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Peacelearning and Its Relationship to the Teaching of Nonviolence

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Abstract

This response to Peterson's (2014) "Nonviolent Action as a Necessary Component in Educating for Democracy" enlarges the discussion of the role of the teacher/educator in deciding whether or when it is responsible to facilitate the engagement of students in acts of nonviolent dissent. Ultimately it would seem that the most important of our responsibilities as educators is to provide the moral and ethical foundations and the spaces in which students feel safe and empowered to tap into their own inner teachers. In order to promote the development of active engagement toward a democratic citizenry, including the moral imperative to transform violence, students must be helped toward a holistic understanding of the structural roots of injustice and oppression in their myriad forms. This will go beyond teaching about nonviolence and dissent to include the teaching of the concepts of peace and, by corollary, peacelearning.

This article is a response to:

Peterson, B. A. (2014). Nonviolent action as a necessary component in educating for democracy. *Democracy & Education*, 22(1), Article 2. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss1/2>

A CENTRAL AND VERY important thesis of Peterson's (2014) "Nonviolent Action as a Necessary Component in Educating for Democracy" is that there are compelling reasons that students be exposed to the ideas and practices of nonviolent dissent as an essential component of a pedagogy that teaches toward democracy and engaged citizenry. Peterson also stressed, however, that a cautious approach needs to be taken by educators in how far students are encouraged to engage in acts of nonviolence that are illegal. According to her, educators should be discouraged from supporting students engaging in acts that may irreparably harm themselves or their peers, particularly with regards to any impediments to present or future "educational opportunities" (p. 3). The essay raises a central dilemma: How do teachers effectively teach dissent in a responsible and effective manner and yet also fire up the energy of students to become engaged and active citizens?

Peterson rightfully acknowledges the lack of adequate research and study into not only the teaching of nonviolent dissent but the dilemmas facing educators of how far to go. The article raises several intriguing issues. One is the importance of educating students with the requisite knowledge and skills to influence issues of structural and institutional power and their relationship to

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democratic citizenry. In addition, Peterson extends the discussion of the importance of teaching students nonviolent dissent and its role in addressing issues of injustice. She also includes the importance of students respecting the educational rights of their fellow students in relation to the teaching of nonviolent dissent. And she places, rightfully, a great deal of responsibility on the role of the teacher in facilitating this process. At the same time, she believes it essential that nonviolent dissent be part of a pedagogy toward democratic citizenry. To this I heartily agree.

As Peterson (2014) indicated, the aim of nonviolent dissent is to disrupt the power structures of entrenched institutions, examples being school administrations, governments, and corporations, those institutions that often seek to hold onto power and resist structural changes. The idea of nonviolent dissent is to engage in actions that shift the balance of power, creating social disequilibrium, which ideally then creates space for a move to more equitable social structures and practices within the institutions, ensuring people's voices are heard, so that power may subsequently be decentralized: "If students are taught to effectively oppose the power holders, they will be better prepared to have their voices of dissent heard and taken seriously" (p. 2). And: "Raising awareness about injustice is important, but so is actively opposing the injustice through various methods of nonviolent action that can shift the power from one group to another" (p. 4). I stress the words *methods of nonviolent action* as a concept that I will revisit in this response.

According to Peterson (2014), dissent must be taught responsibly; thus, it must be taught in an effective, yet careful manner. Peterson went on to note that this is far from a straightforward process. Understanding what constitutes responsible dissent can be a conundrum. As if by way of answering her own question, at the conclusion of the essay, Peterson stated, "When having students practice what they have learned about nonviolent action, it may be prudent to engage students only in *legal* [emphasis added] acts of nonviolence because teachers are responsible for the educational welfare of their students" (p. 6). Thus, the conclusion we draw is that the thesis of Peterson is that we should teach *about* (my emphasis) the history and practice of nonviolent activism but actively resist supporting students engaging in illegal acts. Because too much is at risk.

I found myself, in reading Peterson's essay, intrigued by the dilemmas she has raised, and having devoted my career to a further understanding of peace pedagogy and praxis as well as engaging in peace and environmental activism, I am grateful that she has raised these important issues. Her discussion has brought into sharp relief the understanding that theories are fine theoretically, but it is on the ground, in the classroom, that the challenges of theories into praxis are felt.

As if echoing the tension I felt at times reading her essay, Peterson tantalized us first with the power of dissent and pointed to examples of why students need to understand it, especially as it relates to promoting effective democratic citizenry. I believe that, given an ideal world, she might recommend that students always feel free to engage in both legal and illegal acts of dissent in (and out of) schools, especially under the mentoring of a teacher, but as

we are aware, we do not have such an ideal world, and there are often constraints, ethically, legally, and morally on the obligations teachers have and that students have to one another and to themselves.

Peterson (2014) focused on the teaching of nonviolent dissent, not on the theories of nonviolence that form the basis of acts of dissent, as espoused by such thinkers as Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Krishnamurti. While space considerations in her essay may have precluded a fuller discussion, it might have been helpful to include the relationship between nonviolence as a philosophy and nonviolent dissent, that is, nonviolence in action. I believe that it is difficult to fully understand dissent, either legal or illegal, and to teach about it, without its basis in the philosophy of nonviolence (Carter & Kumar, 2010).

My response to Peterson's (2014) essay did not purport to explicitly answer the important question of what is the proper role of teachers in how far to go in promoting and affirming students' learning about and engaging in nonviolent dissent, a very intriguing question. Rather, my hope is that I might place this question within a larger discussion of the important concepts of peace education. This, I hope, might facilitate a further understanding of how nonviolence and nonviolent dissent are seen as crucial and integral components of a comprehensive pedagogy of empowered and engaged citizenry. Thus, one of my primary goals is to further explicate concepts of the growing discipline of peace education.

Some Issues Raised

Peterson's (2014) essay rightly portrayed the dilemmas of educators in understanding the complexities of our role in not only facilitating the interchange of knowledge but also acting as models for behavior and action. We are reminded of the important role of a hidden curriculum in educational settings. As Apple (1990) noted, the hidden curriculum is "the tacit teaching to students of norms, values and dispositions" (p. 14). These happen by virtue of students being part of the school's institutional community. Apple went on to note the long history of educational institutions' avoidance of any discussion of conflict and struggle, thus establishing the boundaries of school legitimacy as an emphasis on conformity and rules (p. 87). The hidden curriculum can make the tasks of teachers who wish to teach conflict and struggle as models of social change that much more challenging. One way of dealing with this challenge might be for teachers to relate their own personal stories of nonviolent resistance and dissent in the classroom without explicitly inviting students to engage in their own actions.

Another issue raised for me in Peterson's (2014) article is the issue of engagement. How do we decide if teachers actually do engage students in acts, be they legal or not? How far does the role of educator go in laying out complex issues of injustice and then leaving choices of actions to the student? Boundaries between what is legal and what is not often can be fluid. And how much might a more responsible approach actually hinder any action a student may feel compelled to take either inside or outside of school? Does a focus only on supporting legal actions actually serve the purpose of preventing dissent? Or should our aim be to merely teach *about* dissent? And which of these approaches actually might best

empower students? I cite, as examples to follow, students' active dissent during the civil rights era.

I begin with a value assumption that any approach to teaching toward nonviolence should always include teaching *about* nonviolent dissent, a topic Peterson (2014) covered well in her essay. I believe that a student's age can play a role in how much a teacher might support the actual engagement in acts of dissent. It would seem that for university students these issues would be different than those for either public high school students or middle school students, or even younger youth. Peterson used examples of a wide age range of students. For example, college students (and actually much younger children in public schools throughout the South as well) were in the forefront of the civil rights movement, even going so far as urging a reluctant Martin Luther King Jr. to move forward to support acts of civil disobedience (Halberstam, 1998). The entire civil rights movement was in good part a young people's movement. How different would our country be today if the SNCC students (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), for example, had not left their university classes, decided to sit down at lunch counters in Greensboro and Nashville, and face violence and certain arrest (LaFayette & Johnson, 2013)? If public high school girls in 1963 had not been arrested, jailed, and held without bail for demonstrating in Americus, Georgia (Anderson, 2014)? There were countless of these acts of resistance throughout the South. Indeed, very young children walked out of schools in Birmingham and went to jail as teachers looked the other way during 1963 (Houston, 2004). We are left with the question: has there *ever* been a social movement or been real social change where the energy of the young has not been present? And do we know of any instances of real, lasting structural social change without the active presence of nonviolent civil disobedience (i.e., illegal acts) and civil resistance? These important questions may only deepen the complexities of the issues outlined in the essay and the concomitant dilemmas of the educator.

Empowerment

Crucial to a discussion of nonviolence and nonviolent dissent is a discussion of the concept of *empowerment*. The implied assumption by Peterson (2014) in her essay is that, by learning about nonviolent dissent and by becoming engaged in its history and practice, students will become more empowered toward action. As Peterson pointed out, students need to be empowered not only to support justice but to actively and effectively criticize and oppose those structures and practices that lead to inequality, oppression, and lack of freedom and access for so many. I believe that teaching about nonviolent dissent is an important component of empowerment education, that this is necessary but probably not sufficient for the maximization of student engagement in social change. Peterson pointed out, however, that this *about* approach may be the safest one, especially given the hidden curriculum and the institutional structures of many public schools.

My aim in this essay is to place the teaching about and engagement with nonviolence and nonviolent dissent in their place within the growing discipline of peace studies and peace education, thus enlarging the conceptual elements that might be

introduced into classrooms which can lead to the empowerment of students. The literature on peace education includes substantial discussion of the relationship between empowered students and engaged action (Harris & Morrison, 2013). Empowerment means helping students (and those who teach them) to develop their own capacities to become effective citizens and change agents. It means educating not just *about* peace and change but *for* justice and an equitable society, based on the assumption that shared learning will lead toward solutions to the problems faced by our modern world. Teaching for peace, looking for solutions, cannot, by definition, be passive. Action is inherently part of any solution. Peace education attempts to help students move away from a position of fear and apathy to a condition of becoming and staying engaged with others and as they do so, empowerment grows. As Dewey informed us, education consists of the reconstruction or reorganization of experiences which continue to direct the course of subsequent experiences (Dewey, 1916/2011). Since the time of Dewey, we have come to understand that there can be a direct relationship between the healthy accumulation of knowledge and social action.

Peace education (and as a corollary, the teaching of nonviolence and nonviolent dissent) rests heavily on notions of teaching toward critical thinking (Snauwaert, 2011). This means that students are helped to intelligently organize their own conceptions of social problems. Habermas and others of the Frankfurt School have told us that the search for meaning comes from critically questioning the dominant ideologies that support current social realities (Habermas, 1971). Peterson (2014) rightly pointed out that it is crucial that students come to an understanding of the relationship between violence and historical and contemporary social forces that both consciously and unconsciously impact our beliefs and our actions.

There have been many examples in American history of successful efforts to empower people to work through their own experiences of oppression and to create their own futures. These have included endeavors both legal and illegal. The United States has a long history of dissent, often left out of mainstream history texts (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000; Lynd & Lynd, 1998). Legal dissent, including mass protests, strikes, and the establishment of organizations working toward changing institutional power structures are included in this history. Hull House, founded by Jane Addams in Chicago during the late 19th century, empowered immigrants with the skills to find meaningful employment. Quakers founded the American Friends Service Committee during the First World War to provide opportunities for conscientious objectors to put their skills and energy to work (Harris & Morrison, 2013). Citizenship schools, such as the Highlander Center in Tennessee, established in 1930, taught literacy to activists during the civil rights movement in the 1950s in order that Southern African Americans could pass the state requirements to vote. Many Southern blacks who were educated at the Highlander School, such as Rosa Parks, went on to engage in illegal acts blurring lines between what might be considered legal or not. In more modern times, the Responsive Classroom (<https://www.responsiveclassroom.org>), used in elementary schools, uses the concepts of *power*

with rather than *power over* and has been shown to improve academic achievement as well as higher quality instruction.

Peace Education

An understanding of nonviolence and of nonviolent dissent are inextricably linked with a pedagogy that promotes a democratic citizenry. The pedagogy of peace encompasses concepts of not only the teaching of nonviolence and of dissent but much more. Nonviolence is one part of a more holistic conceptualization of the philosophical principles and processes (skills) of peace education. Educators such as Reardon and Boulding have adopted the term *peacelearning* to connote this holistic and more active description. (Harris & Morrison, 2013).

The field of peace education has grown by leaps and bounds since its modern founding out of the ashes of World War II. The founding of the United Nations and the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) engaged world leaders and educators in finding ways to prevent the future scourge of violence and war. It was felt that since war begins in the minds of those who wage it, peace can also. The first peace studies program on a college campus was started in 1948 at Manchester College, a small Brethren institution in Indiana. Seventy years later, the study of peace is now found in well over 400 colleges and campuses, as a conservative estimate (Harris & Shuster, 2006), and the teaching of peace, in its various modes and practices, is found in many public and private schools across the USA and around the world. In addition, many community-based and after-school programs offer peace studies to both children and adults (Global Campaign for Peace Education Newsletter, 2014). Paralleling this has been an exponential growth in research devoted to the causes of violence and solutions toward peacemaking and peacebuilding. In 1965 international scholars came together to found the International Peace Research Association (IPRA), which continues to hold its biannual conferences in various sites around the world (Kodama, 2004). In 2004 the formal academic publication *Journal of Peace Education* was launched, a project of the Peace Education Commission of IPRA.

The UN and UNESCO designated 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace and 2001–2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, an initiative begun by all of the world's peace Nobel laureates. Throughout the decade and throughout the world, thousands of educators and citizens were involved, and continue to be, in educating for peace. Central to this is the idea of building peace, which is peace as positive, holistic, visionary, empowering, and transformative, all linked to peace action.

What Is Peace? What Is Peace Education?

Before conceptually elaborating on peace education, we must understand more fully what is meant by *peace*. This term is often bantered about without a real conceptual analysis of its meaning and uses. While often used flippantly, the term *peace* also can bring knee-jerk connotations of visions of drawings of happy children and rainbows. This can lead to a marginalization of a discussion of peace or, worse yet, claims by some, often those with political power, that the teaching of peace will promote a weak citizenry,

that is, students who will not be prepared in the event of war, or will lead students into acts that go against their supposed patriotic duties. The teaching of peace is not without its powerful distracters. Scholars and educators who engage in the teaching of peace have opened themselves up to intense criticism. Yet the study of peace continues to grow.

I use the term *peace* in its holistic sense. A single sentence can hardly define it. It is inextricably tied up with notions of justice. It implies more than the absence of violence, as so aptly pointed out in the essay by Peterson (2014). Peace “implies human beings working together to resolve conflicts, respect standards of justice, satisfy basic needs and honor human rights” (Harris & Morrison, 2013, p. 14). Bound up with this is a visionary concept of the world we seek and a respect for life and the dignity of each human being. The absence of war and violence may be seen by some (particularly from the view of police and the military) as peace; however, war, violence, and peace are not correlatives. The term *structural violence* is used to denote the kind of violence that is not overt but is violence nevertheless, because basic needs are not being met, undue power is in the hands of a few, and freedom of thought may be nonexistent. Structural violence means that standards of justice are not upheld.

Some scholars define peace using a relationship approach. The National Peace Academy describes peace as “the wholeness created by right relationship with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which we are a part” (Harris & Morrison, 2013, p. 14). This definition is closely aligned with the Earth Charter, a declaration of fundamental principles for building a peaceful and sustainable world. The Earth Charter, an excellent teaching tool, recognizes the interrelationship among peace, justice, the environment, economic well-being, human rights, and human development. The charter was seeded in 1987 at the UN World Commission on the Environment.

If peace is defined as above, peace education, or *peacelearning*, is the pedagogical process that can lead to peace. The word *education* comes from the Latin word *educare*, “to draw or to lead out.” Inherent in this root word is the admonition to educators that first and foremost our task is to draw from within our students their highest ideals, their visions, and their ideas on how to make for a peaceful world. Peace educators recognize that conflict is ubiquitous. It is not to be avoided but addressed in ways that promote understanding and transformation. Peace is therefore not the absence of conflict, for conflict is always with us. We must learn, at times, the value (and the risks) of conflict and its role in transformation. Peace educators address the root causes of conflict and violence. The long term goal is to create in human consciousness the continued desire to pursue peaceful solutions to problems of violence and to transform human values toward nonviolence.

Essential Concept in the Teaching of Peace

It is generally accepted among scholars of peace education that there are essential concepts associated with the teaching of peace (Harris & Morrison, 2013). In addition to students learning about the roots of violence, both overt and structural, students of peace are taught that security ultimately comes not from the barrel of a gun, but human security is rooted in everyone in the world having

access to the basic needs of life: food, clothing, home, and the freedom to think and act without fear of retribution. While peacekeeping is important in stopping violence (i.e., police, the military), lasting peace results from peacemaking *and* peacebuilding efforts (Galtung, 1990). And given our current understanding of the threats imposed by climate change, any pedagogy of peace must understandably include notions of environmental sustainability and environmental justice.

In order to build a more peaceful world, we must engage in a futures orientation. Visioning the world as we would like it, taking a longer view, also includes studying the history of wars and violence, coming to some understanding of causes, and studying the history of peace efforts and what has worked to stop and to transform violence.

Students must be taught the skills of conflict resolution. I prefer the term *conflict transformation*, as there is common understanding that the peace that comes with resolution often does not lead toward real and lasting change. These skills include understanding anger, its roots and how it escalates, anger management, listening, using the first person to express feelings (“I” messages), and learning to engage in others in dialogue and conversation, to hear as well as to be heard. Underlying this is the need to learn the philosophical concepts associated with peace: compassion, caring, empathy, listening, humility, and the willingness to be open to understanding those with whom we disagree and differ. These are the basis for the philosophy of nonviolence. These, along with a willingness to question structures of power and oppression and to recognize injustice, form the basis of empowerment that can lead toward students becoming engaged citizens.

Students are taught toward a worldview, one that encompasses an understanding of the United Nations and the efforts toward a more inclusive world order. The efforts of the millions of nongovernmental and grassroots organizations around the world that are working toward a better future are included (Hawkins, 2007). One of the more hopeful movements of the last few decades has been that of restorative justice, most evident in the increasing use of truth and reconciliation commissions in areas of the world torn apart by war and violence. The most vivid example is that of South Africa, shortly after Nelson Mandela became its first postapartheid president in the early 1990s. There are signs in some countries of a return to more ancient and indigenous forms of settling differences and resolving violence. The movement toward restorative justice is happening also within the United States criminal justice system.

Sustainability

King Jr., in his famous speech in April of 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City, spoke the following:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly shift from a “thing oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. (King Jr., 1992, para. 45)

This quotation relates to the environmental crisis facing the world where an overproduction of things and a materialistic lifestyle are leading to the destruction of ecosystems, the extinction of species, and the alteration of weather patterns. We as humans have benefited greatly from the development of the use of fossil fuels over the last two hundred years, which has led to huge advancements in civilization. Now, however, we face a very different future, a long emergency, one in which we will inevitably need to create serious and rapid energy descent plans and greatly reduce our use of carbon. The information telling us this, such as recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has been out there, but as is our wont much of the time, we have ignored the evidence and continued business as usual. There is no historical precedent for what we must do. In short, a paradigm shift is needed. There can be no lasting peace nor justice without an earth restored. It is the impoverished and the vulnerable who are often on the front lines of the effects of climate change.

Orr (2009), an environmental scholar, has reminded us that how we got to where we are now, in our present state of planetary emergency, is not the result of the work of ignorant people but, for the most part, highly educated MBAs and PhDs. The designers of the Holocaust were, as an example, the heirs of Kant and Goethe. Education does not serve as a barrier to egregious actions nor guarantee decency. More of the same kind of knowledge cannot get us out of the fix we are in. One aim of education should not be only subject matter knowledge but mastery of one’s own person or, as Verghagan (2010), an environmental theologian, has told us, fostering our own “ecological identity,” finding our unique place in this world of wonder so that we can become truly human. This is inherently a spiritual process.

The maintenance of hope, as well as crucial knowledge building, visioning, and acting, will be the task of educators in the next decades. This is crucial to educating for a more peaceful world. As Orr (2009) has noted, hope means putting aside resistance to that which we don’t wish to face and just getting down to business. Students must come to know their own “places,” including who are the members of their communities and what shared skills can be offered in this altered world.

The concept of *nonviolence*, as a focus of Peterson (2014) in her essay, is an essential component in the teaching of peace. This includes its philosophical elements as well as its practical applications. In the words of King Jr., “In a real sense we must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish as fools” (King Jr., 1961, p. 11).

Nonviolence has been described as a set of skills, as a method for resolving problems and conflicts and as a way of life. The Center for Nonviolence & Peace Studies (<http://web.uri.edu/nonviolence>) at the University of Rhode Island describes nonviolence as follows:

The skills and methods of nonviolence are closely related to those involved in mediation, interest-based negotiation, counseling and process consultation. Nonviolence has a long history, nationally and internationally, of creating positive social change, peacebuilding and elevating the quality of human interaction.

There has not always been agreement among those using nonviolent means of solving problems on exactly which methods are most useful and successful. Nonviolence may be seen as a continuum of behaviors, from talking it out to civil disobedience, that is, the breaking of the law for the sake of conscience. Nonviolence has at its roots the essential belief in the possibility of human transformation. Change can occur at an individual level as well as a societal one. Educators need to see peacebuilding within a holistic paradigm, as having its essential roots in the work necessary for inner peace and outer peace. Inner peace does not mean merely a state of inner being that ignores the reality of human suffering. Thus, a summation of the principles upon which nonviolence is based is the word *love*, or *agape*, as the term was used by King Jr.

Nonviolence promotes empathy and helps students become compassionate toward the suffering of others at a personal level, not just through study. Education can awaken young people's hearts to the suffering and misery that exists in the world and imbue a sense of compassionate efficacy to work toward changing structures that oppress and impoverish. Gandhi had a holistic view of education that relied upon the hand, heart, mind, and body to arouse in students a sense of common human destiny.

Conclusion

In order to promote the development of active engagement toward a democratic citizenry, including the moral imperative to transform violence, students must be helped toward a holistic understanding of the structural roots of injustice and oppression in their myriad forms. This will go beyond teaching about dissent to include the teaching of the concepts of peace and, by corollary, peacelearning. The teaching of nonviolence is a natural outgrowth of this process. A holistic teaching includes the notion that nonviolence, and its corollary of nonviolent dissent, is not simply a method of protest but a system of thought based on a foundation of love: love for oneself, for one's neighbor, for one's community, for all of humanity, and for the earth as a whole. And love toward purposeful change. Nonviolence is a way of life. It is empowering because at its core is the idea that those whom one opposes, who oppress, and who may wield power may ultimately be transformed.

It is hoped this response to this most provocative essay by Peterson (2014) has permitted an enlargement of the discussion around the role of the teacher/educator as to whether it is responsible to facilitate the engagement of students in acts of nonviolent dissent. My reading of Peterson's essay shows she rightly placed a heavy responsibility on teachers for this process. History shows us that both college and public and private school students have engaged through the years in many acts of both legal and illegal dissent, both in and out of schools. Sometimes even the illegal acts had the explicit or implicit sanction of teachers or administrators. The author raises many questions in her essay which I admit I may be only obliquely addressing in my response. However, I hope that I have permitted an expansion of the discussion to include notions of the larger pedagogy of peace and peacelearning and the place of the teaching about nonviolent dissent within this. While I hope I have not given short shrift to the important issue of how to teach nonviolence responsibly, to me ultimately it would seem that the most important of our

responsibilities as educators is to provide the moral and ethical foundations, the settings, the conversations in classrooms, the role modeling in which students feel safe and empowered to tap into their own inner teachers. Whatever acts follow, either in the now or in the future, will be of their own choosing.

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