# Building Hope in an Era of Noise: Critical Pedagogy, Slow Resistance, and Youth Activism

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Many young people are growing up in a political atmosphere shaped by uncertainty. War in Europe, climate anxiety, rising living costs, and increasingly hostile public debate are no longer distant issues discussed in the news. They are part of everyday life. At the same time, public discussion has become faster and harsher. Social media rewards immediate reactions and strong opinions. Nuance is harder to maintain and so is trust. Political participation easily becomes reduced to visibility, reaction, and constant positioning. For many young people, this can feel exhausting before participation even begins.

These conditions also challenge educators and youth workers. What kinds of spaces still allow disagreement without hostility? How do we support political engagement without pushing young people into constant visibility and performance? And how do we create situations where people can stay with uncertainty instead of immediately turning away from it?

In this article, we reflect on these questions through the work of the Peace Education Institute (Rauhankasvatusinstituutti, RKI) and its collaborators. Rather than presenting activism mainly as protest or rapid mobilization, we focus on practices that are slower and less visible: dialogue, collective reflection, community work, and cultural activism. Our approach draws from traditions of critical pedagogy, particularly Paulo Freire's pedagogy of hope. For us, hope is not optimism or positivity. It is the ability to remain politically and socially engaged even when the future feels uncertain. It also requires spaces where people can reflect together, build trust slowly, and imagine forms of participation.

## Power of education to co-resist and change the world

We, at RKI, believe in the power of education to change the world. In an era marked by polarization, rising nationalism, and contested historical narratives, critical global education becomes increasingly important in supporting democratic and inclusive societies. Yet critical reflection alone is not enough; maintaining hope for the future remains essential, as education must also create possibilities for solidarity, transformation, and collective action.

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A pedagogy of hope is an educational framework that refuses to surrender to despair. Rooted in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, it transforms learning situations into spaces of critical reflection about power relations and active resistance against the logic of different forms of violence (Freire, 2014; see also 2017). Pedagogy of hope means that we cannot deprive learners of hope, even if we ourselves feel frustrated and hopeless at times. We must rebel against hopelessness and cynicism. It is understandable and completely normal to experience feelings of despair during large-scale crises and conflicts, but we must continue searching for thoughts, actions, and communities that nurture hope within us.

Many people describe feeling more hopeful about the future when they know they are contributing, even in small ways, to making the world more just and compassionate. At RKI, we support young active members of society and educators in building peace in their own surroundings. We have noticed that peacebuilding can evoke experiences of hope, especially when it is planned and carried out collectively with others.

Pedagogy of hope must also be grounded in an understanding of the current social and political realities within society. Being hopeful means believing that change is possible through collective human action. At the same time, everyone reacts to global crises differently, and we never fully know what the people we work with are experiencing in their personal lives or how ongoing crises affect them.

If we are able to take care of ourselves, we have more resources to act as safe and compassionate adults for the people we work and spend time with. In difficult times, caring for ourselves and interacting with others compassionately becomes especially important.

In this sense, pedagogy of hope is not only about sustaining individual resilience, but also about creating collective spaces where people can process uncertainty, confront difficult realities, and feel recognized in their experiences. Compassionate and safer environments are essential for this work, because meaningful dialogue and critical reflection can only emerge where people feel they belong and are treated with dignity. This also highlights the broader role of education in shaping how societies understand identity, history, and power relations.

Education plays a pivotal role in mediating identity politics and power dynamics, and schools need to foster inclusive forms of collective memory that support social justice. As educators, we can cultivate spaces where historical narratives and collective memory are not merely recalled but reclaimed, and where remembrance becomes a radical act of recognizing and affirming marginalized perspectives. We find that intentionally building safer communities of practice, where discomfort is not avoided but actively addressed, moves teaching and learning towards a critically reflexive pedagogy.

At RKI, in our work with educators, we have used the HEADSUP framework developed by Vanessa Andreotti and further refined by Karen Pashby and Louise Sund as a pedagogical tool to resist, challenge, and transform simplified historical and contemporary narratives and inequitable power structures. HEADSUP is an acronym that stands for:

> ***H**egemony – unseen justifications of superiority and domination*
> ***E**thnocentrism – projecting one worldview as universal*
> ***A**historicism – forgetting historical legacies and complicities*
> ***D**epoliticisation – disregarding power inequalities and ideological roots*
> ***S**alvationism – framing help as the burden or responsibility of the "more capable"*
> ***U**ncomplicated solutions – offering simplistic solutions that ignore systemic causes*
> ***P**aternalism – seeking affirmation of authority through helping practices that infantilize recipients*
>
> (Pashby & Sund, 2019.)

From a pedagogical point of view, the framework itself, including its individual concepts, can be difficult to grasp and contextualize. For this reason, practical and concrete exercises are essential in making the framework meaningful to learners. In the Erasmus+ project *Co-creating Global Belonging*, for example, we explored the framework through case studies. The cases included World Youth Day stamp of Pope Francis and the "Monument to the Discoveries" in Lisbon, Portugal, which celebrates the Portuguese "Age of Discovery" during the 15th and 16th centuries, which was withdrawn after facing criticism. The other example was Finland's annual Nose Day development aid campaign, which faced (annual) criticism for reproducing stereotypical portrayals of poverty and misery before its discontinuation in 2025. Through the HEADSUP framework, participants were encouraged to critically reflect on how such narratives are connected to colonialism and exploitation, and how seemingly positive or neutral symbols and campaigns can unintentionally reproduce ethnocentric, paternalistic, or depoliticized perspectives.

The HEADSUP framework also compels us as educators, often situated within contexts of relative privilege, to critically examine our own assumptions and complicity in systemic inequalities. A pedagogy of discomfort becomes unavoidable, inviting both teachers and learners into a collective and often uncomfortable process of critical inquiry. This work requires attention to emotional responses such as defensiveness, guilt, uncertainty, and vulnerability, which are integral to critical learning processes. In this sense, critically reflexive pedagogy requires not only analytical tools, but also emotional and relational capacities to remain engaged with complexity, discomfort, and the possibility of social transformation.

## Slow resistance in an era of noise

Across Europe, including Finland, civic space is not only shrinking; it is also transforming in ways that make meaningful participation increasingly difficult. Public debate has become faster, louder, and more polarized, while influence is often measured through visibility, certainty, and the ability to react instantly. In such an environment, those who hesitate, reflect, or seek deeper understanding risk becoming invisible. This shift comes at a cost. When public space rewards speed over depth and certainty over curiosity, the conditions for dialogue begin to erode. Complex societal questions are reduced to simplified positions, and disagreement easily turns into division.

For many young people, this creates a feeling that participation requires performing confidence rather than developing understanding, or that their voice does not matter at all. If this is the direction civic participation is taking, then resistance cannot simply mean speaking louder within the same logic. It must also involve questioning the logic itself.

Within the POWER project[7] and its Academy of Hope(lessness), we see this as a central educational and societal task. Our work with young people seeks to strengthen something that is currently under pressure: the capacity to think, relate, and act in ways that sustain democratic life. This begins from a simple but often overlooked premise: meaningful influence does not start with visibility, but with understanding. Before individuals can act responsibly within society, they need opportunities to reflect on their own experiences, values, and assumptions. Without such reflection, participation can easily become reactive, polarized, or disconnected from others.

[7] The POWER project co-funded by European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) strengthens the equal participation and influence of young adults in Northern Finland, focusing on 18–29-year-olds whose voices often go unheard in public decision-making (https://rauhankasvatus.fi/en/kova/).

In the Academy, this space for reflection is created intentionally. Participants are not trained simply to argue more effectively or position themselves more strategically. Instead, they are invited to slow down, listen, and reflect. They are encouraged to encounter perspectives that challenge their own without immediately reducing them to something to oppose. This process is not always comfortable. It requires tolerating uncertainty and remaining present in conversations where agreement is not guaranteed. Yet this capacity is increasingly both missing and necessary in contemporary democratic life.

A central part of this work involves creating safer and braver spaces. Safety means that individuals do not constantly need to defend their dignity, identity, or right to belong. On this foundation, something more demanding becomes possible: the courage to express unfinished thoughts, question one's own assumptions, and remain engaged in situations of disagreement. The aim is not to avoid conflict, but to transform how conflict is encountered and negotiated. Through this process, influence is also redefined. It is no longer understood solely through visibility, persuasion, or access to formal power. Instead, influence emerges through relationships, everyday interactions, and the ways people choose to engage with difference. This broadens participation, while also making it more relational and responsible. On the other hand, the existence and operation of the Academy actively challenges, reflects and questions the accessibility of other existing (formal) structures of participation. Through the activities we create, we ask whose voice and presence is welcomed in public spaces and local decision-making, who can feel represented, empowered or that their thoughts and ideas matter in the environment in which they live.

At the same time, the question of hope becomes unavoidable. Many young people today relate to the future through uncertainty, anxiety, or emotional distance. In such circumstances, calls to "participate" or "make a difference" can easily feel abstract or empty. Hope cannot simply be demanded; it must be experienced. Within the Academy, hope is therefore understood not as naïve optimism, but as a consequence of agency. It emerges when individuals recognize that their actions, however small, have meaning, and that change, although often slow and complex, remains possible.

This also reveals some of the limitations of dominant approaches to civic engagement. Too often, participation is framed in ways that reward visibility over understanding and speed over collective responsibility. While such approaches may produce short-term reactions, they may simultaneously weaken the foundations that long-term democratic change depends upon.

From our perspective, resistance must also be evaluated in terms of how it shapes relationships, dialogue, and the possibility of future cooperation. Not all forms of engagement are neutral in this regard. Some deepen polarization and reduce others to simplified categories, ultimately narrowing the very civic space they seek to influence.

The Academy of Hope(lessness) offers a different starting point. It can be understood as a form of slow resistance: a practice that resists the pressure to react instantly, simplify complexity, and equate influence with visibility. Instead, it invests in the slow and often invisible work of building understanding, trust, relationality, and collective agency.

This work rarely produces immediate results, nor does it fit easily within dominant narratives of measurable impact. Yet without it, the capacity for collective transformation weakens. In times of increasing division, resistance is not only about opposing injustice. It is also about refusing forms of engagement that reproduce the same conditions we seek to change.

Sometimes, the most radical act is to slow down and to build differently.

## Fashion beyond aesthetics: cultural activism as slow resistance

The ideas discussed above become visible not only in formal educational settings or civic participation projects, but also in grassroots cultural activism led by young people themselves. In a social climate that often rewards speed, visibility, and simplified forms of influence, creative practices can offer alternative ways of engaging with society, building community, and imagining different futures. Cultural spaces may therefore function as sites of dialogue, critical reflection, and hopeful resistance.

One compelling example of this can be found in the work of Ruusa Kiiskilä (21) and Toivo Kiiskilä (19), a sibling duo of self-taught fashion designers and makers from Kokkola on Finland's west coast. Their approach to fashion and activism emphasizes community, accessibility, sustainability, and dialogue. In May 2026, they were part of a youth collective that organized the fashion event *Sinä ja Minä* ("You and I")[8], built around the theme of communication: how people encounter, listen to, and understand one another.

For the Kiiskiläs, fashion is not merely about aesthetics or self-expression. It is also a way of engaging critically with society and creating spaces for collective reflection. Toivo Kiiskilä's collection *AUTOIMMUUNI*, for example, explores communication through questions of power, fear, and social fragmentation. The collection reflects on what happens when societies lose their capacity to listen, communicate, and remain connected across difference.

Importantly, the Kiiskiläs' approach to activism is not declarative or moralizing. Rather, it is grounded in lived experience, deliberation, and relationality. Their aim is not simply to deliver political messages, but to create environments where people can openly discuss, question, and broaden their understanding of the world and each other. In this sense, the *Sinä ja Minä* event functioned as more than a fashion show; it became a collective space for encounter, dialogue, and participation.

The event itself also challenged traditional hierarchies within the cultural and fashion industries. Most of the organizers were under 25 years old and came from outside established fashion circles. As self-taught creatives, the Kiiskiläs view their backgrounds not as limitations, but as strengths that allow them to bring authenticity, accessibility, and new perspectives into the field. Their work demonstrates how meaningful cultural participation can emerge outside institutional gatekeeping and professionalized structures.

Sustainability similarly functions in their work not as a branding strategy, but as an ethical and practical commitment embedded in everyday practice. By using deadstock and second-hand fabrics, the siblings seek to align their creative work with ecological responsibility. In this sense, sustainability becomes inseparable from their broader understanding of activism and social responsibility.

At a time when the future of Finland's cultural sector remains uncertain, the Kiiskiläs also embody a form of hopeful perseverance. Despite structural challenges within the arts and cultural field, both emphasize the importance of continuing to create, collaborate, and imagine otherwise. Organizing *Sinä ja Minä* reminded them that culture is not an optional addition to society, but an essential part of being human.

Their work illustrates how hope-oriented and critically reflexive forms of activism can emerge through creativity, relationships, and collective cultural practices. Much like the forms of "slow

[8] See more about the "You and I" fashion event https://www.instagram.com/sinaminaevent/ and designer Toivo Kiiskilä https://www.instagram.com/toivo_kiiskila/. The event was supported by RKI through Ecoality project, funded by the European Commission and DEAR programme (https://dearprogramme.eu/project/ecoality/).

resistance" discussed earlier in this text, their activism resists the pressure for instant reactions and simplified messages. Instead, it invests in dialogue, process, community-building, and the difficult but necessary work of sustaining human connection in increasingly fragmented societies.

In this sense, the Kiiskiläs' work demonstrates that activism does not always begin with slogans or confrontation. Sometimes it begins with creating spaces where people can encounter one another differently — and where alternative ways of living together can be imagined.

## Resistance Beyond Visibility

The examples discussed in our article suggest that sustaining collective resistance in times of shrinking civic space and growing polarization requires more than rapid reactions or visible forms of activism alone. Critical pedagogy, hope-oriented educational practices, youth engagement, and grassroots cultural activism all demonstrate the importance of creating spaces where people can reflect, build relationships, and remain connected across difference and uncertainty. For us, collective resistance is deeply connected to practices of dialogue, care, collaboration, and collective imagination.

Whether through critically reflexive educational work, forms of "slow resistance" that challenge the pressure for constant visibility and certainty, or youth-led cultural initiatives that create spaces for encounter and participation, meaningful social transformation emerges through relational and collective practices. In increasingly fragmented societies, sustaining hope, trust, and the capacity to act together may itself become one of the most important forms of democratic resistance.

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