



Commentary

Learning to Live Together: The Role of Education in Human Interdependence

Marta Lescano

President

FUNDACIÓN FEPAÍS, Argentina

martalescano@yahoo.com.ar

Introduction

The lack of education in nonviolent communication, conflict mediation, servant leadership, and positive coexistence has had devastating consequences in our societies. When conflicts are not managed through dialogue, empathy, and shared responsibility, they easily escalate to extreme levels. This is how they turn into wars, forced displacement, environmental destruction, and the breakdown of the most basic human bonds. Understanding positive coexistence as a model of communication, and not just as an abstract ideal, means accepting that our ways of speaking, listening, deciding, and acting are at the heart of either peace or conflict. We need to rebuild that model from its roots, beginning with education.

Faced with this painful reality, it becomes urgent to recover a forgotten principle: human interdependence. We are not islands. Our existence is interwoven with that of others and with all forms of life. Remembering this is not only an ethical act but also a necessary condition for building peace. This reflection is framed by the contributions of *The Joyful Talisman*, a work by Vedabhyas Kundu and Munazah Shah, who propose pedagogy of human values centered on five pillars: Inner Transformation, Human Interconnectedness, Footprints of Nonviolence, Footprints of Solidarity, and Active Caring for Others.

In particular, this article focuses on the second pillar: literacy in human interdependence, understood as the critical capacity to recognize the deep web of connections among all human beings, a consciousness that enables us to understand that our actions and thoughts are interwoven with the well-being of others. This perspective fosters mutual respect, dignity, and responsibility toward our fellow human beings and the natural world.

We know how every action—individual or collective—have consequences. Every word, every decision, every omission affects ourselves and sends ripples that harm other people and the environment. In this context, educating for peace requires us to be aware of that impact and to instil, from an early age, an ethic of care, empathy, and shared responsibility. Recovering the awareness of interdependence is an act of resilience, healing, and hope. It is also an invitation to rethink education as a tool for rebuilding the ethical fabric that every society needs in order to live together in peace.

Diagnosis of the Crisis: Violence, Disconnection, and the Ecology of Estrangement

We live in an era where conflicts are no longer limited to battlefields or geopolitical disputes: they pervade our families, communities, digital networks, and educational spaces. Violence has become a common—though never legitimate—way of responding to differences. Often, this violence is not only physical but also manifests through everyday gestures of exclusion, discrimination, indifference, or humiliation.

This multiplication of violence is deeply linked to emotional, ethical, and relational disconnection. In the words of Kundu and Shah, “many of us are in conflict with our inner selves, with others, and with nature”, and this accumulation of conflict poisons our relationships, mental health, and perception of the world.

To this human disconnection we must add an unprecedented environmental crisis. The deterioration of ecosystems, climate collapse, loss of biodiversity, and rampant consumption are also symptoms of a relational model based on domination, exploitation, and the forgetting of our interdependence with the Earth.

Contemporary education, with some valuable exceptions, has largely contributed to this fragmentation. It tends to favour approaches centered on individual competition, technical performance, or the accumulation of information, while neglecting the processes of ethical, emotional, and communal formation. Children today face a troubling paradox: in the name of technological advancement, their spaces for growth are increasingly structured, automated, and disconnected from lived experience.

Schools often fail to allow for new ways of learning, playing, or coexisting; and the same happens within families and entertainment environments. Everything seems to follow a rigid, repetitive, standardized script that prevents the emergence of creativity, affection, and relational richness. This systematization not only limits imagination but also mirrors itself in the child's mind, restricting the capacity to perceive alternatives, explore new bonds, or envision collective solutions.

As a result, entire generations have grown up without tools to manage conflicts, listen to others, or make decisions with a collective, positive, and transformative perspective on real problems. The crisis, then, is not only social, environmental, or political. It is also a crisis of meaning, relationships, and values. Further, it is a crisis of how we inhabit the world and relate to one another. In this context, it is urgent to recover a narrative that does not deny complexity or technological progress but restores our capacity to imagine new ways of coexisting. And that narrative may begin with a change of perspective: to understand that we are not separate, but deeply interconnected.

The Forgotten Thread: Understanding Human Interdependence

In the face of the bewilderment generated by the current crisis, the notion of human interdependence emerges as an ethical compass: a reminder that our lives are deeply intertwined, beyond borders, ideologies, or contexts. Far from being an abstract idea, it is a concrete reality, shared by ancient traditions, deep ecology, and pedagogies of compassion.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh expressed it clearly when he coined the concept of inter-being: we do not exist separately, but as part of an infinite web of relationships. We breathe thanks to the trees, we eat thanks to the Earth and the labour of others, and we learn because someone once cared for us or taught us. Every thought, word, or gesture impacts that web. Nothing is neutral. Nothing is disconnected.

Along these lines, educational approaches have emerged that invite us to develop true literacy in interdependence. This is not limited to intellectual knowledge but involves cultivating ethical sensitivity and a consciousness of care: for others, for nature, and for oneself. It means understanding that our decisions have collective consequences, and that individual well-being cannot be built at the expense of others' suffering. In this backdrop, Kundu and Shah (2024) underlines the need to encourage and promote human interdependence literacy as a 21st century essential skill.

When we forget this truth, indifference, contempt for life, and social fragmentation flourish. But when we recognize it, a different horizon opens: one of shared responsibility, mutual respect, and solidarity as a vital principle.

Weaving this forgotten thread again implies a profound change in perspective. It means shifting from the paradigm of "me first" to that of a conscious "we." It means learning to see others not as threats, but as essential parts of our own existence. The other is our mirror, showing us what we do not know—or avoid knowing—about ourselves. Ultimately, it is the first step toward any lasting culture of peace.

Education—formal or non-formal—has a key role in this reconstruction. It should not only teach content but shape our humanity. And that humanity begins when we understand that living well is not possible unless we learn to live together.

From the Conscious We to Action: Values for Rebuilding Relationships

If we accept that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of healthy, just, and conscious relationships, then we need tools to help us cultivate such coexistence. It is not enough to proclaim peace: we must practice it, build it, live it.

In this context, the Joyful Talisman approach proposes five essential dimensions for a culture of care and nonviolence. Far from being recipes, these pillars function as ethical and pedagogical maps for those who wish to transform the world by starting with themselves:

1. Inner Transformation: cultivating mindfulness, self-awareness, and ethical coherence.
2. Human Interconnectedness: understanding the web we are part of and acting responsibly.
3. Footprints of Nonviolence: acknowledging that our actions, even the smallest ones, leave marks.
4. Footprints of Solidarity: recognizing the value of serving, accompanying, and supporting others.
5. Active Caring for Others: committing to the common good through volunteering, empathetic leadership, and everyday tenderness.

These pillars are not dogmas but invitations to practice a different way of inhabiting the world. Each of them is intertwined with the others, like strands of the same fabric. For example, it is not possible to practice solidarity and volunteering without first developing a sense of interconnectedness, just as we cannot care for others without first cultivating a compassionate view of our own inner world.

The greatest challenge is to bring these ideas into the real world: to schools, neighbourhoods, social networks, and workplaces. This requires participatory educators capable of leading by example. In many regions of the world, transformative experiences are already taking root—some in schools, others in communities or regional initiatives—that show it is indeed possible to educate with a socially committed, humanistic perspective.

Educating for coexistence is not about training for obedience, but for dialogue, discernment, repair, and co-creation. As Martin Luther King once said, “We have learned to fly like birds and swim like fish, but we have not yet learned to live together as brothers.” Today, more than ever, this statement unfortunately looks true.

Educating for a Regenerative Future: Interdependence in Action

Literacy in human interdependence cannot remain at the conceptual level. To become a lived reality, it must translate into pedagogical practices that forge bonds, foster commitment, and support collective transformation processes. Kundu and Shah (2024) clearly argue on the need to make human interdependence literacy a practical endeavour and not meant for just academic discourses; it has to take to classrooms, institutions, and in families. With this conviction, diverse experiences around the world have begun to incorporate this perspective into education, citizenship, and social leadership.

At Global Peace Let’s Talk and Fundación FEPAIS, we have been developing initiatives inspired by this vision and applied in concrete settings. In schools, neighbourhoods, rural communities, and intercultural spaces, we train Promoters of Sustainable Communities and Ambassadors of Peace Schools—children, adolescents, young people, and educators who not only reflect on the values of care, peace, and solidarity but also put them into practice through local actions with global impact.

These programs are implemented in countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, with cultural and linguistic adaptations but a common core: educating to live together with dignity, respect, and shared responsibility. Activities include nonviolent communication workshops, ecological campaigns, intergenerational dialogue circles, community-focused recycling projects, emotional education, intercultural mediation spaces, and collaborative conflict resolution practices.

Each initiative has a dual objective: to strengthen internal bonds—self-awareness, emotional regulation, and self-care—and external bonds—active empathy, networking, and environmental stewardship. The goal is to teach that peace is not just a topic but a way of being in the world.

In vulnerable contexts, this pedagogy becomes even more powerful: it fosters transformative actions, rebuilds trust, and helps imagine new futures. In areas affected by conflict, migration, or exclusion, programs based on interdependence offer concrete paths to healing and reweaving the social fabric.

The classroom or community space ceases to be a closed environment and becomes a laboratory of planetary citizenship. And education, understood this way, is no longer merely preparation for employment but the foundation for inhabiting the world with humanity and civic responsibility.

Conclusion: Interdependence as a Path and Commitment

The world needs fewer speeches and more experiences capable of healing, connecting, and transforming. Literacy in human interdependence is not a distant utopia but an urgent necessity. It is the ethical foundation for positive coexistence, planetary citizenship, and a real culture of peace lived out in everyday life.

We believe this path begins with a critical reading of context. That is why we work with an integrated approach that starts with the investigation of local challenges, analyses opportunities for transformation, and designs concrete actions aligned with specific goals. Each intervention is monitored, evaluated, and improved based on clear criteria: objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, relevant, and time-bound.

We aim to foster social innovation projects with tangible impact in communities, capable of expanding the awareness of “we” and generating fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable environments. In every workshop, gathering, course, or initiative, interdependence becomes practice: it is breathed in dialogue, exercised in listening, and built through networks.

There is no deep transformation without education. Further there cannot be any lasting peace without awareness of others, without responsibility for shared life. Thich Nhat Hanh has so aptly said: “We are not observers of the world, we are part of it. Changing our way of being changes the world itself.”

Literacy in human interdependence invites us to do just that: to change the way we are in the world so that another world becomes possible.

References

1. Kundu, V. and Shah, M. 2024. *The Joyful Talisman: Conversations on Human Values for a Joyful World*. Naamak Publications. New Delhi.