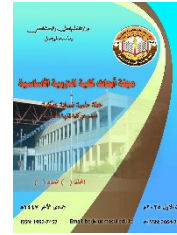




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### Primary school teachers' perception of introduction of Social Life Skills in primary schools in Iraqi Kurdistan; a comparative study

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#### Abstract

Social Life Skills (SLS) (formerly, Peace Education) is newest edition into primary school curriculum in Dohuk, Iraqi Kurdistan. This is part of an approach to tackle pervasive violence that affects most members of society, between and within different ethnic/religious groups. Since physical punishment was outlawed and a significant influx of internally displaced people arrived in area, Ministry of Education in Iraqi Kurdistan has put in place nonviolent measures to improve educational environment. These actions also shows world community and nongovernmental organizations that Kurdistan is making major efforts on its own behalf to enhance peaceful value of education. This study investigates perceptions teachers have regarding SLS. It involved teachers of all ranks, including head teachers and SLS teachers as well as those teaching other subjects, and used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. Results show significant differences in opinions of teachers of SLS compared to other fields. While SLS teachers tended to be positive about the subject, having found that it has potential for significant social, emotional and academic benefit for students, other teachers were dubious about value of this form of learning, favoring more academic subjects. Critical obstacles identified are : lack of effective teacher training, lack of ownership, autonomy and support, limited resources, and lack of alignment with existing curriculum. The paper concludes with recommendations for resolving these issues.

## تصور معلمي المدارس الابتدائية لإدخال مادة مهارات الحياة الاجتماعية (Social Life Skills) في المدارس الابتدائية في كردستان العراق؛ دراسة مقارنة

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### المستخلص

تم إدخال مهارات الحياة الاجتماعية (SLS) المعروفة سابقًا بتعليم السلام مؤخرًا في منهج المدارس الابتدائية في كردستان العراق. هذا جزء من نهج المتبع لمعالجة العنف المنتشر الذي يؤثر على معظم أفراد المجتمع، بين مختلف المجموعات العرقية/الدينية المتعايشة في كردستان العراق. منذ أن تم حظر العقوبة البدنية وتدفق عدد كبير من النازحين داخليًا إلى المنطقة، اتخذت وزارة التربية في كردستان العراق تدابير غير عنيفة لتحسين البيئة التعليمية. تُظهر هذه الإجراءات أيضًا للمجتمع الدولي والمنظمات غير الحكومية أن كردستان تبذل جهودًا كبيرة من جانبها لتعزيز القيمة السلمية للتعليم. تبحث هذه الدراسة في معرفة تصورات المعلمين بشأن ادخال مادة المهارات الحياة الاجتماعية ضمن مناهج التعليم الاساسي، وشمل ذلك المعلمين من مختلف الاختصاصات والرتب في المدارس بما فيهم معلمي مادة مهارات الحياة الاجتماعية ومعلمي الذين يدرسون المواد الاخرى والادارة المدرسية، واستخدم البحث المهج الكمي والنوعي والتي شملت الاستطلاعات والمقابلات ومناقشات المجموعات البؤرية. تُظهر نتائج الدراسة اختلافات كبيرة في آراء معلمي مادة المهارات الاجتماعية مقارنة بمعلمي المواد الأخرى. بينما كان معلمو مادة مهارات الحياة الاجتماعية يميلون إلى الإيجابية تجاه الموضوع، حيث وجدوا أنه يحمل إمكانيات كبيرة لفائدة الاجتماعية والعاطفية والأكاديمية للطلاب، بينما كان آراء المعلمون الآخرون مختلفا متشككين في قيمة هذا النوع من التعلم، مفضلين المواد الأكاديمية التقليدية. العقبات الرئيسية المحددة هي نقص التدريب الفعال للمعلمين، نقص الملكية المحلية، الاستقلالية والدعم، قيود الموارد، ونقص التوافق مع المنهج الحالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات الحياة الاجتماعية، تعليم السلام، كردستان العراق، المدارس الابتدائية.

## 1. Introduction

Over recent generations, violence and learning violent ways have become a cultural way of life, and there are multiple symptoms indicating that Iraqi Kurdistan society has a pro-violence rather than pro-peacebuilding culture. Whether part of the host community or internally displaced, people have been exposed to systematic injustices and inequality from the Iraqi government since the inception of Iraq's independent states. Significantly, they have experienced enforced exodus, destruction of their houses, and the use of chemical weapons in 1988; all of which has led to a pervasively more violent society.

Violence against women in Iraq is widespread; cultural traditions make violence a tool of child-rearing. Moreover, it is a largely militarized society, evident in the presence of numerous peshmerga, great amounts of money spent on military warfare, favoritism towards those in military positions, and a plethora of high-paying jobs offered to people within military sectors. Moreover, as Zizek (2008) claims, violence is not just active: passivity can also be a form of violence, while actualized violence has become so normalized through media representation that its passive consumption can be considered a form of represented violence.

Despite recent advancements, the region continues to face challenges, including economic instability, political tensions, and the threat of terrorism; therefore, Kurds need to be prepared to be resilient in difficult circumstances. Peace education can help individuals and communities develop resilience to cope with past and present challenges. Consequently, one method of preventing conflict-relapse and transforming violent conflict into sustainable peace is by reforming the education system. Kurdish governments and international NGOs have responded by introducing peace education and promoting safe school environments.

Since its education system gained independence, Iraqi Kurdistan has made significant improvements in its educational environment. Pro-Baath content and values have been removed from the curriculum. Corporal punishment has been banned in schools. Minorities are now allowed to study in their own languages, and numerous schools for Christians and Yezidis have opened. Moreover, Peace Education has been introduced for all years of primary school: Human Rights Education (HRE) was piloted in 2007 before being extended to all years. In 2023, HRE was replaced by Social Life Skills (SLS).

While peace education is often associated with war-torn regions, its importance extends beyond these contexts and has been carried out in numerous countries, in both formal and non-formal institutions (Harber & Sakade, 2009). It can help individuals and communities deal with violence, promote reconciliation, and address the root causes of conflict. In settings where violence is generalized peace education undoubtedly has a significant role (McGlynn et al., 2009) because it can address the underlying causes of conflict, such as inequality, injustice, and discrimination. As Galtung asserts, in the search for peace, “there are tasks for everybody.” (Galtung 1980: 396) Thus, students develop respect and empathy because the training promotes the values of understanding and tolerance – it bridges divisions and leads to social cohesiveness.

Interestingly, the United Nations recognized the importance of peace education in 1994 and 1995, asserting that it is crucial for children to develop understanding, solidarity, compassion, and tolerance. It involves teaching knowledge, values, attitudes and skills that promote peace and nonviolence (UNESCO, 2017). Consequently, the establishment of new peace education courses worldwide is currently popular.

### ***The importance of researching the introduction of Social Life Skills in Iraqi Kurdistan***

As the first assessment of peace education in primary schools in Iraqi Kurdistan, this study represents a pioneering effort to evaluate its effectiveness. Understanding teachers' perceptions – especially those of SLS teachers – provides valuable insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of implementing this crucial subject for several reasons:

- a) Improving teacher engagement: By understanding the factors influencing teacher attitudes, this study seeks to enhance teacher engagement and, consequently, improve the implementation of SLS in classrooms. In giving a voice to teachers, the research empowers them to participate in the decision-making process and to contribute to improving the education system. Most teachers were happy to give their opinions, as one said, "this is the first time that someone has asked my opinion regarding teaching in school.”
- b) Identifying implementation challenges and opportunities: By examining the practical challenges teachers face, the study can pinpoint areas where additional support, training, and resources are needed. Moreover, it can

uncover potential opportunities for enhancing the curriculum and pedagogical approaches to maximize the impact of peace education.

- c) Informing policy and practice: This research's findings can inform Iraqi Kurdistan's evidence-based policy decisions and curriculum development. By understanding the factors that contribute to successful implementation, policymakers can make informed choices that promote the effective integration of peace education into the educational system.
- d) Promoting peace and social cohesion: Peace education fosters peaceful societies. By equipping young learners with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for conflict resolution, empathy, and critical thinking, peace education can contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive future for Iraqi Kurdistan.
- e) Supporting development of strategies for promoting peacebuilding through education.
- f) Lastly, it will contribute to the broader understanding of peace education's impact in different cultural and political contexts, enriching the global discourse on peacebuilding.

Investigating peace education in Iraqi Kurdistan schools is particularly relevant due to the region's complex history and ongoing challenges. The region has experienced significant conflict and social upheaval, making it a very useful context for exploring the potential of peace education to promote social harmony, tolerance, and democratic values. By studying the perceptions and experiences of teachers in this specific context, the research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence the effectiveness of peace education in post-conflict settings. Additionally, the findings can inform targeted interventions to enhance the quality of peace education and its impact on students' lives.

### ***Research Problem Statement***

Despite implementing peace education in Iraqi Kurdistan's primary schools since 2007, many teachers still lack understanding of the subject's importance and fail to engage with it constructively or to use effective teaching strategies. This research aims to identify what impedes teachers' lack of engagement.

After providing an outline of peace education, the article presents the aims and methods of the research, followed by the findings. I then discuss the benefits and challenges, including specific challenges in implementation, before concluding with a summary and recommendations.

## 2. Peace Education

### *Peace Education Definition*

Peace and education are abstract concepts that do not have absolute and concrete meanings. While this makes them difficult to define (Haavelsrud, 2008), Salomon (2002) warns that "without clarity in conceptualizations of peace education and the functions it is supposed to fill, no theoretic or practical advancement will be possible." (p. 3). This section seeks to give some clarity to the concept of peace education and the discussions surrounding it, before presenting the results and discussion of the research.

According to UNICEF, peace education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to enable behavioral change that will make children, youth and adults more capable of preventing conflict and violence, whether overt or structural resolving conflict peacefully and creating the conditions that foster peace at both an intrapersonal (between people), interpersonal (between groups) level as well as a national or international one (Fountain, 1999, p. 1). More simply put, peace education is a package of educational and planning, pedagogical, and pragmatic policies that can equip students with the competencies needed to develop values that favor holistic peace (Bajaj, 2008).

Harris (2004, p. 6) gives five postulates for peace education: 1) it clarifies the sources of violence; 2) it provides alternatives to violence; 3) it adapts to include various types of violence; 4) peace is about context; 5) conflicts are omnipresent. According to UNESCO (2017), the principles of effective peace education deal with cooperation, experiential learning, contextualized analysis and transformative values. These principles form a democratic learning environment that brings together diverse perspectives to help contribute towards peace and reconciliation.

Meanwhile, Reardon (1988) insists on the need for formal holistic peace education at all levels and in all fields of study. She asserts that peace education needs to have a formal structure supporting a holistic approach that enables exploration of different political, social, ecological, and ethical perspectives, rather than simply attempting to prevent war. Moreover, she believes it should be integrated throughout all stages of education and in arts and sciences as well as

social sciences. It needs to focus on the causes of violence and learning effective strategies for peace.

Similarly, according to Harris and Morrison (2003), peace education is a philosophy and process. Peace education encompasses a wide endowment of both horizontal and vertical approaches. The latter includes the philosophical dimension of teaching nonviolence, love, compassion and reverence for all life (p. 11). Taking all these viewpoints into account, for the purposes of this article, peace education is considered a process whose objectives are to produce a society in which conflicts are resolved peacefully and sustainably.

### ***Education and peacebuilding***

Whether within or outside school, education plays a crucial role in peacebuilding, particularly in post-conflict societies. Ellison (2012) argues that education can contribute to peacebuilding in several ways:

- a) ***Reintegration and Skills Development:*** Education, particularly skills training, helps former combatants reintegrate into society. It provides them with the necessary tools to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their communities (Khan et al., 2020).
- b) ***Normalization and Development:*** Education helps children and young people re-establish a sense of normalcy in post-conflict environments. It promotes their cognitive, psychological, and emotional development. Education also symbolizes a functioning system and state-building efforts.
- c) ***Social Transformation:*** Education teaches essential values like decency, morality, proper conduct, and communication. These values are transmitted from generation to generation, fostering coexistence and promoting peace among future generations (Byrne et al., 2019). On the other hand, education can have a negative impact, promote extreme ideology, lead to political indoctrination, generate inequality, and transmit negative stereotypes and discrimination (Bush & Saterelli, 2000).

Schools can play a crucial role in fostering peaceful relationships between individuals and with nature by adopting a constructivist approach to peace education. As Bretherton et al. (2003) argue, schools can be powerful spaces for

building new meanings of peace and exploring intercultural notions of needs, capacities, and positive coexistence.

### ***Approaches to Peace Education***

#### *Within School Approach*

Peace education is a lifelong process of learning. It can be installed formally in schools and informally in families and communities. This within-school approach focuses on the positive impact of the school environment, curriculum development, pre-service and in-service teacher education. It considers the best way of exhibiting effective conflict resolution behavior is through the showcased school environment. Teachers, administration and peers can act as models of positive relationships, demonstrating respectful communication, problem-solving skills, and de-escalation techniques (Bald & Furness, 1998). In some countries, peace education aims to make institutions become microcosms of a more peaceful and just society; this enables the messages of the curriculum and the school environment to be in alignment.

Three main approaches are used in formal education systems, which may be implemented by governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and there are also combinations of these termed integrative approaches (Carson & Lange, 2004, p. 3). The main three are: as a separate subject in the curriculum<sup>1</sup> this is the approach in Iraqi Kurdistan; as a subject spread across the curriculum;<sup>2</sup> or as a whole school approach.<sup>3</sup> This last is similar to the Sabona approach, which was introduced in Norway by Galtung and involves a preventive approach to peace education called *conflict hygiene*.<sup>4</sup> This approach

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Galtung (1996), Bar-Tal (2000), Harris (2004).

<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Reardon (1988), Haavelsrud (1993), Brock-Utne (1995), and Danesh (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Some schools, such as Montessori and Waldorf schools, as well as those that follow other progressive, holistic, or social justice approaches, teach nonviolent and caring behaviors as core goals (Eisler and Miller 2004, p. 11).

<sup>4</sup> Galtung uses the concept of conflict hygiene as an analogy to health studies. He uses the term because of its importance as a remedy to cure social illnesses like inequality, violence, and injustice. He adopted this approach, believing that more work has been done on the diagnosis and prognosis than on therapy (Galtung, 1996). So Galtung suggests paying more attention to preventative therapy and *conflict hygiene* to enable the society-organism to handle all patho/bellogens at early stages (Galtung 2007, p. 15)

has been generally successful and introduced to places such as Austria. Embracing all three approaches is preferred over championing one specific approach (Bretherton et al., 2003, p. 15).

There are also three practical strategies that may be used in implementation:

i. Curriculum development.

One way to improve the quality of education in post-conflict societies is to develop a curriculum that purifies schools' curricula from values of war and violence. This is the first and easiest step that many post-conflict societies undertake.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, this process started after the independence of the Ministry of Education from the Iraqi government in 1991. Since then, there has been a chain of changes in the education curriculum. Different curricula were introduced: human rights, democracy, genocide, and civic education. Currently, SLS is taught throughout the primary stages.

ii. Pre-Service Teacher Education

This training is supposed to be given before the teachers start teaching and is a common practice in many countries. Training can include strengthening the skills needed in interactive and participatory teaching methods, organizing cooperative groupwork, and facilitating group discussions. Pre-training is important, especially for novice teachers, to convey values of cooperation, respect for the opinions of the child, and appreciation of differences. However, based on teachers' interviews, the only pre-service training is the regular teaching and training those teachers receive on their university bachelor's degree.

iii. In-Service Teacher Education

This is conducted when the school year commences. This is more common in Iraqi Kurdistan. The interviewees' teachers explained that in-service training happens in the summer vacation almost every year. Some of these trainings are voluntary; some are conducted and supported by NGOs, and others are conducted by the directorate of training.

### *Outside Schools Approach*

There are also training activities for teachers outside school, generally programs for teachers' training workshops during the summer break. These are based on learning activities offered by public institutions and NGOs, and also termed 'additive'. Peace educators in Afghanistan, for example, published storybooks for children, designed posters and distributed T-shirts with peace messages (Fisher 2000, p. 146). This approach tends to involve fewer restrictions imposed by governments and so takes less time to implement (Ardizzone 2001).

## **3. Materials and Methods**

### *Aims of the Research*

The overall aim of the research was to understand obstacles to implementation arising from teachers' perceptions of SLS. Primarily, this involved gaining a rounded understanding of how the subject is perceived within the primary education system. Therefore, the research used a comparative design, studying the opinions of a range of educators to provide a broad perspective while gaining a deeper understanding by specifically focusing on the experience of SLS educators.

### *Data Collection*

The study used a mixed-methods research design, including questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions.

**Questionnaires:** Online questionnaires were distributed through email and social media; in addition, manual questionnaires were given to participants. A formal questionnaire was designed using Google Forms to record numerical data from a broader diversity sample of respondents comprising Heads (Principals) [18], Head assistants [22], other subject teachers [88] and SLS teachers [77].

**Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were held with a wide range of participants, including SLS teachers (7), headteachers (5), assistant headteachers (8), and other subject teachers (13). The interviews examined participants' understanding of SLS, experiences with the curriculum, and implementation difficulties.

**Classroom observations:** Data was also collected through notes taken during classroom observation. These included information about teaching practices, lesson planning materials, and assessment strategies. The observer also examined the learning environment, student engagement, and resources.

**Focus group discussions:** The data collected in the questionnaires, interviews and observations were presented back to participants and discussed in groups. This allowed for reflection, dialogue, and planning around ways to overcome perceived challenges in implementing SLS education.

### *Data Analysis*

**Quantitative Data:** The statistical software (SPSS) used to analyze quantitative data from the questionnaires.

**Qualitative data:** Data from interviews, observations, and focus group discussions were thematically analyzed for key themes/insights.

Mixing these techniques provided an overall understanding of perceptions, difficulties and possibilities associated with SLS education.

## **5. Results**

Despite a wide range of responses, two consistent but divergent narratives became clear throughout both groups: on the one hand, opposition and lack of enthusiasm for the introduction of peace education on the part of headteachers, assistant heads and other subject teachers and, on the other, significantly more positivity from SLS teachers. The only issue on which there was general agreement was that there were insufficient resources for teaching SLS. There were no significant differences according to gender.

**Table 1: Results of the questionnaires**

	Statement	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
2	I feel confident and adequately prepared to teach SLS					
	Teachers of SLS	2%	4.1%	9.9%	40%	44%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	40.4%	25.6%	9%	10%	15%
3	Teaching social values is a rewarding and enjoyable experience?					
	Teachers of SLS	3%	5%	6.8%	35.2%	50%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	45.8%	9.2%	25%	5.9%	14.1%
4	Are there sufficient resources and support available for teaching SLS?					
	Teachers of SLS	40.4%	47%	7.6%	2%	3%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	45%	27%	8.3%	9.7%	10%
5	I believe that a social values course can change students' behavior and perspective.					
	Teachers of SLS	3%	3.8%	10%	45.2%	38%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	33%	40%	5%	10%	12%
6	I believe SLS can change students' attitudes.					
	Teachers of SLS	4%	7.1%	12%	45%	31.9%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	30%	35%	5%	10%	20%
7	Introducing SLS as a subject is a positive development in primary schools					
	Teachers of SLS	4%	9%	16%	41%	30%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	30%	30%	25%	8%	7%
8	The content of the SLS curriculum is suitable for the age of elementary school students?					
	Teachers of SLS	4%	5.7%	10%	47.3%	33%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	35%	40%	15%	5%	5%

9	The Ministry of Education is right to mandate the teaching of social values					
	Teachers of SLS	2%	5%	10%	50%	33%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	40%	40%	5.9%	4.1%	10%
10	I believe that social values add value to primary school curricula					
	Teachers of SLS	4%	6%	12%	48%	30%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	45%	35%	5%	10%	5%
11	I would like to know more about the SLS curriculum.					
	Teachers of SLS	3%	7%	15%	45%	30%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	45%	27%	16%	8%	2%
12	I believe that the social values subject needs more attention and time allocated to it in the curriculum.					
	Teachers of SLS	5%	5%	10%	50%	30%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	40%	35%	15%	5%	5%
14	I believe that students need to be allocated more hours for science subjects instead of social values?					
	Teachers of SLS	3%	4%	6%	40%	47%
	Heads, assistants, teachers of other subjects	15%	3%	12%	30%	40%

### ***Findings from all data: interviews, observations, focus group discussions and questionnaires***

Regarding the overall benefits of SLS education, there was a major difference in perception of the participants. A large majority (84%) of SLS teachers reported multiple benefits: improved student behavior, greater social cohesion in schools, increased tolerance and better relations between students. However, 83% of heads, assistants and other subject teachers thought that SLS education had no benefit. Much of this skepticism may arise from lack of knowledge about the subject's aims and objectives and/or a perceived failure to deliver concrete, testable outcomes. In focus groups interviews they gave explanations such as

*“we don't know yet,” “assessment will tell us,” “nobody knows,” and “we still have students making trouble.”*

### ***Resistance***

There was some resistance to SLS with some fundamental stakeholders appearing to discount it. As one headteacher put it: *“Quite frankly Social Life Skills is not a priority; It's a neglected hustler amongst the other subjects and examinations to preoccupy yourself with. Also, there is no real testing, so it holds no weight.”* This absence of testing results meant that the subject often ended up near the bottom of most headteachers' and schools' priorities. Meanwhile, the SLS teachers and students believed the subjects effectiveness is certainly reflected when it comes to socializing. As one informant stated, *“this is the kind of subject I like to teach because it has a low stress level. No exams, no heavy marking.”*

### ***Teachers' Experience***

#### *Positive Impact on Teachers*

Teachers who had received in-service training in SLS or peace education methodologies, such as methods of teaching, critical thinking, learning through games and stories, cooperative learning, and human rights education, tended to have positive attitudes towards peace education curricula.<sup>5</sup> Through training, teachers become aware of the importance of peace education.

#### *Training*

Many teachers felt they were not properly trained in SLS. A minority (19.5%) of SLS teachers had received short 3-hour training while 82% of the teachers of other subjects had no in-service training regarding SLS. Meanwhile, neither the heads nor assistant heads had no training regarding SLS.

The interviews with teachers and education officials highlighted the lack of trained human resources to deliver SLS. One interviewee who had been on a training course described their experience: *“I really enjoy teaching this unit. It's*

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<sup>5</sup> According to interviewed teachers, trainers did not call peace education training by the specific name, some alternatives were 'in-service training on new methods of teacher training,' and 'democratic training.'

*nice and easy-going. No exams, no heavy marking. So, maybe I should say — or not to the public at least — that right now I feel pretty unready. The amount of training we get is small: I am not always confident I'll give a great lesson." Another said: "Frankly, I almost always feel ill-prepared. That training consists of about one workshop I took a few years ago, and I don't always feel confident in my capacity to teach a fun class."*

Many SLS teachers indicated they were attracted to the relative ease of the subject (there is little planning, assessment and marking for it). However, one of the reasons for the decline in quality of teaching and learning is because there are no rigorous expectations. Thus, this provides clear evidence for the need to implement systematic teacher training programs in order to assist educators in teaching SLS.

#### *Teacher confidence*

Regarding how confident they feel teaching SLS, 84% of SLS teachers strongly/somewhat agreed that they are confident in teaching the subject. One explained: *"I feel prepared to teach SLS. This subject is aligned with my passion for teaching students some of the most important skills in their lives. I feel that my training, coupled with experience, has prepared me to teach exciting and efficient lessons."*

However, the perceptions of other educators were different. More than 65% of these teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. A headteacher explained: *"SLS is a wonderful subject, but I'm not sure how prepared our teachers are to teach the content. This is not exactly like any class you'd take in school. Maybe a little more training wouldn't hurt."* This indicates that teachers engaged in the actual teaching of SLS feel relatively confident about their competencies, which may be because of previous experience or simply an interest in the subject.

#### *Individual Worldviews*

Teachers who hold personal beliefs that align with the goals of peace education, such as equality, justice, and nonviolence, are more likely to have positive attitudes towards the curricula. As one interviewee said: *"Many teachers argued*

*that it depends a lot on the teacher personality, teachers who believe in democracy and new teaching methodology not the traditional and banking education will love the subject and want to teach it.”* On the other hand, some teachers argued that *“teachers who don’t want responsibility and who want to take an easy subject, they take the subject as it does not have an education supervisor.”*

### *Eager to Learn More*

Of the SLS teachers, 75% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they would like to learn more about the curriculum. One informant says, *“I just want to know more about the SLS curriculum. The more I know, the better I will be to help my students gain access to life skills.”* It indicates that SLS teachers are keen on furthering their understanding and ability around the content of the curriculum. They may need more targeted support designed to advance their professional growth or seek new methods of teaching. But amongst heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects, a different picture emerges. More than seven in ten thought otherwise as they either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. One head said *“I would not provide additional training on SLS. Our teachers appear to be handling it pretty well. We have bigger fish to fry, such as state test scores.”* Heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects have less agreement on the statements, suggesting they are not very interested or curious in relation to the SLS curriculum. This might be due to the lack of appreciation regarding why this subject matters, a sense that it is irrelevant to their work, or simply a sense of lack of time and resources.

### **Teaching basis**

#### *Teaching Philosophy*

Teachers who have the philosophy of student-centered teaching that use critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration are more likely to be open to incorporating peace education into their classrooms. As one female teachers *“as you explain peace education principles, I use it without calling it the name of peace education, we call it collaborative education, since I use teamwork, my philosophy is student-centered.”*

*Teaching is enjoyable and rewarding*

Regarding how much they enjoy teaching the SLS, along with perceptions on the introduction of the subject, almost 86% of SLS teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that delivering social values is a rewarding and fun activity. A teacher mentioned *"I love social education. Rewarding learning to see students with empathy, kindness and respect."* But the same cannot be said for heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects. More than 55% of these educators disagree or strongly disagree with that statement. One headteacher said, *"Of course, social values are critically important, but I'm not sure that our teachers are well qualified to deliver them. And how do you balance academic rigor with character development?"*

These findings imply that SLS teachers find it rewarding and enjoyable in itself which is seen as a positive by the teachers engaged with it. For one reason or another, they might be passionate about social values for the good of students and appreciate that there is still sociability to foster good character. Lower levels of endorsement among heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects suggest the subjective experience that teaching social values may be less rewarding or pleasurable. This may be due to things such as not having been trained on how to implement it, perhaps they do not feel that the subject matters or favor a focus on more traditional academic subjects.

*Age Appropriate*

The majority (80.3%) of SLS teachers agreed/strongly agreed that the curriculum is appropriate for primary school students. One stated: *"The SLS curriculum is perfect for our elementary age students. It explores everything from empathy and communication to problem-solving and decision-making. The activities are fun and suitable for the age group, and I can see my students flourishing socially and emotionally."* However, a very different picture emerged among heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects. More than eight in ten of these teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A headteacher, who wished to remain anonymous, said, *"Although SLS is well intentioned in principle, I am not sure that this curriculum is effective. It's not relevant enough for our students and feels too abstract. We need one that is closer to their ground."*

This implies that teachers who are directly involved with teaching SLS have found the curriculum to be focused on what is appropriate for elementary school students and based on how to encourage them to grow and develop. Reasons contributing to this insight could be that the learning content was relevant, or sourcing activities were interesting, or it suited students' interests. Meanwhile, other teachers felt the curriculum was inappropriate for primary school students. A number of reasons could be possible, from not having received the curriculum to concerns that it is just 'fluff' and/or a belief that such skills can be picked up outside of structured learning.

### *Attitudes to the Government Mandate*

There is a continual gap between SLS teachers and other educators about the mandate of Ministry of Education regarding teaching social values with 83% of SLS teachers agreeing/strongly agreeing with the Ministry's mandate. This indicates that they feel the mandate is fair and needs to exist. One SLS teacher said: *"The Ministry's directive to teach values is spot on. Our students need to learn empathy, respect, and responsibility. These skills are critical to their future."* On the other hand, 80% of heads, assistants and teachers in other subjects either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the requirement. This indicates something like a cynicism, maybe an antagonism toward teaching social values. One headteacher said: *"I see the great importance in social values, but I'm not sure if it's the most effective use of classroom time. Our curriculum is full, and adding additional subjects would have teachers pulling their hair out or sink young people under the water."*

In keeping with the findings above, a majority (78%) of SLS teachers believe that social values bring value to the curriculum. This exemplifies the view they have that these values contribute to character building and life preparation of students. *"Social values are part of a complete education,"* said one teacher. *"It aids the students in forming a strong moral code and form good connections. As educators, we need to teach these values to our students."* But 80% of heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects disagreed or strongly disagreed that social values add value to the curriculum. One science teacher argued, *"I value social values too but I believe they should be taught in home or through other*

*activity not at school. School is for teaching subjects like math or science.”* This suggests that either the value of education in social values is unknown, or academic subjects take precedence over it.

### ***Resources***

Regarding access to appropriate resources, all the teachers had similar perceptions. For example, a high number (87.4%) of SLS teachers disagreed (strongly or slightly) with the statement that there are adequate resources and support available for teaching SLS. They also discussed the challenges they face due to structural factors like small classroom sizes that limit activities and overcrowded classrooms where students may have little time for more than one subject or topic in a day. The lack of information available outside any school resources that teachers needed while struggling to develop skill-learning programs without expert guidance to refer when necessary. As one SLS teacher expressed it, *“Of course, it is very frustrating – we just do not have the space to facilitate these activities which are critical for teaching SLS. No, the classrooms are small and in such large cohorts of attendees it is difficult to engage all of them. We require additional time and more effective tools to have the desired impact.”* Three quarters (72%) of heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects disagreed that resources and training for teaching SLS are sufficient. One headteacher said: *“I recognize the need for SLS but sadly our school's emphasis has been on academic achievement. On the contrary, SLS do not seem to receive this level of hype, which is why they are often overlooked in terms of resource allocation.”* This suggests that the leadership and teachers of other subjects are partly responsible for the lack of support for SLS teachers and a good teaching environment for the subject.

Many teachers lack teacher training on how to teach SLS as the subject is not studied at university, and schools have a heavy timetable, especially schools that have three shifts. In addition, schools lack quality material like a teachers' manual support material that can help teachers feel confident and be prepared to implement peace education. As one headteacher said, *“many teachers feel reluctant to teach the subject as they don't have any idea about the subject, its new to all, teachers want to teach their subject of study.”*

### *Time Allocations*

While other educators thought that social value skills already had enough time compared to other subjects, 70% of SLS teachers said there should be more time dedicated to social values. This shows that they value the subject and believe it needs to stay for their students. For instance, one teacher stated "*I feel that Social Values is equally as important as any subject. It instills important life skills in students, such as empathy, respect, and problem-solving. This is something that we need to provide greater emphasis on for our students and ensure that they become well-rounded individuals.*" But a vast majority (75%) of the heads, assistants and teachers from other subjects do not agree/strongly disagree with that more time is needed for Social Values. One headteacher said "*we have to focus on the basics, such as math and science. Those subjects are important parts of students' education and future jobs. That implies the importance of academic subjects is higher than social and emotional learning.*"

When it comes to more time allocated specifically for science subjects against SLS, a majority (70%) of heads/assistants, and other subject teachers agree or strongly agree on allocating more time for the expertise in the science subjects. One head said "*Science is for the future. We have to spend more time on the science subjects if we want to encourage out future scientists and engineers.*" This indicates some priority on science education. However, only 47% of SLS teachers agree or strongly agree that there needs to be more time for science while a nearly as many (46%) disagree or are neutral. A female informant commented "*We don't only need science, we also need things like Social Values. A comprehensive education can include academic and social-emotional learning as well. We have to be a bit of both.*" In sum, this points to a balanced view of both science education and social values education.

### *Changes in Behavior*

Regarding noticeable changes, the behavior of students, from their direct experience, most SLS teachers (83.2%) strongly agree that learning SLS improved students' behavior of students: they found that studying social values brought about positive change in students. According to one teacher, "*I really think that social values subject helps change the attitudes of students. In my own*

*classroom, I witness this daily as students start to contemplate their behavior and character through the lessons. It's not all about teaching them facts, but shaping their character and exposing them to various world views."* This reflects high trust in the ability of these courses to influence students positively.

On the other hand, heads, assistants, and teachers of other subjects were less positive with 73% believing that SLS cannot change the behaviors and perspectives of students. One head assistant commented "*I can recognize the merits of teaching students social values in the classroom, but I'm not sure it impacts how they behave very much. Although this may aid some kids, most are influenced by other issues—their family, peer groups and life experience.*"

#### *Attitude Changes*

Regarding attitudes change, 76.9% of SLS teachers believed that the subject plays an important role in shaping student attitudes positively. Such optimism is likely born of direct firsthand contact with students and the adoption of SLS programs. According to one teacher, "*SLS doesn't simply tell them how to act, it transforms how they view themselves and the world.*" Although SLS is able to change attitudes, heads, assistants and teachers from other subjects (65%) were doubtful. One headteacher said, "*I'm sure SLS matters (too), but I'm not sure if those actually get through to students.*" This view suggests that some do not fully understand or appreciate the effect SLS can have on student behavior and beliefs.

#### *Positive Development of Implementation*

There is a substantial gap in perceptions for the implementation of SLS as an independent subject. Approximately 71% of SLS teachers regard the introduction of the subject as a progressive step. This positive outlook will have come from their firsthand experience with students and the use of SLS programs. One SLS educator emphasized the immediate impact on students: "*I see the benefits of teaching communication, empathy, and conflict resolution first-hand.*" However, the majority (60 %) of heads, assistants and teachers of other subjects were skeptical about SLS being exposed for use. One math teacher reasoned, "*I am still not convinced. Aren't these things that we should learn at home casually and through extracurricular activities?*" This quote reflects a widespread but false belief that these skills can be obtained haphazardly.

## 6. Discussion

### *The importance of cultural relevance*

A curriculum that is culturally relevant to Iraqi Kurdistan can significantly enhance student engagement, academic achievement, and overall well-being. By incorporating the unique experiences, history, and traditions of the region, educators can create a more meaningful and inclusive learning environment.

Awareness of the potential of SLS to achieve this varies among teachers: those who had in-service training on topics related to peace education argued that SLS topics are relevant to the cultural norms of the society. They felt the ideas presented are not something new but have similarities the cultural tradition of the society. One teacher said, “I compare what is mentioned to our cultural norms and I tell students to brainstorm.” Another explained, “I understood in training that we must give students time to reflect and make it relevant to our culture.” Hence, these teachers connect the content of the curriculum to the students’ experiences and life so it reflects the diverse perspective of Kurdish students.

On the other hand, several teachers of other subjects felt it was at odds with local culture. For instance, one argued that “*this is not close to our cultural tradition, it ruins our cultural tradition, it is western ideas, the West wants to implement it into our culture to destroy our culture.*” However, SLS has been designed specifically within Iraqi Kurdistan to relate to our culture and issues, in particular to more recent issues that have resulted from imposed institutions, like the previous Baath government policies. However, it is mainly only SLS teachers who seemed to be aware of this, making research like this especially important.

### *Student engagement*

When students see their culture reflected and presented in the curriculum, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated in learning in a number of ways:

- i. **Academic achievement:** when the curriculum is culturally relevant it can help students develop an understanding of the subject matter and improve their critical thinking skills.

- ii. **Cultural identity:** when students learn about their own culture and history, this can develop a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging.
- iii. **Learning flexibility:** Many teachers argue that students like SLS since it puts no pressure on students as it is easy to pass. While teachers of other subjects felt this was a weakness, it meant that students rarely drop out. Moreover, as most of it depends on the students' participation, they learn valuable lessons in cooperation and understanding other points of view.

#### *Subject-Matter Expertise*

Including teachers of other subjects would be very beneficial to ensuring SLS is more culturally sensitive. Teachers who are experts in subjects like history, geography, or social studies are better equipped to integrate peace education concepts into their lessons, especially if they can connect these concepts to relevant historical events or current issues. This was demonstrated in the interviews, informal conversations and observations. However, math and science teachers asserted that the Ministry must give more importance to science than SLS, and the lessons currently dedicated to SLS should be given to science and math.

#### *Challenges in Implementation*

There are many challenges at different levels: practical, resistance to and lack of understanding of new ways, the sensitivity of the subject matter, and the effects of traumatic violent experiences. On the practical front, the main challenge articulated by most SLS teachers (76%) was the scarcity of specialists and subject teachers. This indicates that more teacher training and support is needed. However, less than 15% of SLS teachers reported time constraints as an issue, especially with the weekend holiday. Fully 93% of heads, assistants and other teachers felt that SLS is less important than other subjects, suggesting that they felt academic accomplishment and standardized tests should dominate the conversation.

Several further factors that contribute to influencing teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding SLS subjects were identified:

***Peace education involves sensitive subject matter***

Since it is an approach which is often seen as challenging the political, social/economic, and cultural status quo of a society, peace education — in terms of methodology (how children are taught) and content (what children learn) — has come under fire from opponents. Possibly this *perceived* intrinsic opposition to accepted norms is a reason why peace education has not been prominent in the study and practice of many states in the Middle East. However, while content and methodology may be new, this does not mean it is in opposition to tradition.

Therefore, teachers need to learn how best to navigate these sensitive issues and reflect their cultural relevance. This can be a complex task not least because they are dealing with preconceived ideas and expectations; so, if teachers are not well prepared, classroom discussions may quickly get out of control and or *be seen* to get out of control.

***Lack of balanced perspectives***

As the Kurdish community includes a range of cultural/religious groups with different beliefs, it is crucial to balance the perspectives of various cultural groups within the Kurdish community to avoid promoting stereotypes or biases. Many schools fall short in providing equal representation, as evidenced by separate schools for Yezidi and Christian students. Even in diversity schools, there is often a lack of representation from different ethnic groups. When implementing SLS, this can mean more work in ensuring all groups are included although, at the same time, it implies a greater need for the subject to provide students with understanding of different viewpoints that is essential to a harmonious society.

***Traditional values***

Teachers who adhere to traditional values that emphasize obedience, authority, and hierarchy may need support in integrating peace education concepts that promote equality, cooperation, and critical thinking. Peace education is new in Iraqi Kurdistan and, while it does not promote disobedience or lack of respect for authority, it does involve students taking more responsibility for their actions and behavior. Although corporal punishment is forbidden, many people still believe in the Arabic saying, “The stick is for those who disobey”; assuming that attitude

and behavior of children can be changed forcibly. Peace education can provide a less violent way, thus teaching children that there are other ways – although it does not preclude using force if more responsible methods fail.

### ***Historical Trauma***

In general, Kurds have faced a lot of violence and conflict throughout history. They have experienced displacement, movement from villages to cities due to the demolition of their houses and the invasion of Turkey to fight the PKK. This continual suffering has created a situation of despair, lack of hope or perception that things could be otherwise. Indeed, Kurds have a saying, "Kurds have no friends except mountains." This indicates that Kurds need to be self-reliant and resilient to circumstances that might be worse; they have only themselves. Hence, peace education in schools helps them realize how they can be more resilient through cooperation. Teachers who have experienced or witnessed conflict, violence, or displacement may have a deep understanding of the importance of peace education but may also face particular challenges in implementing it due to personal trauma.

## **7. Conclusion**

Given Iraqi Kurdistan's history of conflict, violence, and cultural diversity, peace education is particularly important. It can help address the deep-rooted trauma and divisions within the region, promote understanding and tolerance among different groups, and build a more peaceful and just society. By fostering resilience, critical thinking, and conflict resolution skills, peace education can empower young people to become agents of change and contribute to a more positive future for Iraqi Kurdistan.

The study findings indicate considerable differences between different stakeholders concerning the importance of the subject. Most SLS teachers view the subject favorably and believe it has the most potential benefit for students in terms of social, emotional, and academic growth. However, skepticism is rife as school leaders and teachers of other subjects have strong resistance to introducing SLS as an academic subject. Consequently, there also needs to be

better understanding about SLS throughout the school system, especially on the part of teachers of other subjects, who generally had little knowledge as to what was involved. Moreover, fostering collaborative partnerships, possibly partnering SLS teachers with other subject teachers and school leaders could be very beneficial, sharing best practices and addressing common challenges. This would not only ensure SLS was more relevant to the other subjects, but also teachers of other subjects would have a clearer idea of what is involved and why. Indeed, if teachers of subjects like history, geography, and social studies can integrate peace education concepts into their lessons, students can connect what they learn in SLS to relevant historical events or current issues.

Most significant is that the research found that the reluctance of teachers of other subjects is a consequence of lack of autonomy and perceived Western influence in curriculum implementation, lack of teacher involvement, inadequate training, and a general lack of support from the Ministry of Education. For SLS to be accepted and to have a positive long-lasting impact, these issues need to be addressed, as indicated below; in addition, more research is needed in other contingent areas.

***This study identified the following key challenges:***

- **Lack of a sense of ownership:** A large number of teachers (mainly outside the SLS domain) feel that they own no part of this curriculum; it feels like an imposition from others.
- **Lack of preparedness of teachers:** Insufficient training and lack of preparedness among teachers make the implementation less effective than desired.
- **Resource constraints:** The availability and accessibility of resources, such as materials, equipment, or properly trained staff significantly affects the quality of SLS education.
- **Hostile mindset:** Some teachers may have resistance to the subject because they see it as inferior to core academic subjects.

***Therefore, the author suggests the following areas for focus:***

- **Cultivate ownership:** involving teachers in the curriculum development process and the decision-making processes will build their sense of ownership on the work.
- **Provide more quality training:** Make sure teachers have the support they need to give their students what they deserve.
- **Provide sufficient resources:** Allocate resources to provide schools with the funds, materials and time necessary to implement SLS effectively. This would benefit from including a teachers' manual for reference.
- **Foster collaborative partnerships:** Encourage SLS teachers to partner with other subject teachers and school leaders in sharing best practices and addressing common challenges
- **Assess and modify:** Continuously assess the effectiveness of the SLS curriculum and implement changes as needed to meet local or national targets to support understanding and social inclusion.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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