

Survey Tool Development for Assessing Peaceful School Climate

Afshan Huma ^{1*} Gullfareen Fakhar ²

¹ Fulbright Scholar, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: afshan.huma@aiou.edu.pk

² Research Assistant, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: gullfareenfakhar2@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article is one of the outcomes of a larger study conducted over the period of one year to pilot the peace education training modules with elementary schools in Islamabad. Twenty schools were selected in rural and urban zones of Islamabad Capital Territory. The researchers visited each school for collecting quantitative and qualitative data. Initial purpose was to assess training needs and also for pilot testing of the survey tool. The survey tool was constructed on the place-based peace pedagogy framework developed by the primary investigator of this study; Afshan Huma, during her post-doctoral research. The tool was validated by panel of nine experts. 20 headteachers and 80 teachers participated as respondents in the pilot survey. Observations were made by the field researcher herself too. Triangulation and reliability check helped in finalizing the survey tool for peace pedagogy at elementary schools. This tool is now ready to be used in various parts of the country to be used before and after the training of school teachers and school heads. The tool provides rich data for parallel convergent design of mixed methods research as it generates data in qualitative and quantitative form simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: School Climate, School Environment, Peacebuilding, Peace Education

Introduction

“Place-based peace pedagogy” is a framework of “peace education through peace pedagogy” developed by Afshan Huma during post-doctoral research at San Jose State University in 2024; then, in 2025, we piloted this in public elementary schools in Islamabad with seed funding from Allama Iqbal Open University. This framework offers modules for professional development of teachers and headteachers to address the need for trauma-informed peacebuilding by integrating principles of peace education with place-based learning. Drawing on the local realities and context, we can redesign the schools’ ecosystems to foster values such as empathy, dialogue, care for the environment, and active citizenship. Rather than treating peace education as a foreign or idealized concept, peace pedagogy enables young learners to explore peace as a lived practice embedded in shared spaces such as schools (Huma, 2025).

Contemporary societies marked by social polarization, environmental degradation, and recurring conflict increasingly recognize schools as critical spaces for nurturing cultures of peace. In Pakistan, violent extremism and religious intolerance, as well as gender, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination, have ruined the social fabric over the past many decades (Nasir, 2023). Not just in rural areas but in urban centers such as Islamabad, elementary education plays a vital role in shaping children’s early understandings of coexistence, citizenship, and responsibility toward their social

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Corresponding Author

Afshan Huma

✉ afshan.huma@aiou.edu.pk

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and natural environments (Ahmed, 2021). However, peace education in formal schooling has often remained abstract, textbook-driven, and disconnected from learners' lived realities. This gap highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are context-sensitive, experiential, and rooted in local places. Despite growing international scholarship on place-based education and peace pedagogy, empirical studies documenting their application in elementary schools within the context of South Asia are very limited (Vander Ark et al., 2020).

In particular, there is a lack of practice-based research that examines how such pedagogies bring real change in real classroom settings. Addressing this gap, the present study was conducted as a one-year pilot implementation of a place-based peace pedagogy framework in selected elementary schools in Islamabad. The study at hand aimed to examine how school heads and teachers could integrate place-based peace activities into physical space, interpersonal social interactions, and instructional practices to practically demonstrate concepts of peace and harmony in local contexts. This article is one part of a larger study in which documenting pedagogical processes, classroom experiences, and observed outcomes contributed to emerging discourse on culturally relevant peace education in Pakistan and offers practical insights for educational planners and policymakers seeking sustainable approaches to peacebuilding through education under the umbrella of SDGs.

Literature Review

Research in elementary education has increasingly focused on school climate and disciplinary practices over the past two decades. School climate, if characterized by conflict, punitive punishment, and weak social support, is directly linked to negative social impact, including psychological distress, behavioral problems, and reduced civic sense (Bear et al., 2014). A large body of empirical evidence highlights the prevalence and consequences of peer conflict and bullying in school contexts. Research on classroom climate demonstrates that children exhibiting problem behaviors are more likely to develop conflictual teacher relationships, especially in environments where negative climates prevail (Hardy & Meuser, 2017). Studies of conflict management styles further show that school staff's approaches to conflict significantly influence school climate.

Adarayan-Morallos (2018) reports that teachers and school heads frequently relied on common conflict management strategies that affected perceptions of school climate, highlighting the role of teacher behavior in mediating conflicts. Though not focused solely on punitive practices, this research illustrates that unresolved conflict contributes to adverse climates. The early-age experiences not only influence these years but can cause long-term traumatic effects. Zhao et al. (2024) analyzed data from thousands of primary and secondary students in China and found that over 70% experienced bullying, with victims showing significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, poor sleep, and other psychological problems compared with non-victims. This underscores how interpersonal conflict at the elementary level is not trivial; it correlates strongly with emotional distress, which contributes to a stressful learning environment. Beyond peer conflict, classroom behavior problems and teacher-child relationships also shape conflict dynamics.

Punitive Discipline and Stressful School Environments

Punishment cultures remain a concern in discussions of school environment, and systematic review of international literature on school discipline reveals persistent tensions between disciplinary actions and children's rights, especially where rewards and punishments are applied without clear criteria for fairness or conflict resolution (Scribner & Warnick, 2021). Reinforcing the point, multilevel research on school-wide practices indicates punitive consequences are negatively associated with students' perceptions of school climate. In a large study across grades including

elementary levels, students' perceptions of frequent punitive consequences correlated with less favorable perceptions of overall climate compared to contexts emphasizing social and emotional learning. These findings align with literature on restorative versus punitive practices, which suggests punitive methods may fail to address underlying conflicts and may even exacerbate them by alienating students and increasing stress (Saboor & Yousuf, 2019).

From a psychological perspective, fear of punishment in the school environment affects not just overall school climate but leaves long-term effects on children's behavior. Causal evidence indicates that punitive environments can increase dishonesty and task-avoidant responses among children compared to non-punitive settings. While research in primary schools is less experimental due to ethical constraints, these findings suggest that penalizing cultures may inadvertently reinforce negative behavioral patterns among children that can continue in adolescence and later (Yin, et al., 2025).

Interpersonal Conflict and Stress

School environments marked by interpersonal conflict extend beyond student–student interactions; for instance, teacher-to-teacher and head teachers' conflicts mainly shape the school climate, with evidence suggesting that unresolved interpersonal conflict among educators contributes to workplace stress more than anything. Conflicts that originate at staff or institutional levels can filter down to classroom relationships, undermining collective efficacy and contributing to stressful environments for students (Khan, 2021). Moreover, when educators experience stress or conflict, their conflict management responses—whether avoidance, confrontation, or punitive responses—can shape the interpersonal tone of the whole school (Ahmed et al., 2020). The more we learn about the school climate and its influence on students and teachers' behaviors, the more we cannot deny the fact that school leaders play the most significant role, not only in managing their own emotions but also in supporting the teachers to build a stronger school community (Nikezic & Nikezic, 2021).

Physical Features of Schools

A school's policy and planning play a vital role in creating a peaceful and inclusive environment, and it includes physical features such as outer access, building structures, open and closed spaces, and also the furniture and fixtures. A well-designed school building that is safe, airy, and filled with natural light and green elements helps students feel secure, calm, and welcomed from the moment they enter (Cremin & Bevington, 2017). Classrooms that are bright, well-ventilated, and organized support focused learning and positive behavior, while flexible seating arrangements allow inclusion of diverse learning needs. A clean and green environment, enriched with plants, trees, and open spaces, nurtures calmness, reduces stress, and builds a sense of responsibility toward nature (Istianah et al., 2025). When physical spaces are designed with care, sustainability, and inclusivity in mind, they naturally promote harmony, mutual respect, and emotional well-being, helping the school become not just a place of learning, but a peaceful and inclusive community for everyone.

Methodology for Development of the School Climate Survey Tool

The development of the survey tool followed a systematic, multi-stage process grounded in peace pedagogy principles and contextualized within public schools. The methodology ensured conceptual clarity, contextual relevance, and statistical soundness.

Stage 1: Conceptual Framework Development

The process began with the identification of core constructs of peacebuilding, drawing on themes such as non-violence, mutual respect, inclusivity, democratic participation, emotional safety, conflict resolution, and social justice. These constructs were mapped onto established dimensions of school climate, particularly:

- ▶ Physical environment (safety, infrastructure, cleanliness, accessibility)
- ▶ Psychological environment (sense of belonging, emotional safety, relationships, respect, fairness)

In response to the problems associated with school climate and cultures where interpersonal conflict is evident, educational research has increasingly examined practices and positive discipline approaches, especially to build peace. Systematic reviews demonstrated that restorative practices prioritize resilience and reduce school violence through improving group cohesion and compassion. Literature on positive discipline highlighted that constructive, supportive responses to conflict can help in healing and peacebuilding. Another intervention area was inner peace and conflict resolution training for elementary teachers.

The intervention framework included five major elements based on the place-based peace pedagogy modules introduced by Afshan Huma (2025).

1. Physical Environment
2. Teachers' Behavior & Instructional Practices
3. Students' Behavior & Social Interaction
4. Collaborative Learning
5. Place-Based Learning
6. Peace Values
7. Principal's perspectives, policies and practices

The tool development on this framework took one whole year, during which mixed-methods research was conducted with public schools in Islamabad in rural and urban zones.

Stage 2: School visits and collection of field notes

Although the modules were developed after an extensive review of national and international literature, it was found after examining existing school climate and peace education instruments that there was a need for a toolkit that may include space for both qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, a field survey was conducted in rural and urban zones' elementary schools in Islamabad.

Stage 3: Item Generation Based on Peace Pedagogy Modules and Fieldnotes

Survey items were generated directly from the peace pedagogy modules and the field notes of the school survey. Each module was translated into observable and measurable statements reflecting students' and teachers' experiences within the school environment. The initial pool consisted of a broad set of items to ensure comprehensive coverage of the constructs. Each element initially included 8-10 items.

Stage 4: Expert Validation and Content Refinement

The draft instrument was reviewed by a panel of 9 experts comprising educationists, peace education specialists, and experienced school practitioners from the public sector. Five of the experts were peace educators who had successfully completed the peace educator course during the first online cohort, and four experts who had reviewed the modules of peace education. CVI was calculated for each section:

Table 1*Content Validity Index of Survey Tool*

Parameter	No of items before validation	Mean Item CVI
Physical Environment	9	0.945
Teachers' Behavior	8	0.915
Students' Behavior	10	1.000
Collaborative Learning	10	0.925
Place Based Learning	08	0.970
Peace Values	17	1.000
Head Teachers' Perspective	08	1.000

Based on the feedback of experts, ambiguous or overlapping items were revised or removed, and language was refined to ensure clarity in the local context. The final tool contains 7 items for each of the first five parameters, 15 items in the peace values section, and 10 items in the interview protocol of school heads. The following are the survey tool sections:

Table 2*Physical Environment*

S. No	Physical Environment
1.	The school has a clean and easy access (street/road)
2.	Natural elements (plants, water, grass etc.) are present inside.
3.	Stairs, corridors, furniture and learning materials are age appropriate.
4.	Learning materials and resources are accessible to use.
5.	Classroom features, such as fresh air and sunlight are apt.
6.	Flexible seating arrangements make groups or circle activities possible
7.	Peace corner or "peace place" is set up for students to calm down.

Table 3*Teachers' Behavior and Practices*

S. No	Teachers' Behavior and Practices
8.	Teachers have welcoming behavior with students.
9.	The teacher speaks softly and models non-violent communication
10.	The teacher provides equal opportunities to all without any biases (ability, gender, ethnic, linguistic, religious...)
11.	Instructions are adjusted for students with different abilities/needs.
12.	The teacher uses signals to manage the class instead of shouting
13.	Activities are engaging and exciting based on intrinsic motivation (neither reward nor punishment)
14.	The teacher listens to students' voices and encourages free speech

Table 4*Students' Social Interaction*

S. No	Teachers' Behavior and Practices
15.	Students take turns and listen respectfully
16.	Students solve small problems with help from peers or the teacher.
17.	Emotional check-ins to ensure wellbeing are part of the class.
18.	Students of different backgrounds, gender, and abilities share space
19.	Students notice when anyone needs help and respond kindly.
20.	Students use signs and non-violent communication
21.	Students smile and seem happy in school

Table 5*Collaborative Learning*

S. No	Teachers' Behavior and Practices
22.	Students work in groups of random selection or by choice
23.	Lessons connect with real-life situations and community issues.
24.	Lessons include indoor and outdoor activities
25.	Cooperative learning is being practiced with collective effort
26.	Teachers and students encourage all learners to participate
27.	Teachers and students are involved in self and peer assessment
28.	Competition is reduced and collaboration is enhanced

Table 6*Place-based Learning*

S. No	Place-based Learning
29.	Teachers plan place/community-based activity
30.	Parents are involved in planning.
31.	Teachers prepare detailed instructions
32.	Age-appropriate activities are designed
33.	Students get a chance to meet different people
34.	Reflections are recorded and analyzed
35.	Teachers and parents collaborate to enhance value building

Table 7*Practice of Peace Values*

S. No.	Peace Value	Indicators to Observe
1.	Respect	Respecting differences (religion, culture, abilities).
2.	Kindness	Show care and helpful behavior
3.	Fairness	Everyone gets an equal chance, no favoritism.
4.	Cooperation	Working together in groups, support peers
5.	Honesty	Telling truth, avoid cheating/lying.
6.	Responsibility	Care for work, materials and space
7.	Empathy	Understanding and respecting others' feelings.
8.	Forgiveness	Resolving conflicts open heartedly.
9.	Non-violence	No bullying, hitting, shouting, or hurting others.
10.	Sharing	Sharing materials and space fairly.
11.	Gratitude	Saying thank you, show appreciation.
12.	Inclusiveness	Every child is involved, no one is left out.
13.	Interdependence	Connected to seeking and giving help
14.	Care for Non-living things	Saving water and handling things with care
15.	Love for living things	Taking care of plants and other living organisms

Principal's Interview Guide

1. How do you ensure that the school's physical environment (furniture, water, sanitation, safety) is peaceful and child-friendly?
2. What measures are in place to maintain a psychosocial environment that is inclusive and non-violent?

3. Do you have clear policies for child safety, well-being, anti-bullying, and teacher well-being? How are they implemented?
4. What policies and strategies exist for teacher support and wellbeing (healthcare, stress management, professional training)?
5. How do you encourage teachers to adopt peace pedagogy approaches (cooperative learning, non-violent communication, play-based activities)?
6. How do you celebrate diversity through co-curricular activities in school?
7. How often do students participate in place-based/project-based/ community-based learning experiences outside of school?
8. What initiatives link the school with parents and community (PTA, events, local projects)?
9. How does your school engage with external organizations/NGOs for peacebuilding activities?
10. What challenges have you faced in implementing peace pedagogy? How do you address them?

Stage 5: Pilot Testing in Elementary Schools

The refined survey tool was pilot-tested in 20 public schools. The pilot aimed to assess:

- ▶ Comprehension of items by respondents
- ▶ Time required to complete the survey
- ▶ Practical feasibility of administration in school settings

80 teachers and 20 headteachers filled in the tool during piloting, and their verbal feedback was used to further improve the sequence and response options. The qualitative part of the tool was really appreciated as it enabled the field researcher to note down details in the same toolkit, which helped in analysis later on. The field researcher informed that the interview protocol not only helped in verifying the quantitative part, but also provided much more details regarding challenges and limitations of school heads.

Stage 6: Reliability Analysis

Data from the pilot study were subjected to statistical analysis for calculating the reliability of the tool. For sections 1 to section 6, two respondent teachers from each school were requested to observe and fill in the data so that inter-rater reliability may be calculated:

Table 8

Parameter	No of items	R
Physical Environment	7	0.793
Teachers' Behavior	7	0.755
Students' Behavior	7	0.702
Collaborative Learning	7	0.691
Place Based Learning	7	0.842
Peace Values	15	0.782

Qualitative data in the notes section of the toolkit and headteachers' interviews were cross-checked to analyze the internal consistency and multiple reviewers. Four responding teachers and headteachers had not seen each other's responses. Cross analysis of three sets of qualitative responses helped to triangulate and ensure internal consistency.

Conclusion

Elementary schools are considered to be the most significant place for a child after home. Children not only interact with other age fellows and students of different age groups but also interact with teachers as well as head teachers. The adults working in a school represent the society where the child is growing up. The psychosocial environment of a school, where children and their parents are welcomed and respected or otherwise, makes or breaks the value system. Students are keen observers and are influenced by direct and indirect behaviors of people around them. Not only human behaviors but also the physical features of a school influence the peaceful environment. In a peaceful school, colors, wall postings, furniture, fixtures, and the indoor and outdoor spaces of the school building provide a safe, happy, and healthy environment.

Creating a peaceful elementary school requires more than preventing conflict or maintaining discipline; it requires nurturing a culture of respect, inclusion, empathy, safety, and shared responsibility. The school environment should enable children to experience peace through everyday interactions, relationships, teaching practices, and the physical spaces in which they learn and play. Researchers find it difficult to gauge such a phenomenon; therefore, a toolkit of mixed-methods research was developed through this study that can serve not only as a school-survey instrument but also as a reflective framework for teachers, head teachers, parents, and education managers to identify strengths and areas requiring improvement. Regular use of such a framework can encourage schools to move from merely responding to conflict towards proactively cultivating peaceful relationships and environments, thereby laying a foundation for children to develop values and behaviors that contribute to a more peaceful society.

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