

Peace Education and Children's Experiences

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Peace education has a long tradition. In 1890 the Dutch teacher Herman Molkenboer pleaded for international cooperation in education instead of an education serving nationalistic and chauvinistic goals.¹ Especially the subject history was accused of nationalism and chauvinism by teachers who wanted an education for peace. Before World War II the peace education movement had two basic roots. The first root was the original peace movement. It was a very complex social and cultural phenomenon, fed by religion, by socialistic and anarchistic theory and practice, and by League of Nations propagandists. In this antimilitaristic tradition, peace education was fighting against war, prejudices, and militarism and was trying to promote international understanding.

The second root of pre-war peace education was the *Reformpädagogische Bewegung* (New Education Movement). Teachers were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. They wanted to prepare a better world through education and were also influenced by Tolstoi who, they said, had realized the new education in his school at Yashana Poljana. Besides these influences they knew the theory of Maria Montessori. This theory was early recognized by Dutch teachers of the New Education Movement. Maria Montessori was thought to have discovered a scientific base for an education according to the laws of nature in child development. Following these laws of nature in education the child would grow up without aggressions and frustrations, which she said were the causes of war and injustice. This form of child rearing would end all human aggression and violence because these phenomena were caused by wrong education. Looking back at the pre-war peace education, we see that education tried to foster a better world through education and used ideas both from the politics-inspired peace movement and from educational reformers.

361

Due to the outbreak of World War II, both the Dutch Peace Movement and the ideas of peace education were halted. The only survival of peace education was the idea of international understanding.

The political and cultural climate became cool under the influence of the cold war until the sixties. Only when the relations between the nations became better was a revival of the Dutch Peace Movement possible. This also led to a new start of peace education. However, this new peace education concept was not a product of pedagogics or educators. It was more a by-product of a new discipline: peace research, which for political reasons is called "polemologie" (*Polemos* = war) in Holland.² This twin brother relation with peace-research focused the attention on objectives of peace education and the construction of curricula. Peace education was concentrated on peace-research intentions: children educated to make peace and save the world from an atomic disaster. Peace education wanted to make clear to children that after 1945 the world situation had changed because of the atomic threat. The unspoken presupposition was that no man who was really informed about nuclear reality could ever be indifferent about the dangers of war and the risks to peace. A problematic point, however, is situated in the interpretation of nuclear reality and peace problems. In

peace research the discussion about the interpretation and analysis of war and peace³ raged.

“Traditional” peace research focused on knowledge about war and peace and made the prevention of a nuclear war its most important point. It studied cold war and the causes of war, armament, escalation, etc. A positive peace concept was found in international understanding. Conflict control, social justice, and human rights were important subjects. The United Nations was seen as a future world government. A more critical view came from so-called “critical” peace research. Critical peace research was of the opinion that war and positive peace were not the concepts to be used. They accused traditional peace research of being an ideological force that legitimated unequal social structures between the First and Third Worlds. By promoting nonviolence, traditional peace research told people that fighting against poverty, injustice, etc. is dangerous. To overcome this problem, Johan Galtung,⁴ the well-known Norwegian peace researcher, proposed the concept of structural violence. In this concept poverty, unequal economic relations, unequal power, etc., are a matter of structural violence. Fighting against war without attacking the conditions of violence and war is seen as keeping the status-quo.

The development of peace education in Holland was at first concentrated on these two streams of peace research. Most projects of peace education borrowed from both traditional and critical peace research. They produced curricula containing peace research information which was mostly concentrated in case studies that promoted consciousness of the issues involved in war and peace. The topics that were used in these projects were cold war, the arms race, international political and economic systems, aggression and violence, but also Third World issues, such as Cuba and the problem of cane sugar, Angola and bauxite. Projects were developed for pupils of secondary education of 15 years and older. At this age children are supposed to be able to acquire real knowledge and insight into these problems. The method of teaching by way of controversial issues was defended with the argument that in this way adolescents became armed against indoctrination.

During the seventies a project for elementary school pupils started from a concept of “development through knowledge.” Children’s experience and consciousness of war and peace problems are different from the perceptions of adults. Asking what adult-like notions of peace, discontentment, and violence mean to children is necessary to assure adult project makers of the right to confront children with these problems. In the opinion of the “project peace educators,” confrontation with the concepts of war and peace is “necessary” because every child often experiences nonpeaceful situations:

He watches television where he sees the news or some films which contain violence. He can also take part in situations which are unfair, or which he experiences as being unfair to him, e.g., when adults use their strength to show the child their power over him, or in the streets which are meant for traffic instead of being used as a playground. Children often have quarrels which are solved with or without aid of grown-ups and finally do not let us forget the enormous number of war toys.⁴

On the other hand, it was difficult for the project to interpret exactly the differences between the experiences of children and grown-ups. Six differences are explored which, however, are very global and hardly experimentally supported:

1. Children are daily confronted with the presence of unequal relationships caused by the fact that they are smaller.
2. Children have a much smaller perspective of power.
3. Their surroundings are confined to a much smaller area: they cannot look about very far.
4. Children need the feeling of safety to be able to develop: they are in greater need of security.
5. When we compare them to adults, children are less independent: they are less capable of coping with responsibility.
6. Children are dependent on adults: an unequal relationship exists between adults and children.

The younger the child, the farther he is from the adult world, and the more of these main differences can be applied to him.⁶

Because the elementary school project "Peace Education" was a curriculum project (however open and flexible it was) and not a research project, no further information about children's experiences were derived systematically. Only very common data from school practices gave us some support for our presuppositions. For a theory of peace education, the project developed an important distinction between material and formal analysis of problems of war and positive peace.

363

Material analysis is concentrated on knowledge and themes, whereas formal analysis stresses the importance of attitudes: "People who are prepared and able to work toward peace are also people who are able and prepared to go deeply into worldly problems. They show qualities like emancipation, ability to judge critically, being open to information, solidarity, active democratic disposition, ability to defend oneself against manipulation, being aware of prejudices etc."⁷

Formulating those attitudes as educational objectives, the project makers were conscious of the fact that they were far beyond the reach of the project. But the project had also an appealing character. Within and around the Peace Movement it forced educators in all educational fields to think about the problem of educating children in a violent, threatening, and senseless culture. On the other hand, the results and theory of the project were for many educators an answer to their own problem of uncertainty, lack of hope and basic trust, together with a great fear about the destiny of the world and the fate of the people in it.

We don't know exactly how children and youth experience and manage these problems, but we have some indications:

- The number of suicides among children and youth is increasing.
- There seems to be a general feeling among youth of indifference, depression, and superficiality: "Let's live as pleasantly as possible, for life is short."

- The greatest hit last year was the song "Als de bom valt" ("When the Bomb Falls") by the group *Doe Maar* (Just Do It).
- Many young people are fleeing into conservative, fundamentalistic religions or into the drug scene.
- Conservative political parties have a great following of youngsters despite the fact that these same parties are attacking young people's rights, jobs, and future possibilities.
- Among young people racism and neo-fascism is growing.

Maybe Horst Richter⁸ is right when he says that in our culture there is an enormous, collective, suppressed anguish of death.

I think peace education has the possibility of being an answer to the problems mentioned above. However, peace education needs more insights into children's knowledge, experiences, and feelings about those problems. We need lifeworld analyses focusing on children's knowledge, experiences, and feelings of war and peace problems. Most studies in this matter are of older date and are focused on cognitive categories related to, for example, Piaget's development theory. We hardly know anything about children under the age of twelve in these matters. Starting from drawings of war and peace, we want to ask and discuss concepts and feelings that are related to children's everyday experiences of these problems. We cannot yet present results of our research, but we are convinced this research will be important for educational theory and praxis, now and in the future.

Notes

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3. B. V. A. Rölingh, *Vredeswetenschap* (Utrecht, 1981).
4. J. Galtung, *Theories of peace*.
5. J. Galtung, "Theorien des Friedens." In: D. Senghaas (ed.), *Kritische Friedensforschung*. (Frankfurt, 1971).
6. J. Galtung, "Probleme der Friedenserziehung." In: Chr. Wulf (ed.), *Kritische Friedenserziehung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973).
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8. H. Richter, *Zur Psychologie des Friedens*. (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1982).