

Peace Education in Multiethnic/Religious Settings: NESNIM as a Possible Model

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Introduction

Human societies in the postmodern world are increasingly becoming multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious. With such pluralism, there arise misunderstandings and conflicts. No postmodern societies seem to be spared from these pluralistic conflicts. In this context of unrest and chaos, peace education is a concern of every person and organization interested in the future of humanity.

According to Aram (2005),

Why is it that peace education is needed particularly for the youth? The fact is that youth of today are brought up in the world of violence. It is not just the Gulf wars glamorously telecast worldwide but also other aspects of television such as serials which bank heavily on violence. So much so that television programming washes away what is learnt in schools and colleges. At places, militancy and other forms of violence are right at one's doorsteps. Children and youth are more vulnerable to violence and hence they should be given special attention. There are occasions when educational institutions themselves reflect a culture of violence. Also, youth of today are tomorrow's leaders and hence there is a need to mould them in a pacifist mindset to have a peaceful future. (Aram, 2005)

Galtung (1996) developed a new meaning of peace as he discarded the traditional one. The traditional idea of peace is a synonym for harmony or the absence of organized, collective violence. According to Galtung,

Most people would agree with the definition of (negative) peace as absence of direct violence, but not necessarily with an additional definition of (positive) peace as the presence of symbiosis and equity in human relations; nor with the thesis that positive peace is the same as the absence of structural and cultural violence. These and others are matters of informed dissent, with schools forming around different definitions and theses. (Galtung, 1996, p. 14)

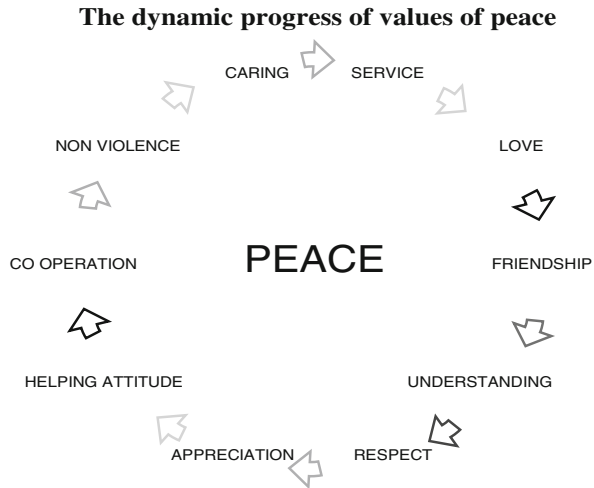
The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines violence as unlawful exercise of physical force. Hicks defined violence as "acts of aggression with the deliberate intention of causing pain or discomfort to others, directly or indirectly" (Hicks, 1998, p. 6).

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Fig. 1 The dynamic circle of the values of peace (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 40)



Very often violence not only causes discomfort and pain but ends in loss of life too. On the other hand, “peace can be defined as (1) the absence of personal violence (direct: assault, riot, terrorism, and war) which can be seen as negative peace and (2) the absence of structural violence (indirect: poverty, hunger, discrimination, and apartheid), which can be seen as positive peace” (Hicks, 1998, p. 6). The positive definition of peace is harmony or tranquility among persons and within communities. Archbishop Thomas Menamparambil of the archdiocese of Guwahati in northeast India, who has written extensively on the subject of peace, writes as follows:

Peace does not mean inaction. It does not mean apathy before public causes. It does not permit uncommitted stances, tolerance of unfairness, complacent ‘do nothing’. Peace really means a radical commitment to all genuinely human causes. However, peace equally means an absolute belief in the ineffectiveness of violence and in the power of non-violent means for social transformation. (Menamparampil, 1997, p. 9)

What the world needs today is a culture of peace, which can be set in place if the world leaders follow the path of non-violent struggle and use the power of love as a means to achieve peace and harmony in the world. Few sensible humans would deny that love is more powerful and permanent compared to the power that comes from fear and punishment. As the Indian scholar and writer Aram (2005) asserts:

What we need today is a culture of peace. A culture of peace is embedded in the Indian culture. It is not only expounded in the philosophical stream of Indian thought but has been effectively put into practice as well. In particular, Mahatma Gandhi led the nation to Independence through a non-violent struggle. According to him, Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than one derived from fear of punishment. . .Strategic non-violent action is an essential element of peace building. Both violence and non-violence are strategies to balance power. Violence usually spirals into a

cycle and creates new victims. But non-violent approaches to conflicts ripen the conditions for transforming relationships and structures while stopping the cycle of violence. (Aram, 2005)

The North-Eastern Students' National Integration Movement (NESNIM)

Faced with the reality of violence in everyday living while working for the betterment of the people of northeast India, and having understood the importance of peace education among youth, the Congregation of Holy Cross in northeast India created NESNIM on September 29, 2001. The underlying belief was that peace and harmony could be achieved by bringing together youth representatives from various ethnic/religious groups in the region that seemed to be hostile to each other, for a live-in educational experience and exposure in an atmosphere of cordiality. The program included classes, workshops, sports activities, cultural activities, and a Peace March. An evaluative study has determined that NESNIM has been effective to a large extent as a peace education program and has helped to break down prejudices between various ethnic/religious groups. Over 2,000 students and 200 teachers went through this program from the year 2001 to 2005 and the program continues to take place every year. This chapter will present some of the significant findings of an evaluative study of NESNIM and propose NESNIM as a possible model of peace education in multiethnic/religious settings.

The Context

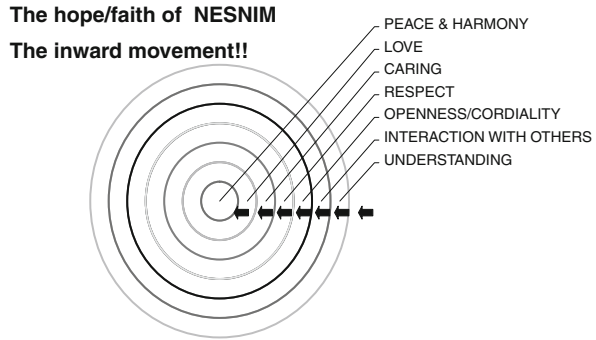
The state of Tripura in northeast India, like many other states in the region, has been experiencing escalating ethnic and communal violence for almost four decades. Many have succumbed to the guns of the terrorists. There is hardly a day when the media does not report violence in its various shapes and forms. It is to be assumed that there are many prejudices among the ethnic groups (tribal and non-tribal) in the region, which seem to perpetuate the region's violent scenario.

The Philosophy

The basic philosophy of the peace education program NESNIM seems to be in consonance with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), which brought out a document on Education in June 2007. In the document, they stated (CBCI, 2007):

Education to peace does not mean merely propagating some pacifist slogans, holding some peace-seminars or courses. It means earnestly working on various forms of *prejudice-reduction*: prejudices against persons of other castes (both higher and lower), tribes, languages, political affiliations, ideologies and theological points of view, regions and religions...education to peace includes teaching youth to deal respectfully with people of other

Fig. 2 The inward movement
(Kallarackal, 2007, p. 14)



convictions, cultures and civilizations, even with those who seem to be opposed to them. It means learning to dialogue with people with whom they have conflicting interests. (CBCI, 2007, p. 4)

The philosophy/faith/hope of the organizers of NESNIM is described in Fig. 2. Genuine peace is the result of an interaction with others in a cordial spirit of openness to others which would lead to greater understanding. This understanding would lead to respect for others and their differences, which would eventually lead to genuine care, love, peace, and harmony.

The Objective

The aim of the peace education program NESNIM was to reduce prejudice and negative impressions by teaching youth to deal respectfully with people of other convictions, cultures, ethnicity, and civilizations; even with those who seem to be opposed to them. The educational approach of NESNIM was grounded in spiritual, ethical and moral values, which has broad implications for life in the postmodern society. It has been anonymously stated that “the greatest truths are the simplest”. The underlying belief of NESNIM was that peace could be achieved by bringing together students from various ethnic groups that seemed to be hostile to each other, for a live-in educational experience and exposure to strangers in an atmosphere of cordiality.

The aim of peace education is a just and peaceful society and world. Educating the hearts and minds of the young people in the way of peace could legitimately lead to a tomorrow with reduced societal violence and hatred. Peace education should seek to sow seeds of peace in young minds. Peace educators should teach FOR peace and not just ABOUT peace.

Violence can be experienced directly or indirectly. When a society legitimizes violent responses to conflict and aggression and teaches their young to respond violently and with hateful prejudices, one could legitimately expect the violent scenario to perpetuate. However, when one responds to violence in a non-violent way, it

seems to break the cycle of violence. Refusal to respond to violence with violence, no matter the extent of consequential sufferings, makes violence impotent and paves the way for reconciliation and healing. There are numerous success stories of non-violent struggles in the world both in the past and in the present. NESNIM sought to educate youth in the ways of nonviolence so that they could respond to violent provocations and prejudicial treatments with the weapons of love and nonviolence.

Although peace is a condition desired by everyone in the world, the experience of peace is infrequent among the billions of human inhabitants on the earth. Isn't it paradoxical that human beings are both constructors and destroyers? Even the most peaceful people may admit to the experience of anger, hatred, jealousy and revenge, even if they may not always admit to acting on those feelings. The capacity of human beings to inflict pain and destruction on one another seems limitless, as has been witnessed throughout the ages of human history.

Because the youth today may be exposed to violence more than ever before, peace education is necessary. Also, since the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow, there is a great need to expose them to the dangers of violence in order to curb their violent instincts and ensure for them a peaceful and harmonious future.

The root of all violence seems to be "the understanding that 'the other' is *different* and distinct – radically separate from me, and is of little or no intrinsic value" (Holy Cross Justice Office, 2007, p. 3). This process of "distancing" oneself from others – forgetting the interconnectedness of all human beings in the society – creates disharmony. Peace is the experience of harmony or tranquility first of all within oneself and among persons and within communities where their interconnectedness is valued and recognized. This would involve *openness* to others and their differences in ethnicity, language, and culture. Such openness could lead to greater *understanding*, *respect*, and *appreciation* for others. This could lead to *caring* for others as friends in a spirit of *love* and *service*.

The Evolution of NESNIM as a Peace Education Program

NESNIM is an annual, 5-day live-in educational experience for youth/students in northeast India. Even though initiated by the Congregation of Holy Cross, other nongovernmental groups/agencies and more than 15 educational institutions have also joined the program. Figure 3 illustrates the process of evolution of NESNIM.

NESNIM attempted to foster respect and love for one another and one's cultures among the students of selected schools in northeast India. NESNIM could be described as an inter-cultural/religious integration program, which is an inter-school activity, organized by the Holy Cross Educational Foundation (HCEF) in collaboration with the Association for Social and Human Advancement (ASHA). This annual event intended to create awareness among the students and the public of the need for peace and harmony in the northeast.

NESNIM participants belonged to various ethnic/religious groups that were often hostile to one another. This program seemed to have made strong ripples of peace in

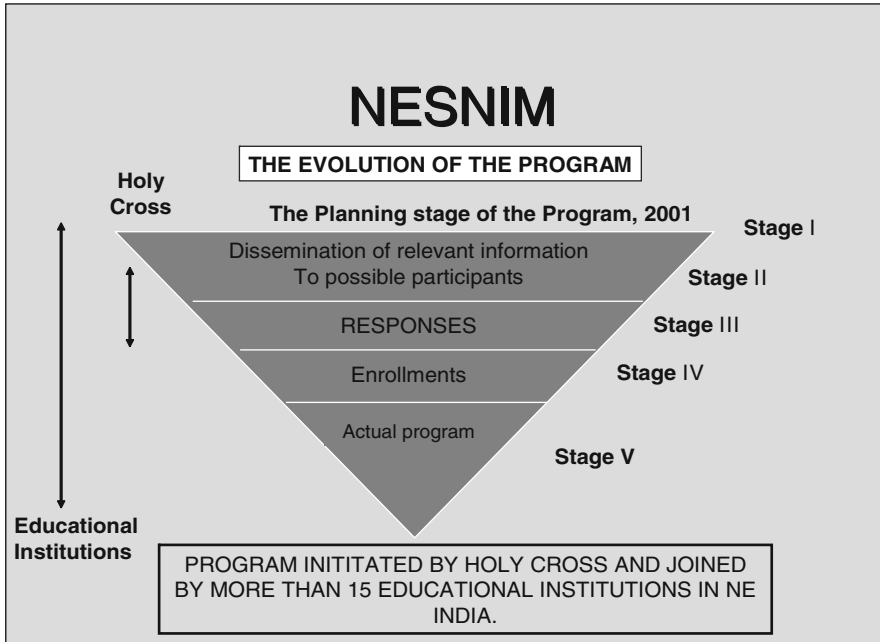
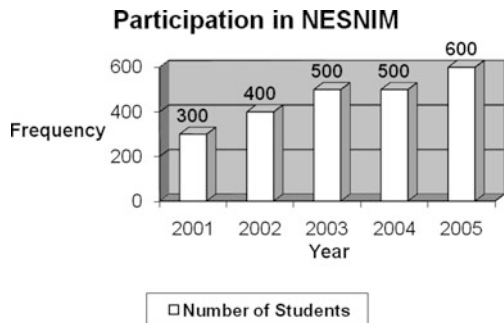


Fig. 3 Evolution of NESNIM (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 10)

Fig. 4 NESNIM participants' frequency (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 12)



the region as observed by some individuals who work in that region. The following chart illustrates the growth in student participation in NESNIM from 2001 to 2005. The numbers are rounded up for easy computing.

NESNIM created opportunities for young people from different ethnic groups to come together, live together under the same roof, play together, eat together, work together, learn together, and entertain together. Watching one another and experiencing the richness of the cultural diversities of various ethnic groups from close

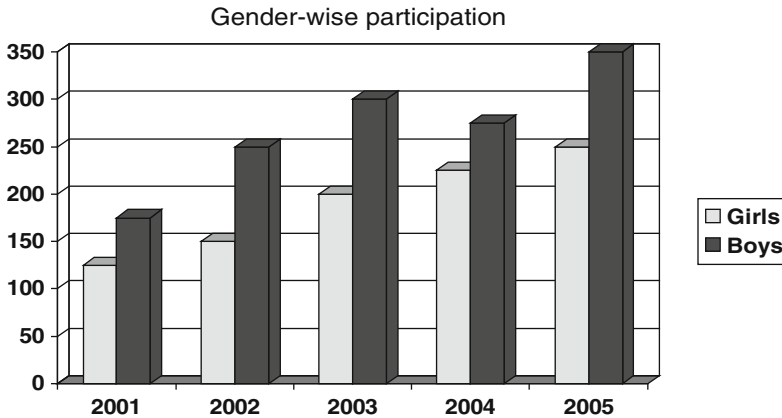


Fig. 5 Gender-wise participation in NESNIM (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 13)

quarters probably helped participants shed their prejudices against one another and better appreciate one another’s culture and ethnicity.

The program was coeducational, but it should be noted that there were more boys than girls, as illustrated in Fig. 5.

NESNIM: An Evaluation

The author conducted an evaluative study of this peace education program. A qualitative research method was used through in-depth personal interviews of 30 purposefully selected students and one resource person who had participated in NESNIM. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed. Two focus group discussions were also held, one among the teachers and the other among the students. There were six teachers who had participated in NESNIM and there were six students who were chosen from the 30 in-depth interview participants. They were chosen since they were “information rich” cases using the strategy of *maximum variation sampling* (Merriam, 2002, pp. 62–63).

There were 18 females and 13 males in the interview sample and they were from 6 selected schools in northeast India. For the sake of anonymity, the names of the schools are withheld and numbers are used instead.

The sample size and spread are shown in Table 1.

The students who participated in the in-depth interviews were studying in grades IX through XII. This is described in Fig. 6.

The participants belonged to various ethnic and tribal groups like Debbarma, Reang, Jamatia, Darlong, Halam, Tripura, and Bengali. This is represented in the following Fig. 7.

Table 1 Sample size and spread (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 28)

Centers	Males	Females	Total
School 1	04	04	08
School 2	03	03	06
School 3	02	03	05
School 4	00	02	02
School 5	02	03	05
School 6	02	03	05
Total	13	18	31

Fig. 6 Grade-wise participation in NESNIM (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 28)

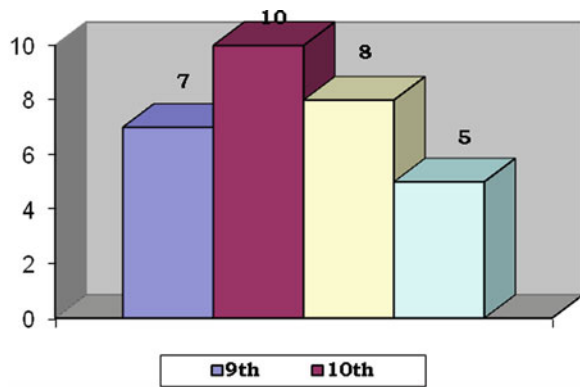
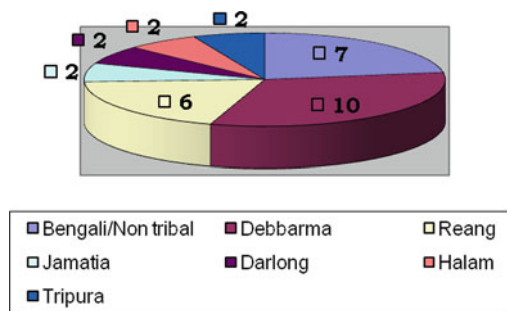


Fig. 7 Ethnicity of evaluation participants by frequency (Kallarackal, 2007, p. 29)



Evaluation Through Depth Interviews

The open-ended in-depth interviews that were used in the research provided the participants with a framework in which to discuss their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. Patton describes a number of sampling strategies that serve purposes (*purposeful sampling*) other than representativeness or randomness. Basic to all these is the importance of selecting *information-rich* cases from which one can learn much about issues that are important to one’s study. According to Patton (2002),

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term *purposeful sampling*. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (Patton, 2002, p. 230)

The Framework of Data Presentation

The data from the interviews and focus group discussions were organized under the following five headings. The “cause–effect” framework was used in ordering these sections.

1. Causes of Violence in the Region.
2. NESNIM as Regarded by the Youth of Tripura in northeast India.
3. Influence of NESNIM Participants on the Peace Process in the region.
4. Influence of NESNIM Participants on Other Youth in the region.
5. Influence of NESNIM in Shedding Negative Prejudices.

Each framework of the study conveys one aspect of the experiences of the participant. As an integrated whole, the frameworks enabled the author to develop a comprehensive understanding of the impact of NESNIM in bringing about peace in the region. The presentation and discussion of the results and analysis protected the anonymity of the interviewees by using disguised names, inclusive language, and participant numbers.

The Major Components of Peace Education

The major components of peace education as emerged from the study are the following: (a) *Moral education*, which would mean overcoming prejudices and selfishness and developing an attitude of respect for others different in ethnicity, religion, and culture. (b) *Spiritual formation* or spiritual enhancement, as one develops a sense of acceptance and tolerance and strives for harmony in one’s surroundings. (c) *Community formation*, as one feels belongingness to a larger community of human beings, equal in status in the eyes of God and the secular laws of the society. (d) *Communication skills*, as barriers would break down with genuine communication, and relationships would begin to grow and develop. (e) *Commitment to justice*, as there cannot be true peace without justice; since justice and peace are two sides of the same coin. Wherever there is injustice, there is unrest and disruption of peace. (f) *Commitment to economic development*, as there cannot be lasting peace without eradication of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and unemployment.

Presentation of Research Data

A number of ideas emerged from the study that highlights the impact of the peace education program NESNIM on the youth participants of northeast India. These are as follows.

Causes of Violence

The first major framework dealt with the causes of violence in the multiethnic settings of northeast India. Deprivation of political and economic power; manipulation by political parties; deprivation of land; intrusion from neighboring countries; unfair treatment by the government; inferiority complex among the tribal groups; ill-treatment of the minority group by the majority group; the double standard of the government; selfishness and blindness of the majority group to the needs of the minority groups, hurt, rejection, and feelings of insecurity; wrong representations by the media; misunderstanding between the people and the government; illiteracy and lack of educational facilities; wrong policies of the government; unemployment; poverty; revengeful attitude; the experience of power of the gun by youth; injustice done to minority groups; prejudices and misunderstandings between the various ethnic groups as well as the historical-political situation of discrimination by the majority population in the area were seen as major causes of violence in the region.

The following are some sample responses from the interviews. According to one participant,

Political parties make use of the youth. What I hear is that each of the political parties has got its own wings of the militants. In the villages they are killing and eliminating their own men not knowing that they are mere puppets in the hands of one political party or the other. They are destroying their own intellectuals and leaders. (Interview #31)

Considering intrusion as one of the causes of violence, one participant responded as follows:

What I feel is that if someone enters your house, and has gone into your bedroom and is lying there without your permission, you start hating it. That same thing has happened with all the other people coming into the northeast. The original inhabitants are very good people. They realized that somebody has taken away their homes and things. That might be one of the reasons for the unrest. They feel unsafe and insecure in their own home, and they react to intrusion. (Focus group discussion, #32, P#06)

Explaining that the tribal villagers are unjustly deprived of the facilities, one participant commented as follows:

For health care and education. . .all buildings are there. But there are no doctors and no teachers. The roads are there, but no buses. No one wants to go to a tribal area. The tribal people are unjustly deprived of the facilities. (Focus Group discussion, #32: P#03)

Yet another participant was of the opinion that it is illiteracy or lack of education that is the cause of misunderstandings and violence:

Lack of education is one of the reasons of such misunderstandings. If they think that the government is not helping them, they can take the government out of power through elections. But they don't. Why do they vote for the government if they think that the government is not helping them? So, education is lacking among the villagers. (Focus Group discussion, #33: P#01)

NESNIM as a Peace Education Program

The second major framework was concerned about the peace education program itself. Many of the participants of NESNIM had come with much excitement and positive expectations. They wanted to have some fun, to learn about peace, to make new friends from other schools and states, to broaden horizons, and to build cordiality among them. Many of those expectations were fulfilled by NESNIM, as related by the participants.

There had been some who had some anxieties and fears about the program and its participants, the type of people the participant would mix with, whether he/she would be accepted by others, and whether he/she would be able to like them and make them friends. They too seem to have had positive experiences and through interactions and the experience of cordial atmosphere they found their fears and anxieties diminish.

Many participants came to NESNIM not because they were interested, but because of the influence of friends or teachers. Some came for the sake of having some fun and an easy time away from their parents, but they too were surprised that they learned much from NESNIM. There were also some who came with the real motivation to learn how to be a peacemaker. Some others found it more beneficial when they attended the program a second time.

The positive experiences that were felt were those of cordiality and friendliness, the encouraging attitude of the participants, the helping and sharing attitude of those who were once total strangers from other ethnic groups and schools, the experiences of the group discussions and the peace march, the realization that all are human with the same concerns and same fears, and the awareness that all are brothers and sisters even though they belong to different ethnic groups.

The lessons learned from NESNIM were many. Some said they learned about peace and peacemaking; friendship among different cultures; the awareness that without an attitude of love there cannot be peace; the value of being together; the need to understand, appreciate, and communicate with others; the need to respect others and to cooperate with others; and the value of unity. Some others learned the art of sharing, which is essential to building friendships. One of the participants came to an important realization in his/her life that everyone is equal as they are human regardless of color, race, language, or religion.

In the opinion of one of the resource persons, NESNIM originated out of a felt need to do something for peace in a violent scenario prevalent in the region. He/she said,

NESNIM started with the deep awareness of the need for peace, because when the peace education program started, the region was very much disturbed with a lot of violence. . . and events of various types. . . even losing the life of a young Holy Cross Priest, and blinding another dynamic young priest of his left eye as bullet splinters damaged his eye, in a violent shoot out. It had an influence on all of us. All of us felt that something has to be done. (Interview #31)

One of the participants shared his/her positive experience as follows:

When we had the Peace Rally, we went in groups. There was a time when one of my non-tribal friends, who belongs to my ethnic group, fainted. I was a bit far and I could not go there as I could not break the line. There were students of my school who didn't help but there were tribal students who came forward and helped. Those students were human and humane! I was very impressed with that. (Interview #01)

Narrating the experience at NESNIM which has made him/her more open-minded to accept others from different cultures and ethnicity, participant #14 said the following:

We used to have group discussions where we used to discuss about peace. It was a great experience. I learnt to love other cultures and to think about peace. Understanding others is important. I was a little shy. . . but I realized that they were a little shy too. I used to think that the people from other states would be very different. But now, I know all are similar. We are brothers and sisters. I have opened up more to people now. (Interview #14)

Participant #17 seems to have experienced change in him/her because of NESNIM. He/she explained this experience as follows:

According to me, if we want to bring about peace, first and foremost we should love one another. Because I believe without that we cannot bring about peace. Though situations in the region have not changed. . . because of NESNIM, we ourselves are changed. If every one can change even a little, then there will be a greater possibility of change. . . . I need to play my part in order to have peace. (Interview #17)

Speaking about the experience at NESNIM and how it broadened his/her outlook, one participant expressed:

Closer contact with people can change your impressions about them. Everyone has friends, everyone has fears. Everyone is the same regardless of color, race, language or religion. Everyone is human. I did not learn this from my family. I only learnt it from NESNIM. (Interview #09)

Influence of NESNIM on Northeast India

The third major framework was concerned about the influence of NESNIM participants on the peace process in the region. The opinions varied regarding the influence of NESNIM from much to no influence at all. Some participants expressed the opinion that they have experienced less tension and more cordiality in Tripura (one of the states in northeast India) after the launching of the peace education program. This could be considered an effect of NESNIM to a small extent. Another opinion

was that NESNIM had helped positively in building up cordiality among students of various ethnic groups, which was not the case before the launching of NESNIM.

Some participants noticed an enhanced sense of community, tolerance, and harmony in the region since those were the values taught in NESNIM. Many of the participants of NESNIM had made commitments to be peacemakers which could enhance the process of peace in the region. In the opinion of many participants, the Peace March (Rally), which was an integral part of NESNIM, also helped to impart effectively the message of peace and unity to the public, thus enhancing the peace process.

Some sharing by the participants summed up NESNIM in a few words. The following is a good example:

NESNIM had been an interactive process. This process helped us in making friends. Also, I understood that there is more than one way to bring about peace. What he thinks of peace is not what I think of peace. We had different opinions and we were fighting on those opinions all connected with peace, but at the end we understood what it means to be a peace-maker. (Focus group discussion #33: P#01)

Some other participants also had come to the conviction that peace is their business as much as it is someone else's business. Establishing peace may be an overwhelming task, but the participant seems to be convinced that "it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". So it was with one, who said:

I plan to be a peace maker by talking about peace and by interacting with others with the focus of peace. This can help me to be a peace maker. In other words, by thinking that peace is not somebody else's business, but it's my own business. After attending NESNIM, I have come to an understanding that even though achieving peace is a huge task, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness? (Interview #24)

Influence of NESNIM on Youth in the Region

The fourth major framework was dealing with the influence of NESNIM on youth in the region. Those who participated in the peace education program NESNIM clearly describe changes in themselves at the end of the experience. Some were influenced much and some were influenced less, but all of them were influenced positively to a certain degree.

Many participants developed convictions about peace and committed to become peacemakers in their surroundings, school, state, and region. For some of them it had become a real need to become peacemakers while others considered it as a duty. Some wanted to organize peace clubs in their schools and villages, and some female participants wanted to organize women in their villages to be a peace force in their villages.

Some students came to realize that they should be slow in judging others as they do not know them. Since these are young people and future citizens, this should have some effect on the future of the region, especially in the northeastern states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, from which these youth hailed.

Many came to the realization that peace occurs with respect for others. They also realized that peace has to begin with oneself and peace is desired by all, regardless of whether they are engaged in violent activities or not. This realization is certainly a good starting point and a common ground to begin the process of negotiation. According to some others, violence is never a solution for problems, as it only breeds more violence. Only peaceful solutions have long-lasting effects.

Everyone seems to desire peace. Some of the participants affirm that in the heart of even the hardcore terrorists who are violent and sadistic, and who take the lives of others, there is a deep desire for peace. For example, one opined,

My conviction is that even the most violent people want to be in peace with others. . . at least some body. Through out their lives they cannot go on thinking only of violence. They realize at certain times the helplessness of any other means and violent means seems to give quick results, though not lasting results. But because of these terrorist groups, the exploiting groups have some fear, and restrain themselves a bit. . . as they are too dangerous. (Interview #31)

After NESNIM, some participants made the resolutions to be peacemakers in their school. Even if others think this is a poking of nose in the business of others, this participant thinks he/she has an inner call to be a peacemaker, and suggests the following:

I have made some resolutions to be an agent of peace and a peace maker. Even in my class, when there are small conflicts, I go for it! Some say that I should not be poking my nose where I don't need to. But when I think I need to, I do! I look at it as an initiative for peace. (Interview #01)

Participant #29 wanted to take the initiative to bring about peace by being an example by practicing self-control and showing that he/she loved peace:

After my participation in NESNIM, I want to be a peace-maker. I will take some initiative...to bring about peace. First of all I will try to be an example. I will control myself if some one is fighting with me and I will show that I love peace. Others may be able to see that. I will also share the education I had about peace, with others. (Interview #29)

NESNIM seems to have well equipped another participant to be a peace builder and make him/her confident to play his/her role in the society as a peacemaker. The participant concluded the following:

After my NESNIM experience, I think I could be an instrument of peace by really helping people. I cannot do big things but I can do small actions. If I go to villages, I can share my experience and educate them. I could say that NESNIM has equipped me well to be a peace-builder so that I am feeling more and more confident to play my role in the society as a peace-maker. This conviction is very strong in me. (Interview #21)

There was a great awareness in another participant that to be a peacemaker, one has to be humble and be a servant to all. He/she also realized that people may be different but they are all human. He/she expressed this awareness accordingly:

The important lessons I learned from the program were the awareness that in order to be a peace maker, we have to be a servant to all. People are different but they are all human. I want to be a peace-maker and I want to practice some of the things I have learned at NESNIM. (Interview #22)

Influence of NESNIM in Shedding Negative Prejudices

The fifth major framework looked at the influence of NESNIM in shedding negative prejudices. Even though dealing with prejudices is not easy as it is an emotionally sensitive area, many of the participants were open to the question. As per the testimony of the participants, many of them came with negative ideas, fears, and bitter feelings about youth belonging to ethnic groups other than theirs and they were able to leave them behind as they returned to their respective schools, villages, and states at the end of the 5-day peace education program. Most of the participants of the interview also testified to the fact that they had made many new friends from students and peers of ethnic groups and schools other than their own.

Some thought that NESNIM could be considered a good starting point for breaking prejudices but not more than that as prejudices are very deep seated. There were some participants who were able to change their impressions of others after the experience of NESNIM. For example, one said,

Before the NESNIM experience, I would not talk to students from other schools, thinking they are bad and all. But in NESNIM, I talked to others and found out they were more friendly. I was able to change some impressions through NESNIM. (Interview #27)

Children hear a lot of prejudicial statements from their elders in the school, village, or home and this contributes to building up hatred toward others and divisions among themselves. One participant confessed to this experience as follows:

Some times they tell us, in the school, home or in the village, things that are negative. They are dividing us, all the things they tell make me feel that they are jealous of us, some partiality can be seen. They are partial to their own tribes. I feel that this is not good. Some are good who have come from other parts of northeast. They behaved properly with us. Slowly, we come to know and appreciate each other. (Interview #22)

Participant #07 had heard different things about other people but the experience taught him/her that the reality is different, as indicated below:

Before I came to NESNIM, I thought that the students from other schools and states will not even talk to me. But my experience was different. I had heard people say that people from the town are better. Someone told me they are proud. But when I came here, I found them to be friendly with me. (Interview #07)

It is apparent that participant #04 had come to a reverse understanding after the experience at NESNIM. He/she used to think that the students coming from rural areas were not very smart as they did not have good education and described how his/her feelings changed:

Earlier, I used to think that people from rural areas did not have good education. But I realized that they asked lots of questions and interacted with teachers. Maybe they were better than us. This happened through interaction. We got to know about each others' opinion about life. When we grow up together, we could banish the differences. (Interview #04)

Participant #11 also confessed to having prejudices and gave testimony to how it got changed due to the experience at NESNIM. He/she was able to treat others as family as he/she understood all are human with same basic needs, anxieties, and

talents. Speaking about the positive experiences at NESNIM, this participant stated as follows:

First was the interaction with the people from other states. I could make many friends. I experienced a lot of prejudice as I was growing up. But after the NESNIM experience of staying together and interacting with others, I don't think it makes an impact on my life. It becomes clear to me that everyone is equal. I realize they are just like my family members. They have the same anxieties, same talents and needs. They are also human. (Interview #11)

Participant #01 was very philosophical when he/she realized that it is nature that has made differences in human beings. He/she called upon the others to celebrate the differences. In his/her opinion, NESNIM was a celebration of the differences:

It is through nature that we have been made different. So, instead of fighting over our differences, we need to celebrate the difference. That is so important. I feel that is what NESNIM is doing. (Focus group discussion, #33: P#01)

According to participant #14, generalizations can be wrong and misleading. NESNIM seems to have opened his/her mind to look at reality as it is than to go by preconceived ideas about others and the reality around him/her. He/she said,

Till now, I have heard many things. I used to think what the people around me and my family tells me is true. But as I grow, I meet people and I understand that it is not like that. I heard that some of the tribes are very jealous. But all of them are not like that. Such generalizations are misleading. NESNIM helped me to realize that people from other states are not much different. (Interview #14)

Participant #06 had the realization that there were no basic differences between students belonging to different ethnic groups. When there is greater understanding, friendship will grow according to him/her. This was described as follows:

I thought the people of other groups would be very different from me, but I discovered they were the same. I always thought they would be better than me. I thought that the students from the town would be better dressed and they would be smarter. But I found that there was no difference among us. I think that we can be friends if we understand each other. (Interview #06)

According to participant #30, NESNIM made him/her realize that there is goodness in others and that whatever he/she had heard earlier about people was not true. This was described as follows:

When I came to know others a little more, through NESNIM, I came to realize that whatever I have heard about others is not true. NESNIM made me realize that there is goodness in others, that they are like me and they too desire friendship, and they too desire peace. (Interview #30)

Most of the participants had a lot of good things to say about NESNIM and some of them were so convinced of the need for peace in the region that they were willing to be instruments of peace, ready to take the risk to be peacemakers, and joining with other like-minded peacemakers. Many also related that peace has to begin with them and they considered themselves fortunate to be part of NESNIM.

All these testify to the fact that the peace education program NESNIM seemed to create an atmosphere of goodwill and fraternity, which could help pave the way for harmonious living and peace in the violence-torn region of northeast India.

In the world of today, one experiences conflict between the spirit of love and the forces of destruction on an everyday basis. Nations are in conflict for ideological, economic, military, and religious reasons. Societies are in conflict for supremacy, control, and material gains. Individuals are in conflict for emotional, psychological, and egoistic gains. Humans hate each other because of fear and distrust. It appears that love and respect for life have disappeared from many lives.

In the light of these thoughts, the study revealed the participants' views of the causes of bitterness, hatred, and violence in the region of northeast India. According to the opinions expressed in the study, the causes for violence are many, but the most basic and underlying causes may be human selfishness and greed. Even though the above-mentioned elements are presented as the causes of bitterness, anger, hatred, and violence in the multiethnic and multi-religious region of northeast India, these could have universal applicability, since basic human nature seems to be the same anywhere in the world.

The Effectiveness of NESNIM as a Peace Education Program

Even though NESNIM cannot be considered as a panacea for the violent scenario of northeast India or any where else in the world, nevertheless, it appears to be effective in its own way as a peace education program. All the participants who were interviewed had many positive experiences to share after their experience of NESNIM.

According to Betty Reardon, Director of Peace Education, Columbia University, "Education is that process by which we learn new ways of thinking and behaving, a very significant component of the transition–transformation processes. Education is that process by which we glimpse what might be and what we ourselves can become" (Reardon, 1999, p. 202). The participants of NESNIM seemed to have picked up many positive values which have motivated them to be peacemakers in their surroundings. It seems to me that there has been a transition–transformation process in them as they learned new ways of thinking and behaving and pondered over what they were and what they could become.

Many had arrived with prejudices against others, but the experience of living together in close proximity and communicating with others brought a greater understanding between them. Some learned that all are human with the same needs, fears, and capabilities; hence all should be respected and loved as brothers and sisters. Looking at the influence of NESNIM on the youth who had the privilege of that experience, NESNIM could be considered as an effective program of peace education.

From the sharing of the participants in the interviews, it was also clear that after the launching of the peace education program, the region was less tense and more

cordial. It is possible that this is more than a mere coincidence. The message of peace was communicated through the Peace March and through the participants of NESNIM who became peace agents as they returned to their respective areas.

NESNIM as a Model of Peace Education

In the postmodern world, children are so exposed to violence that they have become more accepting of violence in their lives. Children have been identified by their race, ethnicity, tribe, or religion. Such situations are reported from around the globe like Rwanda, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Afghanistan, and many other countries in the world.

If NESNIM had been able to break the cycle of violence, and create a taste for peace, and nonviolence (even for a short while and in small measures), it can be considered to be effective as per the testimony of the participants. It is possible that NESNIM could be taken as a model of peace education in Palestine, Israel, Kenya, and Rwanda; clearly it could have as much relevance in Africa and in the Middle East as it has relevance in northeast India.

Peace education, as presented in this paper, is deeply rooted in the context of the diversity of human beings with unique cultures, languages, ethnicity, faith, and outlooks on life. Peace education takes place when individuals with varied backgrounds, ethnicity, and culture interact with one another in a genuine spirit of openness, respect, love, and understanding.

Communication is the key to peace education. Where there is genuine communication, barriers break down and relationships begin to develop and grow. NESNIM brought strangers together and had them part as friends. Friendship between groups that are prejudicial and inimical could be considered as an achievement of NESNIM. Thus, the findings of this research may be helpful in providing a framework for peace educators and peacemakers all around the world.

Conclusion

NESNIM seems to have been effective to some extent in promoting communication, cordiality, harmony, and peace in the region of northeast India, judging from the personal experiences of the participants of the study. All the participants were unanimous about continuing NESNIM, as, in their opinion, it has been effective in promoting peace in the region.

It can be stressed that education for peace through activity-oriented programs can be very effective among the youth. It has been the experience of the participants that lasting effects in the society can be brought about only through non-violent and peaceful means.

It is an undisputed fact that prejudices, revengeful attitudes, and bitter feelings lead to violence. Hence, a peace educator should find ways and means to at least minimize them, if not get rid of them completely among the fighting parties.

In the opinion of many participants, NESNIM can also be considered as a good starting point for educating the young in the ways of peace, but there should be effective follow-up in the local, grassroot units and inclusion of peace education in the school curriculum for it to be truly effective as a peace education program. It appears that NESNIM has had its impact in the region as a peace education program as there are at least some convinced young men and women who are determined to be peacemakers. As was stated by one of the participants of the in-depth interview, “Any effort towards peace, however humble it may be, deserves much appreciation” (Interview # 31). NESNIM may be a very humble effort like a drop in the ocean toward establishing peace in the troubled region of northeast India, but it stands out as a “candle in the darkness” and the effort is truly worthy of praise.

Since similar situations of unrest, prejudice, violence, and hatred prevail in other parts of the globe, NESNIM could be taken as a model of peace education. The cordiality and harmony that seemed to have been promoted through NESNIM speak for itself. NESNIM as an activity-oriented, youth-oriented, and community-oriented education program may be seen as an effective and strategic instrument in promoting and instilling long-lasting peace in the hearts and minds of the youth in any part of the globe.

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