada, our research showed that the ASPnet project causes a more visible and positive impact because it employs a philosophy of global education for the education of citizens who defend the culture of peace. It is also more congruent with the context of Canadian school communities where virtually the entire curriculum is organized in the direction of offering quality education that puts emphasis on education for peace, human rights, and the promotion of solidarity among people. The Canadian member schools involve students and teachers in different educational projects that discuss social issues linked to the promotion of global peace and arouse students'



interest in voluntary participation in social causes on behalf of those who need it most. A considerable portion of respondents said that promoting a culture of peace was already part of the dynamics of their school policies and activities, a fact that facilitated the understanding of the proposal by members of the school community. Moreover, they considered it a great privilege being able to be part of such a select group of schools accredited by an institution such as UNESCO, which was a source of pride for all:

“UNESCO is an organization that promotes a culture of peace. A UNESCO Associated School is a school that cares about human rights, democracy, peace and tolerance. It is a school that educates people with these ideals” (School Co-ordinator, ASPnet, Canada).

[We ask:] *“How can we make the world a better place through peace, sustainability, and social justice? When I work with young people it is always so good compared to adults. Young people start with the premise that they want to change the world; they don’t start small; they start big. So it is very exciting.”* (School Principal, UNESCO ASPnet, Canada).

The big difference in the Canadian context is that the program receives more pedagogical and even financial support (for some specific projects) from UNESCO national office and also from teacher associations and the provincial ministries of education, something that still does not occur in the cases of Brazil and Mozambique. The attention received by coordinators at all levels of ASPnet governance, has made the actions of ASPnet schools in Canada become more effective and their successes contribute to offering a higher quality and more global education. This model of education certainly contributes to the promotion of a culture of peace in the adopted pedagogical practices, making schools more attractive and meaningful to everyone.

“The impact of this program is not just cognitive, but students become aware of in relation to global social problems. They learn they can make a difference and how to solve problems. There are many schools that teach this and this is a differential in the UNESCO program. I think the fact that it is affiliated with UNESCO and having teachers committed to the philosophy of the program brings a positive impact on teachers and students in all aspects.” (School Principal, ASPnet, Canada)



“The objective [of our UNESCO school] is to help people live in harmony with people and the environment.” (Teaching Assistant, UNESCO ASPnet School, Canada)

With regard to the adoption of the UNESCO Program in Brazilian schools, the two studies in the country indicated that the ASPnet project may be an important tool in rescuing quality education; citizenship of teachers and students, and the democratization of schools. This contribution may be even greater in the case of public schools where studies show that student learning and teacher working conditions are more precarious (Guimaraes-Iosif, 2009). Despite many constraints present in the process of implementing the program in the country, the majority of respondents believe that such projects are important because they help restore the social dimension of school and inspire all members of the school community to reflect on important social issues such as school violence. However, both studies make it clear that in order to promote social change in the school context, UNESCO needs to invest more in the program, offering support (educational and financial) to public schools and helping more associated schools with the continuing education of coordinators and teachers mainly in the areas of larger social issues championed by the program, such as promoting a culture of peace. Contrary to what was found in Canada, Brazilian educators highlighted that it is more difficult to put the ASPnet program's objectives into practice.

“A seal on the wall is important, but more important is the attitude and actions taken. The proposal of UNESCO to promote a culture of peace, sustainability and other social issues is very important, but change does not happen with catchy labels. This institution would need another type of investment as well. But I see that schools are associated with UNESCO and it does not invest in them.” (School Principal, ASPnet, Brazil).

Most school principals and teachers surveyed pointed that the mere fact of becoming a partner school is not able to promote the necessary changes. The data showed that the major constraint to this UNESCO program in Brazil (but also in Mozambique) is that the schools are accredited, earn a certificate and then do not receive the help and support they need to invest in the training of educators who must work with the ideas advocated by the project. The influence of neoliberalism in education has made social issues gain an ever smaller space in the school curriculum, instead privileging content that can be measured with predictive scores of performance



nationally and internationally (Guimaraes-Iosif, 2007, 2009). Thus, the space to discuss social issues in schools has become increasingly limited. There are a few teachers who still deal with issues such as violence, inequity and racism in the classroom. Studies have shown that where this UNESCO program does not invest in ongoing teacher training in order to enable educators to deal with major social problems, the scope of their actions becomes increasingly limited. In Brazil, another aggravating factor is the elitist character of the program. It privileges private schools to the detriment of public ones, even though research indicates that the latter have more difficulty in providing quality education and face more problems with school violence. A major find in the Brazilian case is that the representatives of UNESCO in the country did not have almost any knowledge of the ASPnet schools program. This fact was confirmed when we conducted the interview with those representing the institution's educational programs in the country. At the beginning of the interview, the representative said that it was difficult to talk about ASPnet schools in Brazil because he had no information about the program and that it was the responsibility of the national coordinator, who is also the owner of an elite private school in São Paulo city, the capital of the richest and most economically significant state in the country.

As stated previously, although it was not the main focus of research, the topics of urban violence and school violence were raised by several participants involved in the Brazilian schools we investigated. Violence was viewed as something that needs to be taken seriously by all segments of school and society. Their testimonies show that the issue of school violence needs to be considered in all its complexity since it reflects other social problems that are beyond the school walls, but that directly influence the school routine, such as drug trafficking, poverty, racism, and social inequality.

"Here in the school there's not a lot of violence, but around here they're selling drugs and that is why the school gates are kept closed because a while back we had an incident where the police came chasing a bandit and he got inside the school courtyard. So at the parent-teacher meetings they always remind us that we have to pick up our children, because usually at the end of the school day the police are arresting the bad guys who sell drugs close to the school" (Student's mother, ASPnet, Brazil).

The issue of violence was associated by participants in the study with the lack of respect for diversity and also with the racist attitudes of some students and even teachers. The speech below shows how important it is that schools adopt a curriculum



that repudiates racist attitudes, whether taken by students or teachers, since such they encourage violence in schools and society.

“There are many children here in this school that have different opinions. It’s hard to hear the opinion of the whole world. I think there’s more anger in Brazil because people are saying “Oh, you’re black!” That hurts people and creates more anger, which creates fighting and violence.” (5th grade student, ASPnet, Brazil).

The study in Mozambique showed that the impact of the ASPnet project in the country is still limited because the number of partner schools is very small. Furthermore, UNESCO does not support the partner schools and this becomes an aggravating factor in the face of such serious social demands placed on schools in Mozambique. As in Brazil, associated public schools receive no government support for the improvement of their educational quality and the program management model in the country is very centralized. Even without the necessary support from UNESCO and the State, it is important to note, however, that the national coordination of the project in Mozambique is very engaged in order to ensure that ASPnet schools offer a differentiated education in a context historically marked by a cruel process of Portuguese colonization, a long and violent civil war and current situation of poverty, racism, illiteracy, and social inequity.

Some interviewees considered UNESCO as one of the most influential international agencies in the process of pacification of the country after the long years of civil war. However, they also highlighted that the ASPnet program needs to be democratized and involve more schools. For this group of participants, access to programs such as the ASPnet project may contribute to quality improvement in public school and for students to position themselves more appropriately on social issues relevant to the country and the world, as is the case of school violence.

“I feel is that this type of program is good, but there are only a few schools affiliated. UNESCO is limited only to accrediting them and will not offer more substantial support. Accredited schools are not even 10% of our schools and their combined performance will be very small before the greatness and size of the accrediting institution” (Director of the Maputo Department of Education, Mozambique).



It was in Mozambique where we found the greatest concern with the issue of violence, which appeared in the speech of most of the participants as something that needs to be seen in the educational and social context in general. Some teachers and parents reported that at the time of Portuguese colonization, the mere fact of speaking a local African dialect was enough for the teacher to physically or verbally abuse the student in the classroom. Teachers and representatives of the ministry of education and UNESCO said that one of UNESCO's contributions in this direction has been the rescue of African culture in school, encouraging students to feel pride again in their history and teachers to value differences present in the school environment. This new attitude certainly contributes to the creation of a culture of peace in schools and the country as a whole because it is based on valuing diversity, history, and culture of the native population. However, some educators fear that this proposal is more an education model imported by the Global North countries to continue the colonization of minds in the country. On the other hand, most respondents stated that they were not aware of ASPnet and its educational goals, despite being part of a partner school. However, this fact was also seen in the Brazilian and Canadian contexts, albeit to a lesser extent in the latter case.

“In the period of Portuguese colonization, less than 30 years ago, the simple fact of speaking our dialect in the classroom was already reason to get the teacher upset. Not anymore. Today, teaching is bilingual. If the child does not understand something in Portuguese, teachers can speak another language. This would bring violence before” (ASPnet Community Representative, Mozambique).

School and domestic violence appeared quite frequently in the speech of teachers and students in Mozambique. While some expressed concern with the proliferation of urban violence in the country, others consider that the current legislation is important because it brought greater protection to women and children. Some interviewees pointed out that a major shift occurred after the process of democratization of the country in the 90s in that now teachers are prohibited to physically punish children in schools. Physical punishment was permitted and even encouraged in the days of Portuguese colonization, when native students – children, teenagers, and even adults – were constant victims of violence, racism and discrimination based on colour or dialect.



“In practical terms, there is greater protection for women and children. Women have many rights and children as well. When I was a kid I took a lot of punches in the classroom. But today, pulling the child's ear is a crime. So there is an advantage brought by these new laws and educational programs such UNESCO. Many children abandoned school because of the beatings in the classroom, today it is prohibited. But before all this, the teacher would hit the student because it was something normal” (ASPnet Teacher, Mozambique).

With the advances of globalization, violence is no longer a national problem. The fact that Mozambican television has several Brazilian TV programs in their daily schedule makes students from Mozambique learn more about the Brazilian reality and this causes more curiosity about the issue of violence in Brazil. The speech below shows that in the face of a globalized world, when addressing the issue of violence we need to make a bridge between the local, national, and global. Similarly, one cannot talk about school violence without addressing domestic violence and its relationship to human rights and the rights of the citizen.

“In Mozambique there is a lot of domestic violence and violence against children as well. I was wondering if there is such violence in Brazil? I saw on television that there is a lot of violence there, right?” (ASPnet 5th grade student, Mozambique)

The studies conducted in Canada, Brazil and Mozambique showed that despite the specificities of each country and each school community investigated, the UNESCO program has great potential on overcoming violence in schools because it creates a privileged public space that encourages democratic discussion about important social issues. Those schools that have a more democratic ecosystem and, moreover, have a staff and students that understand and strive collectively to achieve the ultimate goal of the ASPnet school project, which is promoting a culture of peace at the local, national, and global level, are most successful at preventing school violence. However, it was evident in all investigated contexts that UNESCO needs to invest more in the program if it truly wants to promote educational and social change in these countries. This situation manifests strongly in the Mozambican and Brazilian cases, where public schools receive the certificate of UNESCO associated schools and are abandoned soon afterwards, without receiving the educational, technical or financial support that would be necessary to overcome the issues faced by most public schools



in these two countries. Thus, the impact has been very limited and few associated schools can offer a differentiated education that rescues the quality of learning, interest in school, and also promotes student and teacher emancipatory citizenship, all strategic elements in the fight against school violence.

PEA-UNESCO: Alternatives and Global Challenges Facing the Overcoming of Violence in Schools

The analysis of interviews of participants in studies on the ASPnet schools in Canada, Brazil and Mozambique shows that the adoption of the program accompanied by a democratic local management and the effective support of UNESCO can effectively contribute to overcoming school violence because every school should redirect their associated dynamic curriculum around respect for the culture of peace, human rights, intercultural learning, and sustainable development. As these schools collaborate and have exchanges at regional, national, and international levels, they share experiences and globally propagate the ideal of a school that advocates for peace locally and globally. By bringing the issue of school violence and other social issues into the public sphere, the member schools can create a democratic space for discussion where all members of the school community will be inspired and encouraged to express their opinions and intervene in solving issues such as school violence. This dialogical learning is essential for the strengthening of a participatory and deliberative democratic space in the school and, consequently, creating a culture of peace because everyone is encouraged to learn to listen, to interact, and socialize by respecting and learning from differences. This work sparks the interest of children and young people in social issues and encourages citizenship education so that citizens become aware of their social responsibilities in the local and global context.

“If I become the president of Brazil, I promise to put more security in schools. There can be no violence in schools! When there’s violence the students are scared and do not learn” (ASPnet 5th grade student, Brazil).

“From my perspective, I think the biggest opportunity we are giving our kids is the opportunity to see different cultures and recognize that people are people are people; that regardless of our skin colour or religious background or our wealth system, we all have the same kind of relationship issues that we should be able to look at someone with empathy and understanding.” (Teacher, ASPNET school, Canada).



Despite the fact that some limitations still exist in relation to the implementation of the program, especially in the reality of Mozambican and most Brazilian ASPnet public schools, research proves that projects such as this one are crucial because they encourage working with social values in school, appreciate the human dimension of education, promote examining social issues relevant to local and international realities, and renew the curriculum, bringing it closer to the reality of the student and their community. Such programs promote a more innovative, creative, interdisciplinary, and contextualized educational practice. They motivate and bring together teachers, students, and the general community. The ASPnet program upholds improvements in learning, improves public school teacher and student attendance, fosters research, and contributes to the formation of emancipated citizens. Moreover, especially in the Brazilian and Mozambican cases, it helps restore the tarnished image public schools have and raise the quality of public education.

“The great contribution of this UNESCO program is to improve the quality of education. The children are enjoying school more because there’s more for them to do. Students begin to see themselves as an integral part of society, not as outsiders, despite living in poor urban areas. This project turns these children into participating citizens that despite all the social problems they face, do not feel at the margins of society. If the student likes the school more because there are more activities, I think he or she will have better attendance and improved learning. The student likes being in school and participates more” (ASPnet teacher, Brazil).

The above statement highlights the potential of the program as an alternative to overcoming violence in public schools because it improves the level of learning, engagement and inclusion of students, especially for those who feel excluded in school and society. Another important factor identified in studies concerning the potential of the program is the recovery of public school teachers’ self-esteem and citizenship and also contributing to their continuing education.

“Generally, the life of the public school teacher is complicated, with many limitations, but this UNESCO project has support as the teacher needs to learn, take courses and study current material. Most importantly, it is to ensure that the same quality that is expected and had from a private ASPnet school is also guaranteed in a public associated school” (School principal, ASPnet, Brazil).



Most respondents said that the success of the ASPnet program depends on the type of educational administration that is in power. This was associated mainly to the fact that UNESCO does not provide financial support for this program. Thus, in Brazilian and Mozambican associated public schools that receive little government support and almost no financial support from the local community, it is very challenging to make progress due to limited resources and little incentives.

According to research, the ASPnet initiative has the potential to improve the quality of education and render citizens more aware of global social problems. Nevertheless, the major challenge mentioned by the majority of respondents is to make its reach more democratic by the inclusion of more accredited schools. In Brazil, for example, there is a need to make more public schools have access to it. Consequently, it is necessary to reverse the current situation where less than 30% of accredited schools are public. In the Canadian and Mozambican context, the ASPnet program also needs to involve a larger number of associated schools. However, this increase in quantity must be accompanied by an increase in quality and support offered to educators from accredited schools. In Brazil, ASPnet must be made more democratic, the exact opposite of what has happened up until now. Here, the program has a more exclusive nature, and few public institutions are allowed into the program.

“I advocate the inclusion of more schools in the ASPnet program. Honestly, I was very surprised at the answers, the questions, and the activities of the students from these schools. ASPnet students demonstrate having a deeper understanding of measures that must be taken on those important social issues and all. We saw that girl talking about the principles of human rights and cultural diversity. I mean, these are the principles we need in our society.” (Director of the Maputo Department of Education, Mozambique).

Despite all ASPnet's limitations and challenges, we recommend that educators and school principals that are looking for proposals to enhance the educational development of a culture of peace look closely at the ASPnet project because studies indicate that its potential for tackling social issues on a local and global level is quite significant. In addition, by addressing social problems both within the local, national, and global spheres, this educational project proposed by UNESCO becomes an important pedagogical alternative in dealing with school violence. However, both UNESCO and national governments need to make a greater commitment with ASPnet associated schools. Moreover, the educators should be made aware that this is a



program created by an international body and it directly influences the process of formulation of international policies in all UN member countries (Martín, & Rusconi Leuze, 2007). So it is needed to differentiate between the positive and negative aspects of the program and only use what can contribute to the improvement of education in the local context.

In order to avoid the risk that programs such as ASPnet promote a new kind of colonization of minds (Abdi, 2008, Guimaraes-Iosif, 2009, 2011) rather than social emancipation required, it is essential that principals, educators, parents and students directly or indirectly involved with the program, take a critical stance and respect the individual needs of each school community and country.

Conclusion

The results of this study lead us to argue that the UNESCO ASPnet program has the great potential for dealing with the problem of not only school violence but also its roots, since those authorities responsible for the program at the international, national, regional, and local level understand the importance of strengthening the mechanisms of democratic participation and inclusive citizenship. As a result, the ASPnet program is fostering a dialogic and deliberative space in the public sphere for educators, students, parents, and communities associated with public and private schools in order to engage critically and collectively with the aim to promote a culture of peace, human rights, international cooperation, respect for cultural diversity, sustainable development, and other United Nations global priorities.

“If we could really put this project into practice here in our school, I think everything would get better. Mainly because we are a very poor community, this project could give us the best support to deal with these social problems” (School principal, ASPnet, Brazil).

Membership in the UNESCO ASPnet project compounded with an emancipatory model of democratic management of education that is ethical and committed to local and global social issues may be the alternative in order for the school to be seen and experienced by all as a space for collaboration and learning where all participate, learn, and relate in a supportive and harmonious manner. This program should be seen as a viable alternative to making the curriculum more focused on social problems and not as a model that should be imposed on accredited schools. We should avoid the risk of



adopting a more invasive program simply to perpetuate the mind colonization project sponsored by the United States in the global south. The global adoption of educational proposals such as the ASPnet program should be accompanied by critical and responsible questioning and it should not disregard at any time, the value of local culture and knowledge.

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