

Peace promoting schools: Educating literate and numerate peacemakers

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Abstract: Everyone is a stakeholder when it comes to education. We all went to school, have children going to school, or have a school in our neighbourhood. Popular media can even make direct links between the ills of society and the school curriculum, the behaviour management policies employed, and the dedication of individual teachers. But what if education was equally the responsibility of governments, parents, school and community? What if we were to implement an approach to educating students that was holistic in nature, promoted peaceful pedagogy and modelled peaceful practices? Whilst we might predict that our graduates would be less violent, could our peace-loving students read and write?

The development of a Peace Promoting School model would aim to incorporate strategies that explicitly teach the skills of conflict resolution while modelling peaceful practices. Such an approach lays the responsibility for the education of contemporary youth, and the future we wish to create, firmly in the hands of the governments, carers, school and community. Could such an approach create a less violent society in addition to students with desirable twenty-first century academic skills? This paper explores the possibilities offered by a holistic approach to peace education that values both the academic and humane development of students.

Keywords: Curriculum, pedagogy, peace

Introduction

Individuals such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jnr, Mahatma Gandhi and others have been responsible for significant systemic change in the past century. These peace makers utilised a range of highly effective skills to mobilise nations, empower individuals and unite governments. What are these skills? How did the peacemakers gain such skills? Was it their upbringing, their education, their environment, or was it their individual or collective experiences? Which of these skills were enhanced or even created through formal education? As we enter a new millennium characterised by wholesale changes to our systems of education in Australia, we must consider if it is possible for our schools through the curriculum, pedagogy, structures and engagement with community to develop similar skills for peace in current Australian students? Is it time to consider developing a contemporary model for twenty-first century Peace Promoting Schools?

The core business of schools is to develop knowledge, skills and attributes that prepare the individual to transfer, reinforce and add to such imperatives. In addition, schools also facilitate a journey of self-discovery, socialisation and the gaining of understandings. When we consider the collective skills of peacemakers the likes of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther

King Jnr and Mahatma Gandhi we can clearly identify attributes such as a passion for social justice, determination, an ability to overcome adversity, respect for human difference and a propensity for forgiveness. Perhaps the time is right for Australia to consider how we might ensure that the development of such skills and attributes form a significant component of the educational experience of Australian youth.

Peace education is defined and delivered in markedly different ways. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition is presented by Harris and Synott (2002, p. 4) who wrote:

By ‘peace education’, we mean teaching encounters that draw out from people their desires for peace and provide them with nonviolent alternatives for managing conflicts, as well as the skills for critical analysis of the structural arrangements that legitimate and produce injustice and inequality.

Peace education in schools has primarily focused on ‘...conflict resolution, peer mediation, and violence prevention...’ (Groff, 2002, p. 9). Regardless of the aims, peace education is often characterised by its delivery at pre-determined points in an educational journey. Whilst many stand-alone peace education programs experience degrees of success in regards to developing youth as skilled, knowledgeable advocates for peace in specific contexts, (Ardizzone, 2003; Eckhardt, 1984; Fountain, 1999) the ongoing evidence of conflict in our society raises questions in regards to the effectiveness of the transfer and application of such skills to new contexts. An alternative to isolated peace education programs is to develop peace promoting schools. This holistic approach is characterized by three primary domains which include the curriculum, school organisation and community engagement. Curriculum focuses on the teaching approaches and learning experiences whilst the school organisation incorporates issues such as school leadership, ethos and functional structure. The final domain, community engagement deals with the essential role played by the wider society in advocating and modeling peaceful practices.

A Peace Promoting School model provides a holistic approach to peace education which ensures that as the inevitable national and state curriculum priorities change, the creation of peacemakers who are literate and numerate, culturally intelligent global citizens adequately equipped to preserve and create peace in the twenty-first century is not lost in the scramble to meet predetermined outcomes. Distinct pedagogical approaches offer effective platforms from which to launch a holistic approach to peace education that maintains the teaching of peace knowledge and skills through the curriculum. Additionally, it models conflict resolution strategies, peaceful policies and practices in both the organisation of the educational institution and its engagement with the wider community. A peace promoting school would be characterized by a wide range of educational imperatives and may incorporate curriculum, pedagogy, professional development, pastoral care, behaviour management and evaluation procedures. This paper will deal briefly with the potential to create literate and numerate peacemakers as a result of aspects from all three domains; curriculum, school organisation and community engagement.

Peace: A Holistic approach

In the current political and educational environment it is no longer enough to argue for the inclusion of an area of study in the curriculum simply because it is a noble pursuit or because it may, optimistically lead to a more peaceful society in the future. To expect a place in the contemporary, congested curriculum, an area of study must do this and more. It must contribute to the achievement of benchmark literacy and numeracy levels, develop higher order thinking skills, cultivate the attributes of both a lifelong learner and a culturally

intelligent global citizen and contribute directly to academic results. Without these characteristics, any area of study will struggle to justify its place in the contemporary curriculum. A holistic approach to peace education which incorporates more than a single domain offers greater opportunity to meet these criteria than explicit, stand-alone peace education programs.

The curriculum, school organization and community domains that characterize a holistic approach contribute collaboratively to the development of students both as individuals and as members of a global community. Such an approach makes every attempt for a more peaceful future but also meets the academic, social and cultural needs of governments, educational institutions, communities, society and most importantly the students we teach. A holistic approach to educating peacefully incorporates pedagogies that explicitly teach skills such as reflective practice and critical self-awareness. Candy (et al., 1994, p. 128) suggests that such approaches to teaching are most likely to build foundations on which lifelong learning skills can be built. In addition, such a methodology teaches ways of approaching, transferring and interpreting knowledge that allows for learning to take place between different environments and over time thus allowing skilled students to learn and develop new and appropriate approaches and understandings as their world inevitably changes. The added exposure to models of organizational and societal practices through the school and community domains further exemplify peaceful ways and challenge accepted practices. This collaborative approach may include teachers as curriculum designers and facilitators, democratic structures within the school and classroom and appropriate community engagement.

Curriculum Designers

In order to educate peacefully, curriculum design must be underpinned by shared values and created in part by those that teach it. Educators must also be given adequate time to develop innovative pedagogy and to hone skills with which to reflect upon, evaluate and renew curriculum. Eisner (1985, p. vi) recalls that:

There was a period in American Education when curricula developed by educational laboratories and commercial publishing houses were to be “installed” in schools. One engaged in curriculum installation, often in the same way that one installed carpeting or a new air filter in one’s car. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Teachers need to have a stake in what they teach. They are not merely passive tubes or mechanical conveyers of someone else’s ambitions and interests.

When teachers are fully involved in the development of curriculum, its implementation, evaluation and modification; peaceful, democratic and just approaches are being modelled and genuinely valued in educational institutions. We should not imagine for a moment that students are oblivious to the disenchantment of teachers who, in a climate of external review, deliver prescribed curriculum in which they are minor stakeholders and have little sense of ownership. The relationship between teacher and student is paramount to quality education. If teachers are involved in institutions where peaceful approaches are given priority then the opportunity exists for them to feel part of a just, democratic, and peaceful organization. Educating peacefully is not restricted to students; a holistic approach demands that those that teach be respected, valued and empowered members of the education profession. MacBeath (1997, as cited in McGhie and Barr, 2000, p. 61) suggests that,

Schools do not improve in a climate of threat and sanctions. The metaphor of leveraging standards from the outside is a deeply misguided one. Schools improve, just as pupils do,

when they are secure and confident enough to be self-critical and when they have the tools and the expertise to evaluate themselves.

Secure, confident, self-critical administrators and teachers offer their students insights into peaceful ways of managing complex organisations. Such models allow students to apply and transfer these practices to their own personal and professional dealings throughout life. In practice it means that students continue to learn, reflect and critique both skills and understandings in a range of contexts over time.

Pedagogy

‘Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time.’ (Dewey, as cited in Eisner, 1985, p. 87). A holistic approach to peace education embraces pedagogical methodology that is just, models democratic processes and attempts to create a peaceful environment in which to learn. Harris (1990, p. 255) argues that ‘peace pedagogy’, characterized by dialogue, cooperation, problem solving, affirmation and democratic boundary setting needs to take the place of outmoded educational practices. Such practices present the teacher as the font of all knowledge, create competitive classrooms, allow and create passive, powerless students and use force as a means of control. A peaceful environment does not mean a quiet classroom, in fact, quite possibly the opposite. What it does mean is that each participant in the learning environment feels valued, respected and empowered whilst simultaneously learning skills and developing understandings for the present and future. One cannot realistically expect students to comprehend and apply democratic processes to their personal interactions after spending their days in a dictatorial classroom. It would be unlikely that a future business owner, employer or dutiful worker would approach problem solving in a just and peaceful manner if their school learning environment had not allowed for fair and equitable processes. Burns (1990, as cited in Hall, 1993) asserts that student-centred learning is critical to successful peace education. There is nothing new in claims that student-centred learning is beneficial to the gaining of skills, knowledge and attributes, however it is critical to the aims of a holistic approach to peace education because it models the skills that culturally intelligent, global citizens must have, and that is the consideration and valuing of others, the skills to contribute effectively to a group environment and an understanding of the balance between roles and responsibilities. Pedagogical methodology that is peaceful in its application is crucial to a holistic approach as it models learning, problem solving and human interaction that enable the lifelong learner to apply such skills to both their present and future learning environments.

Pastoral care initiatives and a multitude of subject areas deal in part with complex issues relating to conflict and disadvantage and are effective vehicles through which to teach about peace. Vrienns (1997) proposes that teachers create a learning environment in which hope for the future is seen as realistic, where skills are developed through experiential learning and where debate and analysis form part of the culture of the classroom. In order for any curriculum area to contribute to the goal of educating peacefully, the pedagogical approach is critical. McGhie and Barr (2000, p. 49) argue that pedagogical methodology requires ‘...collaborative learning and a focus on meaning-making and knowledge building rather than simply information processing.’ Students who are exposed to cursory, stand-alone studies of conflict, social injustices and anti-democratic practices focusing primarily on a pessimistic chronological journey miss the opportunity to make a real connection between themselves, the invaluable experience of their predecessors and their own peaceful futures. A critical inquiry approach that considers perspectives and evidence models a methodology that demands inquiry rather than blind acceptance. In addition, such an approach allows for empathy and the emotions that accompany it to be investigated, ensuring that students see

clearly, for example, that the characteristics of anti-Semitic attitudes in Europe prior to World War Two differ little from the attitudes often shown towards the weak, quiet or just plain different in school grounds every day. We need to ensure that we genuinely investigate events through a critical inquiry approach so that the essential, peaceful lessons of history are not lost in the struggle for a place in an outcomes driven curriculum that may be propelled by changeable political agendas. It is imperative that we instil in our students the willingness to investigate issues whilst equipping them with the skills to make informed meaning of their world and pursue knowledge and understanding rather than information both now and in the future. Only then will the way we teach impact positively on the creation of future generations with an eye for social justice, peace and democratic practices.

Peaceful School organisation

Some would argue that the constraints of timetabling, specifically the coordination of enrolled students, able teachers and available teaching spaces restrict the ease at which a school might employ appropriate pedagogical methodology to support a holistic approach to peace education. What is often easier is to use a range of test instruments to 'stream', 'journey' or 'ability group' students so that teachers can better direct their instruction to the level of their cohort. Such methods do not necessarily extinguish the opportunity for student-centred learning, and may in fact be suitable for developmental subjects; however, an approach such as this does little for ensuring inclusive education where students and teachers experience socially just, democratic and peaceful modeling of processes and policies. Firstly, a school would need to be absolutely confident that their initial testing was just. Assessment is complex and multi-faceted, as are the students it tests. Secondly, the social implications of streaming can be far from peaceful as students, their peers and parents very quickly identify the academically capable group as well as those less so inclined. This grouping of students, suggest Feiler and Gibson (1999, p. 148) '...can be limiting or harmful to those unlucky enough to be assigned to a 'low ability' group'. Finally, the global citizen in the new millennium will rarely be expected to work in isolation or in a group characterized by like minded approaches. Mixed ability groupings, provided they are supported by adequate and increased staffing, model life itself; a blend of attitudes, styles, problem solving techniques, proficiency at skills and varying approaches to communication. Harris (2002, p. 30) puts forward the suggestion that in our enthusiasm to teach students highly developed academic skills we have neglected the essential 'human relations skills'. If the future we wish to contribute to includes current students who show aptitude for both academic and relational skills then, as Rubinstein and Stoneman (1972, p. 143) propose, outdated understandings must be discarded.

It is now held that a child's intellectual skills and abilities, instead of being fixed by heredity, are formed in the process of his life and experiences – in particular through his interaction with adults through the use of language. It follows clearly that the group of which a child forms part is itself a crucial factor in his development, providing him with stimulation in many different ways. The modern theory of intelligence make it clear that to group children in different streams, A, B and C (and even down to N, O, P in a very large school) according to a prediction about future intellectual development, is no longer a viable procedure. The child's development will be determined, to some extent, by the specific group of which he forms part.

From a purely self-seeking perspective, we as educators need to model the attributes of the society in which we wish to retire. Present day students will manage our superannuation funds, operate the facilities we use and perform the medical procedures we require in our future. We need to ensure that they develop appropriate skills that prepare them to deal with

the multiplicity that characterises human nature as well as the attributes that allow them to continue to foster new knowledge, skills and understandings. The way in which we group students in our classrooms may well be mirrored in the way our future students group patient access to medical procedures or distribute dividends; we need to ensure that we model just, peaceful and democratic processes in every action being viewed and experienced by our students.

Community Engagement

In the current climate of an obesity epidemic and related health issues, we cringe at the very thought of Australian schools going the way of some of our American colleagues and allowing fast food outlets to control the tuckshops at our schools. Yet we seem to lose little sleep over the impact of multi-national companies with questionable environmental and industrial relations records sponsoring our football team or providing donations as part of an advertising agreement that has their logo on the school newsletter. Everything we do sends a clear message to our students. By allowing such partnerships to not only exist but be promoted, we clearly indicate to students, staff and the community that the educational institution involved not only supports organisations with questionable justice, peace and democratic process records, but that we are willing advocates for them. According to Claxton (2000, p. 28) 'Adults induct young people into the views of their culture through their actions as well as their words.' The hidden curriculum, the gaps and silences, the advocacy and prominence of events, people and practices send strong and clear messages to students about what it is we value and respect. There is little doubt that if we use our mission statements, school ethos and underlying values as a marketing tool rather than a genuine system of shared beliefs then we as educators and administrators are deceiving and misleading our parents, guardians and communities. We also risk missing the opportunity to play a more substantive role in shaping a just society and perhaps more importantly, modeling appropriate action to students through educating peacefully.

Schools are in a remarkably unique position that is rarely utilized. The opportunity for industry, business and the community to access and possibly influence the very future is both precious and highly sought after. Schools seem to miss the significance of their captive audiences. School based traineeships, apprenticeships and industry related programs are vital components of any business or community that plans to remain viable in the twenty-first century. If schools were to set benchmarks and specific requirements that must be met in order for a business or organisation to enter into a professional educational relationship with any school or individual student then the 'balance of power' shifts. Schools have students, lots of them. Why not set the standards and set them high rather than bend to the fluctuating needs, wishes and desires of business? Schools are in a powerful and unique position to lead societal change rather than contribute to or be willing advocates for societal dysfunction characterised by unacceptable environmental and industrial relations records that are sometimes found in industry. Appropriate community engagement is the tenuous thread that connects peace education and peaceful models with real world applications. The significance of the role of community in the transfer of skills and knowledge cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

Whilst the traditional caretakers of stand-alone peace education programs in schools struggle to maintain the prominence of a curriculum that directly investigates issues of social justice, peace and democratic practices in a crowded curriculum, a more holistic approach to peace education presents distinct advantages. It allows schools to do more than focus solely on the

already complex task of teaching skills for resolving conflict, peer conciliation and the prevention of violence. Through the implementation of the three primary domains; curriculum, school organisation and community involvement, schools are able to teach, learn, model and advocate for peaceful practices, skills and knowledge.

A holistic approach to peace education as opposed to stand-alone peace education programs is both academically and socially progressive as it provides opportunity for a more peaceful future in addition to providing for core learning outcomes through best practice pedagogical methodology and school organisation. A school characterized by a structure and curriculum that is inclusive and student centred provides for real world opportunities through critical inquiry, designed and regularly evaluated by those equipped to appraise and deliver it. In addition, appropriate community involvement offers students learning opportunities whilst positioning the school as a partner to industry and a significant stakeholder in the lifelong learning environments of our community. A holistic approach to peace education through the domains of curriculum, school organisation and community engagement offers current students the opportunity to experience peaceful, world-class learning for life. This approach also allows for these same students to access new skills and understandings as resilient, global citizens equipped with the skills and attributes required to deal with ever changing environments and needs.

How do we balance developing resilience, determination and leadership in our students with the attributes of a global citizen tuned to the urgency of social justice and human rights? The curriculum we teach, the pedagogy we employ and the way we organize our schools and society offers us a both the methodology and an opportunity to promote peace whilst maintaining benchmark indicators in core educational areas. If current students are to become global citizens prepared to learn throughout life and contribute effectively to peace, democracy and institutional structures that demand justice and equality then we need to clearly teach and model necessary skills in today's classrooms, schools and communities; we need Peace Promoting Schools.

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