The Place of Peace

Heather Millhouse

Abstract

Current approaches to Peace Education have come under censure for various reasons. Treating these criticisms as hurdles that peace educators must cross, this paper identifies the various educational, political, cultural and psychological barriers to peacebuilding in Australian schools. The conclusions are drawn on the basis of a survey conducted with students pursuing an education degree at a University in Australia. While taking cognizance of the fact that learnings from other countries and diverse contexts can enrich peace education programs, the paper concludes with the assertion that such learning cannot be a substitute for sensitivity to socio-cultural reality of the place where the peace education program will finally be implemented. It therefore offers some suggestions for tackling structural violence in Australian schools.

Author Profile

Heather Millhouse teaches at the University of Queensland, Australia in Peace Education, a course that explores theoretical and applied principles of peace and inclusive education, with an emphasis on issues of diversity, unity and peacebuilding. She is the Workshop Coordinator for the Queensland branch of Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), an international association of trained volunteers working to empower individuals to liberate themselves from violence. She has an ongoing fascination with Integrated Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an exercise in logical balance.

The Place of Peace

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Tell people in Australia that you teach peace to schoolchildren and they will say, "That's so important" or "that must be rewarding". Teaching peace inspires hope, both in the community and in educators. Peace Education has been an integral work component of the United Nations, but it is not without its critics. Critical reviews of the field include the following:

- The most common criticism is lack of evidence- hard data that verifies Peace Education as effective at building peace. This is further complicated by the fact that peace is considered a lofty and ill-defined goal.

- Without evidence of the effects a program may have on a community, a related criticism of Peace Education concerns programs that focus on schoolchildren's intra- and inter-personal peacefulness without including the wider community, placing an unfair burden on children who are living within violent societies.

- In addition, Peace Education programs orientated to the individual may emphasize individual interests at the expense of the collective interest. In this way, Peace Education concepts may fail to align with local cultural understandings, and indeed, the cultural conditions of the majority of the world's population.

Peace Education needs to answer these three criticisms in order to justify its inclusion across a crowded Australian curriculum.

How can these criticisms inform the scope and flavour of Peace Education? While the feeling of safety amongst Australian women has improved in the last 10 years[1], we know our society continues to struggle with random domestic, structural and cultural violence. We know that schools are sites of direct and indirect violence, so the mandate to work with peace in our schools is clear. We do need to broaden our scope, however, to shift or balance some of the responsibility for violence in schools off the shoulders of individual students and teachers, and across the education spectrum into the wider society. According to a survey by an employment website, wider society certainly needs to consider the role of adult modelling on young people's experience, when "almost two thirds of Australian workers say they have been bullied at work, and nearly one third claim to have been sexually harassed." [2]. Limiting Peace Education to anti-bullying programs for students targets the tip of the iceberg. It feels like "Do as I say, not as I do".

How is it possible to deliver a course in Peace Education that is fair for students and does not require its teachers to be saint-like and omniscient? It seems, at times, as if Peace Education can be about everything, and perhaps that means it might also be about nothing. Grounding a course in students' experiences enhances its meaning and locates its relevance, and the application of Peace Education principles becomes a possibility. The principles and theory of Peace Education must be molded according to the socio-political, cultural and structural contexts of local communities, rather than generically imposed across the diversity found between schools and students. In multicultural Australia, if we can shift the orientation of Peace Education to programs that emphasize group and community concerns while still addressing individual interests and behaviors, the principles of

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[1] ABS, *Personal Safety Survey Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, Cat.4906.0, (2006)

[2] Staff writers NEWS.com.au, "*Silent Victims Opt for Jobs Over Workplace Bullying, Sexual Harassment Complaints*", (March 19, 2009), http://www.news.com.au/business/story/0,27753,25200938-5012424,00.html

equity across cultural groups may find a more secure foothold. If Peace Education is not delivering opportunities for diverse worldviews to find expression, student feedback needs to make that apparent. Rigorous post-course evaluation, coupled with international perspectives of the field, enables Peace Education to be sculpted around its context. Using the criticisms of Peace Education as a litmus test, we can be guided and focused in determining the place of peace in Australian classrooms. J.P. Lederach advises us to embrace the paradoxes, to build within multiple discourses and to use the experience of the 'other' as a seedbed for growth.[3]

Those sentiments are easy to write, yet not simple to implement. Taking the first steps towards building peace means accepting that a problem exists across our communities, it means recognizing the implications of structural violence and voicing the deep scepticism regarding human nature that seems to exist just beneath the surface of the young people. Identifying the need for peacebuilding at the structural level of our education system has been undertaken by tertiary students while they are unravelling what it means to them. As the concepts of Peace Education are understood in the context of each student's experience, ideas about other ways of being educators – harmonious, fun and effective ways of working with children and young people – are being formulated, stimulated by identifying barriers to peace. These barriers to peace in schools have become opportunities for growth.

A paradoxical approach to teaching peace delivers multiple entry points for the analysis of issues of structural and cultural violence in schools. By using the insights of recent successful school graduates, an external perspective on some structural barriers to peace in schools can be gleaned. Post-school evaluation of the education system is being undertaken by those whose memories of school are recent enough to be detailed and whose results were good, which adds intensity to their critiques when one considers their less successful counterparts.

Pre-service teachers and other students from the University of Queensland can take Peace Education as an elective unit towards their Bachelor of Education degree. Not all students opt for the course because they have an inherent interest in peace – some enrol because the assessment does not include exams, some, to fill a gap in their timetables – but many students who enrol are genuinely interested. Approximately 360 students between 2005–2009 studied discourses of peace and violence, including concepts of negative and positive peace, engaged in assessable group work, read widely in their fields of interest and education discourse, and then contributed their insights to four categories – Educational, Political, Cultural and Psychological barriers to peace in schools. Table 1 provides a summary of these lists.

Table 1. Barriers to Peace in Schools

Educational barriers	
Curriculum ▪ Curriculum is powerful in maintaining exclusive and violent structures eg. subject discrimination, weighting of subjects eg sports vs arts; sciences (hard subjects) vs humanities (soft subjects); commercialisation of curriculum. ▪ Syllabus and work program content limitations, plus time constraints of crowded curriculum leave no room for peace. ▪ Limits to teachers' experience with concepts	**Pedagogy** ▪ Lack of recognition of prior learning and other ways of knowing. ▪ Acknowledge only hegemony and homogenous western-centric systems of learning. Conformity expected of all – lack of attention to practical skills in learning style diversity. ▪ Classroom process – teacher out front - unequal power dynamic – need for partnership learning.

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[3] John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

of peace.
- Glorification of violent activities, especially contact sports.
- Religious impact on content eg intelligent design vs evolution.
- Lack of critical discourse analysis eg. 'dumbing-down' of curriculum, especially in English.

Behaviour Management
- Ignorance of students' backgrounds.
- No clear school philosophy.
- Discipline and control vs freedom to be who you are; punishment as normal.
- Fear of change both personal and structural
- Lack of relationships of trust between all levels of school functioning

Assessment
- Competition between students as a motivator.
- Outcome-based education – tests/results focus.
- Narrow assessment forms advantage some and disadvantage others; ranking and failure are accepted / normal.

- Bullying in classrooms, disrespectful teaching styles, ignorance of nonviolence.
- Pace set by institution, not by students.
- Focus on teaching rather than learning.

School structure
- Strong hierarchy and unequal power relations.
- Few learning support staff – teacher's increasing and constantly changing workload.
- Business minded schools – choice of priorities and competition based on commercialism.
- Principal's vision for the school, or lack thereof.
- Marginalization of minority groups.
- Exclusivity, righteousness and superior attitudes in some schools – 'us and them' thinking.
- Single Sex schools: attitudes formed towards and with opposite sex.
- Insufficient support for students by way of counselling.

Environment
- Physical classroom layout.
- Timetable – need flexible attendance options.
- Environment restrictions – need comfortable, flexible outdoor spaces for diverse learning opportunities.

Political barriers

Global issues
- Economic rationalism – well considered policy subsumed in economic expediency.
- Patriotism – the 'other' as enemy.
- Definitions of peace vary widely.
- Government as exemplar in conflict – first strike.

National issues
- Compulsory schooling
- Policies that yearn for 'back to the past' – visions for the future from the government prioritise technology over relationships.
- Tyranny of democracy and weight of demographics – marginalized voices remain unheard.
- Subjective political policies not open for

Local issues
- Restrictions on who may attend schools – exclusivity and exclusion.
- Bureaucracy: rigidity; decision making structures can be exclusive and hierarchic; communication channels can be restrictive; access to resources inequitable; staff politics, interpersonal staff relationships, personal agendas remain invisible and unexamined within the school hierarchy; paperwork prevents experiential, co-operative and open-ended learning.
- Power relations amongst school community used to reinforce inequity and conformity.
- Attitudes and beliefs: school administration, teachers and parents, harbor traditional beliefs; authoritarian, command and control

discussion across/between schools: who is in power, what the govt wants, instead of what schools want. Less importance placed on critical analysis. Interference of nationalism in the formation of history syllabuses. White Australian history taught at the expense of Indigenous perspectives.
- Militarism in schools e.g. cadets, public/private partnerships with the aviation industry have militarist ends, defence force recruiting at city periphery schools.
- Funding disparity between public and private schools; and insufficient funding, especially for non-commercial subjects.

structures; avoid controversial issues; discrimination – gender, ethnicity, ability; single sex education as inhibiting.
- QSC – students judged in relation to their schools, not on their own merits.
- Competitive struggle to be 'top', system of appointing captains, awards.
- Teachers impose personal beliefs in a closed environment – classrooms.
- School funding and expertise goes towards disciplinary actions rather than peacebuilding in the school community.
- Lack of listening – students, teachers, administration.
- Students need to contribute to learning goals.

Psychological barriers

Personal beliefs
- Alienation, low self esteem and depression.
- Insecurity and uncertainty about dealing with diversity in the classroom.
- Lack of psychological and emotional safety.
- Personal perceptions, values, beliefs, life experiences, lack of experiences.
- Desire for dominance and control and fear of being insignificant.
- Self esteem issues – victims or legends.
- Motivation – lack of or hyper.
- Lack of confidence to deal with conflict.
- Need to succeed in competition, fear of failure.
- Fear and belittling used to control students.
- "I am just one person, I can't make a difference".

Disorder / Dysfunction
- Mental health issues e.g. ADHD, autistic spectrum disorder, bipolar disorder, anxiety, obsessions, depression.
- Ignorance about these and lack of treatment.
- Learning disabilities, communication issues.
- Troubled family background – violent, abusive family, substance abuse.
- Lack of self awareness.
- Social exclusion of students with special needs and reaction to others' need for acceptance.

Group beliefs
- Teacher dominant, student submissive.
- Clique culture of segregated groups and discrimination, prejudice: eg locality (country versus city), gender-based, sexuality, intellectual competence, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, social-economic group, physical condition, age of teacher.
- Need to belong – peer group pressure and pressure to conform.
- Fear of being different, both teachers and students.
- Macho syndrome culture.
- Baiting teachers seen as student 'sport'.

Wider Social beliefs
- Parental and family beliefs, attitudes and expectations.
- Punishment as first response to transgression.
- Marginalisation for religious/political beliefs.
- Feelings are discouraged.
- Acceptance of violence as 'natural' and belief that humans are inherently violent.
- Effects of media violence.
- Media treatment of violence in current affairs
- Lack of belief in possibility of peace.
- No awareness of peaceful societies.

Cultural barriers

Adversarial cultures

- Binary positioning among students e.g. rich vs poor, brains vs brawn, attractive vs unattractive, sub-cultures e.g. emo vs skaters vs nerds vs jocks etc, sexism, us vs them, in-group and out-group dynamics.
- Ethnocentrism and national pride at the expense of 'aliens' or difference.
- Demonising the 'other' e.g. students are against teachers and vice versa, teachers and administration think parents are inadequate, parents are demanding and hostile to teachers and administration, teachers disrespected by administration and employer.
- Tall poppy syndrome.
- Culture of competition.
- History written by the victor.
- Militarism and machismo as hegemonic masculinity, opposed to other forms of masculinity.
- Western exportation and imposition of market economy and democracy makes us enemies.
- People are taught to fear or fight the 'other' rather than learn from and celebrate with each other.

Cultures of fear and conformity

- Standardized testing – fitting students onto a 'grid'.
- Narrow definitions of gender roles and promotions of stereotypes.
- Nostalgia for homogeneity – promotion of sameness rather than belonging.
- Uniforms.
- Submitting to 'groupthink' rather than dealing with conflicting ideas.
- World events (terrorism) portrayed as culture- and religion-based, thereby promoting fear between cultural groups.

Cross-cultural issues

- Language – narrow range, testing in and pre-eminence of Standard Australian English.
- Different forms of deep cultural practice, different ways of being are not recognized e.g. ways to show respect, deal with conflict, negotiate, ask permission, act morally, be inclusive, prioritize relationships etc.
- Misunderstanding cross-cultural communication – verbal and nonverbal.
- Unwillingness or inability to accept other cultures/religions due to avoidance, inaccurate data, lack of information, fear.
- Not enough diversity in some schools, overwhelming diversity in others.
- Tokenism or the 4D approach to multiculturalism – dance, dress, diet and dialect.
- Difficulty in negotiating firm beliefs in a climate of relativism.

Australia-specific cultural issues

- Eurocentric or 'skips' dominant culture in schools is reinforced by a lack of diverse cultural enrichment, the maintenance of stereotypes that oppress, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and a lack of understanding, among non-Indigenous Australians, of Indigenous people's cultures.
- *Terra nullius* is still impacting on non-Indigenous Australian mindsets.
- Trans-generational effects of *terra nullius* still impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian peoples' lives.

Ideas for change

Given a free reign and broad-stroke, almost idealised definitions of peace, the young university students responsible for generating these lists went on to look at ways to take action to address some of the challenges of structural violence in schools.

Education is a tool to break barriers to peace
- Teachers need to read and think about these barriers, and be given a secure opportunity to voice their observations and insights.
- Problems evolve from ignorance – address the lack of knowledge.
- Open knowledge is needed in conjunction with critical thinking.
- Change to positive peace rather than negative peace when working with all education relationships.
- Schools help shape children and reinforce values – students, parents, teachers, admin – all develop and model the peacebuilding values of school.
- Develop critical awareness of the bias of texts used in schools and the freedom of resources.
- Parents and teachers together lobby government for funding and change.
- Lobby school and district to encourage reflection and change in curriculum to infuse Peace Education principles into all subject areas; and to encourage reflection and respect within and from the department.
- Address financial costs of university.
- Address federalism – difference between states.

In schools
- Link peace theory and practices through all subjects e.g. history of peace movements.
- Anonymous boxes (awards/rewards; suggestion/complaints) for students and teachers.
- More power spread out amongst teaching and administrative staff – less hierarchy.
- In the case of a ruthless power, undermine their authority nonviolently by local political action.
- Get parents and teachers onside, working together rather than being fearful of each other.
- Engage in critical thinking about problems and put a band-aid on it till action can be taken.
- Importance of dealing with diversity, especially cultural diversity.
- Increase the number of perspectives, culturally, socially, philosophically, so

In the classroom
- Allow different options – create variety e.g. sit next to someone new each week.
- Classroom dynamics: use group processes interspersed with very short lectures; classroom layout to promote communication, collaboration, critical analysis and problem solving.
- More human resources in the classroom – change the teacher: student power ratio from 1: many.
- More equal classroom dynamic – teachers and students on more equal footing.
- Involve parents and wider community in education.
- Language – peer to peer tutoring.
- Use experiential, practical learning processes and techniques to create variety and interest and reduce boredom.
- Supportive environments – prioritize relationships.
- Encourage reflection and change in teaching practice

Personal
- Give yourself permission/ plenty of time to think about an approach/ strategy. Given opportunity, creative ideas, guidance, will /effort, you will find a solution.
- Seek advice in the tearoom, on the net, from mentors – collaboration.
- Solutions come in parts – there are many aspects to a problem.
- Be a supportive, open teacher (so students have the faith to confide in you).
- Keep your life interesting by valuing variety – teacher as an example.
- Encourage reflection and change in personal practice to honor your craft.
- Find more peaceful strategies and foster willingness to challenge barriers to peace.
- Care for self, keep physically healthy – unwell teachers do not make peaceful companions.
- Have a place and a group of people to support your practice, affirm your value and challenge your thinking.

Education of teachers
- Teachers need more practical skills and

ideology is balanced. ■ Language sub-divisions in schools at same time as integrating groups to prevent ganging up (affiliate culturally yet also mix socially). ■ Indigenous studies in public and private schools. ■ System of approach to bullying behaviors rather than labelling individuals e.g. address role of media in social relations e.g. America's Favourite Model as desirable girl behaviour? "Go the biff?" ■ Mix grades to develop student mentor relationships and increase school unity. ■ Classroom/homeroom/form – streaming across ages eg fun, sports for more community feeling. ■ Encourage reflection and change in all areas of school relationships and practice.	experience when it comes to handling conflict and teaching peace. ■ Peace practices and principles need to infuse all education courses at university. ■ Internships and mentoring for new teachers, similar to an apprenticeship system. ■ New teachers combine part-time teaching with part-time pedagogy observation and lesson development. ■ Time given to raise issues faced by teachers. ■ Encourage reflection and change in all areas of teaching practice and curriculum.

The will to peacefulness is powerful in young people. Peace Education students will be moving into school positions, expecting to be able to make schools a more peaceful place for young people who are less favored by cultural hegemony than themselves. The main concerns of Peace Education students are how the values and practices of peace that they aspire to, will find a place in schools; whether the discourse of peace will be accepted by the wider school community; whether their own blossoming sense of belief in possible peaceful futures will continue to grow or wither. The bigger question may be whether these new teachers will have the persistence to maintain living out their aspirations in a structurally violent system that expects conformity. Perhaps the balance of community interests is shifting now, and peace may take its place among Australian values.