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## Conference Reviews

# Attending a peace conference the day after a war breaks out

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Thank you to the CUE SIG grant selection team for awarding me the 2023 CUE Member Support Conference Grant. This support will help defray some of my costs to attend the Children as Peacemakers in Divided Societies: Educational Approaches conference which was jointly organized by the War Childhood Museum Foundation (WCM) and the International Association for Intercultural Education (IAIE) and was held in Sarajevo on October 9 and 10, 2023. This conference was a game changer for me as it enabled me to network with some of the world's best-known practitioners in cooperative learning, my field of specialty and the topic of my PhD dissertation.

The conference was a collaborative event that brought together intercultural education and peace education scholars from Europe and other parts of the world help find pathways to solutions on global issues related to democracy and human rights. The focus was on how these issues specifically related to children and the impact they have on global societies.

The conference's eventual impact could not be overstated and the need for such a forum could not be more strongly felt than on the first day of the event. The conference started on October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas militants attacked Israel and where hundreds of children would start their journey of living in a war-torn region in the midst of a conflict that will surely define geopolitical diplomacy for decades. As of Feb 19, 2024, reports put the total amount of deaths resulting from this attack at 29,000 people.

The conference's 10 strands covered the themes of peace, diversity, and

education. I presented in the “Cooperative Learning - Facing and Answering the Challenges of the 21st Century” strand. My presentation, titled “Heightening the effectiveness of diverse cooperative learning teams”, dealt with social issues faced by Japanese students related to the inter-personal communication gap that had spontaneously appeared at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presentation described the effects the pandemic era shutdown had on students as they struggled with the technological leap they were to take in their educational journey. More specifically, it dealt with the struggles felt by students in their attempts to deal with their new educational environment and the new social restrictions that quickly arose from this unprecedented halt to the machinations of societies all over the world. The effects of the altered mediums of communication and the limits placed on studying online were explored, which led to the main part of the presentation – the effective use of cooperative learning strategies and practices to develop interpersonal skills.

To demonstrate the particular challenges faced by Japanese students, my PhD research was introduced. Summarizing the literature and classroom observations made in *Research Trends in Cooperative Learning in Japan: STEM Teaching vs Humanities Teaching* (Laurier, 2023), quantitative data was provided to indicate Japan’s lukewarm response toward cooperative learning in comparison to its Asian neighbours. In a first of its kind work, I analyzed works compiled by the International Association of the Study of Cooperative Education (IASCE) Journals, a publication that, until the IASCE’s folding in 2021, was the world’s largest academic community studying cooperative learning research and practices and sharing its developments. The study consulted 1,082 works published between 1998 and 2019 and analyzed the levels of interest in cooperative learning in Japan and contrasting it to the level of interest in other Asian countries. In this research a trend could be seen showing the Japanese government’s reinforcement of its innovative and political approach to education. The results of the research demonstrate a propensity in Japan to incorporate cooperative learning strategies in humanities and social sciences classes over the utilization of the same strategies in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) courses. The trend is revealing as it shows a Japanese resistance to foreign influenced pedagogy that permeates

in other corners of education and beyond, further solidifying the practice of competition and individual work seen throughout Japan, albeit at a slowly decreasing pace. Furthermore, the study showed a noticeable trend in Japan to view cooperative learning as a discussion tool that could be used in humanities and STEM programs. It was not seen as a pedagogy to develop critical thinking and social skills as it is seen in other countries in Asia.

The final section of the presentation introduced recommendations to help teachers get students to overcome the increasing communication divide that was created during the pandemic. With overwhelmingly homogenous classrooms that are slowly starting to include international students, the issue of communication in Japan is a bit more complex as it involves language issues, student willingness to communicate, and cultural norms. Cooperative learning strategies that require all students to participate, communicate, share information, and praise other class members were demonstrated. A special emphasis was placed on activities created to form heterogeneous teams simulating international cooperation and improving turn taking and simultaneous participation. Attendees were shown how to create groups that cater to individual student strengths and weaknesses, as well as ensuring diversity on every team. Examples provided include the formation of gender diverse teams and, where possible, teams that had included international students. This, in Japan, could include returnees or students who have studied abroad for significant amounts of time, as their experiences give them varied perspectives as well as a higher range of vocabulary which could help other members. The core component of each of the teams is the component of helping each other, trusting each other, and learning together. One facet of team building which seemed to interest attendees was that of joining the highest-level learner with the lowest level learner in the same team. The questions that were asked during the question period showed a good deal of interest in the research presented.

My presentation at this conference allowed me to make connections with other specialists in cooperative learning and broaden my research's reach. The connections I made from this event have given me a new circle of practitioners with which to share information and seek feedback. I also found that there

are others interested in my research and who could help me develop stronger research branches. All this, with the help of the CUE SIG grant, whose support helped make this a very professionally rewarding experience.

## References

Laurier, J. (2023). Research trends in cooperative learning in Japan: STEM teaching vs humanities teaching. *Sophia University Studies in Education*, 57, 91–105.

## Author bio

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