

Children as 'Change-agents' of Peace

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Background

The One People One Planet initiative is a child-centred project that uses current and future communications technologies - primarily the Internet - to facilitate safe and secure contact, collaboration and interaction between children under 12. Based in New Zealand, its vision is global as it seeks to empower children in making a tangible contribution to building a more peaceful world. In addition to a growing body of empirical evidence gained from working directly with children, it is essential to the project to verify its basic premise that young children are more than capable of operating with the underlying concepts and of working together to articulate their ideas and influence the future.

Introduction

For too long children have been shielded from dialogue concerning war and peace. We do not teach children to openly discuss or take action in matters of peace and war because, having little or no sense of power to make change, we ourselves do not take action. This paper argues that children are both competent and capable of developing informed views on the concepts of war and peace, and of desirous of generating new solutions to the peace process.

Children and peace

Children should be more than simply passive recipients of the world they are given. Instead, they should be active participants. Boulding (1972) has discussed the need of children to perceive themselves as 'change-agents' and 'shapers of the future'. However, the potential of children to meaningfully interpret their world and effect change is highly underestimated. In fact, Myers-Walls, Meyers-Bowman, & Ann (1993) state that with regards to the subject of war, adults deny the possibility of it, as a defence mechanism, when faced with questions about it from children. LaFarge (1987) calls this a 'pact of silence' and Jacobs (1988) has coined it the 'ostrich effect'. Both authors argue that because there is no dialogue adults assume that children are ignorant and therefore

protected from the fear. However, what the children actually learn is that the subject of war is taboo.

War exposes people to situations that no adult, much less a child, should ever have to experience. The chaos and trauma of being actually involved in war deeply affects children and can interfere with their acquisition of healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. This experience can not only negatively affect their own well-being, but also damage their ability to adapt and contribute to a healthy, productive society. In our current global climate, education via open discussion is one of the principal means available to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression, and war (Delors, 1996).

Peace is more than the absence of war. It is an active process among and within people. It is not just the absence of conflict, on the contrary, peace incorporates creative and non-violent responses to conflict (Myers-Walls et al., 1993). War and peace affect families and communities, and because children cannot be shielded from their realities, war and peace are subjects about which children should learn. Children should be empowered to shape their futures. Myers-Walls et al., (1993) recommend that talking about peace with children should involve; helping children to deal with their fears about war; finding ways to involve children to give them a sense of control; teaching positive, non-violent approaches for dealing with conflict; and teaching strategies so they may work actively for peace. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, in engaging in social interaction, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them, including concepts of peace and war.

Children have a natural predisposition for learning from others, making friends and resolving conflict – this is part and parcel of their psychological, social and intellectual development. Rogoff (2003) calls this 'participatory appropriation' and explains that children change through



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their participation, collaboration and discussion in activities with other people. Through their involvement with others they are able to transform their understanding and thus become better prepared to engage in informed decision making. Vygotskian theory also argues that children acquire understanding of the world through joint action with others (Smith, Dockrell, & Tomlinson, 1997). By working collaboratively, and dialogue, children come to understand the meaning of others, internalise them and use these understandings to tackle new problems on their own. Piagetian theory further asserts that children learn through exploring their world freely because children can only understand their world through their actions on it (Smith et al., 1997).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model also provides a sound framework in which we can better understand how children's views about war and peace develop. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that we need to place more emphasis on studying the wider macro, exo and meso influences on what and how children learn. His model asserts that children's development and learning occur as part of a complex system of relationships within

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family, among peers and society. Therefore, the notion that parents and/or educators can truly shield children from concepts like war and peace is a fallacy. It's valuable to heed Mahatma Gandhi's words, "if we are to teach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with children."(cited Iyer, 1973).

Conflicts are omnipresent in young children's lives. Contrary to what one might think, conflicts are not negative as such. On one hand, conflicts are intrinsically linked to any personal and social change; as such they are necessary and valuable. On the other hand, conflicts are too often managed violently and, in this sense, they have to be dealt with through education (Harris, 2002).

The ultimate goal of peace education is to minimise and eventually eliminate various forms of conflict through consciousness raising, vision and action (Brantmeier, 2003). We should invest in peace education by helping children to develop cognitive competencies and by helping them to see themselves as 'change agents'. The twentieth century has given rise to a number of educational approaches and theories linked to peace education (Brantmeier, 2003; Brown, Emidio-Caston, & Bernard, 2001; Freire, 2000; Galtung, 1969; Huckle &

Sterling, 1996; Montessori, 1974; Noddings, 1993; Prutzman, Stern, Burger, & Bodenhamer, 1988) however all are very similar in their essence; they value dialogue, co-operative behaviour and a democratic community of inquiry, and they aim to stimulate youngsters' critical and caring thinking.

Daniel, Doudin, & Pons (2006) state that to build a culture of peace in children's minds, the children must first learn to think in a critical and caring manner about situations or concepts related to war and peace (for example; definitions of war and peace; their various manifestations, causes and consequences; and means of action) and about situations or concepts related to comprehending the world (identity, privacy, equality, justice, fundamental rights, plurality, relationships and social responsibility). Through open, cross-cultural dialogue children may come to better understand, critique and create change with regard to concepts related to war and peace. Children need to develop a sense of competence and come to realise that their opinions can make a difference.

Talking with others, particularly of their own age, about war and peace helps children to better understand the world in which they live. Dialogue, especially cross-cultural dialogue, encourages children to consider multiple perspectives and other world-views. We must believe in children's abilities to not only comprehend, but effect change, in the world. Children are capable of not only acquiring knowledge, but through interaction and collaboration creating and generating new knowledge, new solutions and new possibilities in terms of the peace process.

Conclusion

The mission of One People One Planet is to bring a diverse range of children together to create mutual respect and acceptance, leading to a more peaceful world. Its aim is to harness current and future technologies to create and sustain a child-driven and child-centered platform of interaction and collaboration. Children will come to realise the significance of their voice in the global arena with regard to their perspective on peace. This has the potential to intrinsically motivate them to see themselves as change agents and shapers of the future.

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