11-2011

Restorative Classrooms: Critical Peace Education in a Juvenile Detention Home

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Keywords: *critical peace education methodologies, curriculum, peace education, pedagogy, reflective writing, restorative classroom, war education*

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Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

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The Need for Peace Education

What can critical pedagogy contribute to preventing and reducing the violence endemic in the communities of many adjudicated students? While some of the literature on peace education is highly theoretical, I come from the perspective that probing and developing what actually goes on in classrooms (or other venues of peace education) will also bear fruit with respect to the transformative peace and justice mission of critical peace education. First I will discuss some of the relevant critical peace education (CPE) theory; then the majority of this article will offer a narrative description of some of the most successful activities my middle and high school students and I engaged in through the lens of CPE theory. My primary purpose here is to advance the growing depth and

legitimacy of the field through this CPE analysis of a specific curriculum practiced in a U.S. juvenile detention home classroom. I hope this analysis will contribute to the growing body of work on the *practice* of critical peace education. This is especially important work for critical peace educators to engage in, I believe, because our field remains so little understood outside of our niche. Also, in these intensely partisan and divisive times, our work, like my students' lives, can too often become politicized and seen as dangerous. Hence my call for us to tell our stories.

All critical peace education assumes that classrooms are not politically neutral places. My challenge teaching writing, literature and conflict resolution for three years with adjudicated students was that my students were often precisely the marginalized young men and women who lived the structural violence which Galtung (1996) and Freire (2003) theorized. Their lives were too often what critical theorist Habermas (1981) might have referred to as ―colonized,‖ under society's microscope. By this Habermas meant that the very communicative, daily social spaces of their lives were shaped by political, economic, cultural and educational systems. Essentially Habermas argued that critical dialogue (―communicative action‖ in his phrasing) between individual citizens was a vital socio-political space where true democracy was either reproduced or threatened. As he wrote, ―this leaves culture with the task of supplying reasons why an existing political order deserves to be recognized‖ (Habermas 1981, 188). He continues, ―...the functions of exploitation and repression fulfilled by rulers and ruling classes in the systemic nexus of material production have to be kept as latent as possible‖ (Habermas 1981, 188). In other words, the cultural narratives and political and economic systems which oppressed my students were likely hidden to them, yet they actively reproduced

this culture by default and would probably continue to do so until those oppressive cultural norms and politico-economic systems became visible. Certainly they had no illusions about the cultural forces of oppression; they knew far more experientially about such oppression than me! Yet there is a subtle but important difference between the awareness of such realities, and possessing the skills and *belief in one's own agency* needed to be a part of transforming structural violence. This subversive objective has always been central to critical pedagogy: ―…as a result of an evolving critical pedagogy, teachers and students will gain an ability to act in the role of democratic citizens" (Kincheloe in McLaren and Kincheloe 2007, 38; see also McLaren 2005, 83; Malott and Porfilio 2011). Planting the seeds of such agency, the ability to be a thoughtful, active, critical citizen, was a central goal of my pedagogy.

My students' lives were politicized spaces in ways often beyond their control. I designed my curriculum with this in mind. One half of my imperative was to help them, through our readings, discussions, activities and writing, to deconstruct their own choices as well as the larger systems of which we are all a part. The other half of this imperative was to offer compelling examples of social change, and to facilitate their development of the skills necessary to contribute to it. In so doing, I hoped to help them build practical skills for their future, yes, but also the social, creative, imaginative and critical skills they would need to navigate futures which they quite rightly viewed as dangerous and uncertain. (Like other ―d-home"—detention home—educators, I had students insist to me that it did not matter if they graduated, as they would not likely live until graduation!) Boulding (2000) in particular, of course, emphasized the role of imagination as an essential skill for building peace and social justice. Without this skill, students and

societies are hard pressed to develop empathy, understand themselves as empowered agents or to envision a more peaceful, just future for their communities.

Recent scholarly work has included attention to the rationale for and philosophical underpinnings of peace education. Bajaj (2008) recently called for scholars to ―reclaim‖ critical peace education in particular (as opposed to generic peace education). Calling for increasing empirical description, such as I attempt to provide below, she writes that, ―The field would benefit from greater emphasis on both research for the sake of greater knowledge about local meanings and experiences….‖ (Bajaj 2008). Significantly, Bajaj links empiricism to this attention to local context and argues that this type of empiricism is essential to a successful CPE reclamation. It is my hope that the below classroom narrative demonstrates just such a localized application of CPE theory to a juvenile detention home context.

In addition to a need for localized empiricism, scholars of critical peace education have put forward other important critiques of typical approaches to the collaborative, community-building activities common in CPE; Beckerman (2007), for example, argues that the too-individualized approach he often observed in Israel-Palestine dialogue groups might well be insufficient for addressing power imbalances and truly empowering students to collectively act for sustainable political transformation. As he writes, ―At this point we might either despair or try to challenge present realities and theoretical understandings by attempting to redirect educational activities from their dealing with cognitive categories to their work towards changing the relations of power through active participation in the world‖ (2007, online). Here Beckerman puts his fingers on the pulse of how I understand critical peace education. Because asymmetrical power relationships

are a key driver of so many interpersonal, community and international conflicts, empowering students with the skills, agency and knowledge to transform unjust social, economic and political systems is the ultimate objective of CPE. Of course, this is a common theme throughout the literature on critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux offers a similar observation when he writes, —Critical pedagogy refuses the official lies of power. On the contrary, paraphrasing Bill Moyers, it is, in part, a project whose purpose is to dignify _people so they become fully free to claim their moral and political agency.' Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents…." (Giroux in McLaren and Kincheloe 2007, p. 1). This is the theoretical lens I will apply to the classroom curriculum narrated below.
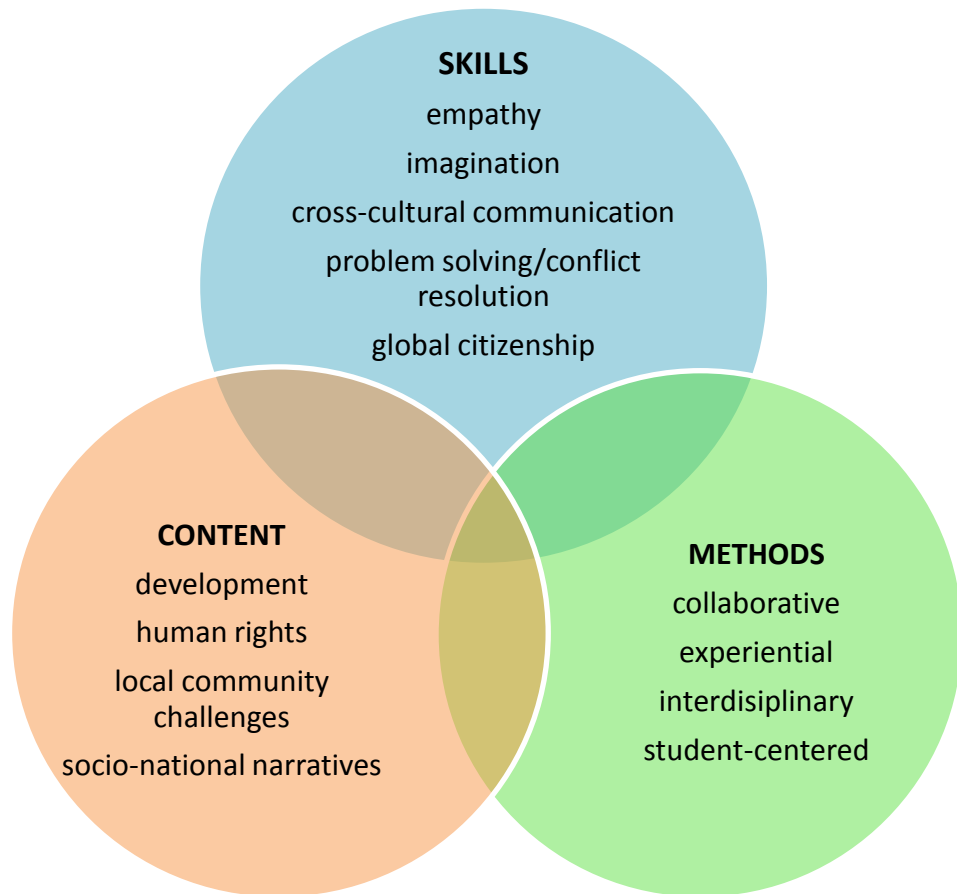
Other recent scholarship in peace education generally has traced major themes within peace education or given specific attention to barriers which peace educators too often face (Ndura-Ouédraogo and Amster 2009; Harris and Morrison 2003). Recently an *Encyclopedia of Peace Education* (Bajaj 2008) began the work of tracing founders of the field, major themes, debates within the field, and various theories of peace education. Scholars such as Rizvi (2004) examine education in the context of globalization through a post-colonial lens. While he does not address CPE directly, he does offer an astute discussion of the need for educators to, as I interpret him, unpack with their students dominant narratives relevant to the War on Terror, surely an urgent discussion for critical peace education classrooms given the millions of lives impact by this war. That said, there is no —practice piece" here; the article is wholly theoretical. Another study of peace education in former-Yugoslavia examines student development of —peace knowledge" (Wisler 2010).   It provides an impressively personal and detailed narrative of the

phenomenological experience of three students, yet its purpose does not seem to have been an integration of their experiences with CPE. Another recent study of a higher education conflict resolution classroom does an impressive job of sharing with us a classroom narrative regarding critical reflection portfolios; the authors are admirably transparent in their assessments of what was successful and what was not with this experiment, and to my mind, integrate CPE impressively. For example, while they do not address social power dynamics outside the classroom, the explicit goals of the critical reflection portfolios and collaborative learning model they employed were to begin developing the critical analysis habits of mind which are essential for later engaging structural violence (Kelly and Betts 2008). Most importantly they provide details of classroom practice which can too often be lost in pedagogical theorizing.

In other recent scholarship, Julie Morton offers a strong integration of teaching literacy and teaching critical conflict transformation skills. The dialogical, creative and critical thinking skills involved in study of literature, Morton argues, can be used by a CPE teacher for also teaching the skills of conflict transformation. As she writes, "I propose that we teach conflict transformation in public schools today by integrating peace skills into literacy classes. Literacy implies an active and investigatory approach to text, and conflict transformation entails the same active and investigatory approach to conflict" (2009, 45). While she does offer some examples from classrooms, her work is more predominantly an inspiring theoretical argument for the natural fit between critical literacy and conflict transformation skills, as opposed to a detailed classroom narrative. Again, while theory is essential, it is equally vital to illuminate and evaluate what critical peace educators actually do in their classrooms. This aids new critical peace educators,

as it facilitates their conceptualization of how they themselves might undertake a critical peace pedagogy. In addition, I believe these stories from the classroom are essential to making the case for our work in an often skeptical (and funding-starved) environment.

I will offer here a few words on my understanding and experience of peace education in general before proceeding to specifics from my own classroom. One key insight is that peace education involves all three traditional aspects of curriculum design: skills, content and methodology.

SKILLS
empathy
imagination
cross-cultural communication
problem solving/conflict resolution
global citizenship

CONTENT
development
human rights
local community challenges
socio-national narratives

METHODS
collaborative
experiential
interdisiplinary
student-centered

Important skills include communication, compromise, problem-solving (especially in cross-cultural contexts), imagination, global citizenship and empathy. Common content areas in critical peace education include protecting the environment, human rights, understanding the processes of stereotyping and its relationship to

violence, disarmament, or the underlying socio-cultural, historical, political and economic causes of war. Because of the role that socio-national narratives often play in facilitating war, I often argue that being able to articulate and trace the development of one's own national narrative is an important content area for critical peace education. Can students (and teachers?) identify the historical and cultural myths which have been used to justify violence? Centered as critical peace education is around compelling and authentic problems faced by particular students, the curriculum is almost certain to be interdisciplinary. Relatedly, the activities and lesson plans designed by a critical peace educator should be experiential. I join numerous other critical peace educators in arguing that this interdisciplinary nature of a critical peace education curriculum is crucial because the academic divisions themselves are artificial (Harris and Morrison 2003). They have traditionally served the needs of bureaucracies and corporations, not students (McCarthy 2003; Giroux 2010).

Crucially, a critical peace educator's methods should flow from and resonate consistently with the above skills and content. Methodology therefore should be active, consensual, participatory, collaborative and engaged in real-world problems—problems significant to the communities from which the students hail (Duckworth 2008; Boulding 2000; Harris and Morrison 2003; Freire 2003; Montessori 1972). Such methodology should honor students' cultures and full humanity. For example, as Boulding and McCarthy both suggest, a critical peace educator would not likely fear to ―diverge" from a prescribed curriculum, which may or may not be designed by someone who understands the needs of individual students in a particular local context (Boulding 2000, 154-5; McCarthy 2003, 53). Boulding observed that this common lack of relevance helps

explain the rapid growth of home-schooling, community-based learning and other alternative approaches (Boulding 2000, 227-229). Relatedly, outcomes and assessment of student progress in a peace education classroom must be authentic and holistic. Has the student grown as a person? A thinker? A listener and communicator? A critical, global citizen? Based on my classroom experience, such a qualitative, subjective evaluation often causes discomfort in the very educational bureaucracies, so dependent on standardized tests, in which I would like to see critical peace education mainstreamed (for more on this see Kozol 1991 or Love 2011). This, again, is why I argue that scholar-practitioners must tell their stories, building a rich, varied collective narrative of the power of critical peace education to transform lives and communities.

Since I have suggested that critical peace education is sometimes greeted with suspicion or confusion, a brief reflection on why such skepticism still exists might be of use before proceeding further. My purpose here is both to make an argument for mainstreaming critical peace education (Brantmeier 2011), as well as to paint a portrait of what it might look like in practice, especially in an often violent context. One argument critics of peace education have made is the inherent political bias that they perceive. In the course of examining the underlying causes of war and violence, critical peace education classrooms often naturally challenge dominant socio-political narratives and even deeper cultural narratives about the nature of human beings and social systems. Along with many other peace educators, I would respond that the manner in which we currently teach normalizes violence and war. Elise Boulding (2000) classically made this argument in her work *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*. She argues that, ―history is generally thought of as the rise and fall of empires, a chronicle of reigns, wars,

battles, and military and political revolutions; in short, the history of power—who tames whom and who controls whom" (Boulding 2000, 1). Continues Boulding, ―Yet a closer inspection of social records, the bias towards reporting war notwithstanding, reveals a much richer tapestry of human activities" (Boulding 2000, 15). Boulding here notes that history education (and other forms of socialization) too often simply understands the human experience as a series of wars, presenting war almost as a generational rite of passage. As a critical peace educator, I argue that such a view of war as inevitable can readily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Critical peace education is then a necessary corrective to present biases long unrecognized and unchallenged in most national curriculums.

Numerous other scholars and practitioners of critical pedagogy concur that, given the injustices and inequities of our social, political and economic systems, neutrality is no virtue (McCarthy 2003; Sintos 2009). As Roger Simons writes,

> As an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life, education always presupposes a vision of the future. In this respect a curriculum and its supporting pedagogy are a version of our own dreams for ourselves, our children, and our communities. But such dreams are never neutral; they are always someone's dreams and to the degree that they are implicated in organizing the future for others they always have a moral and political dimension. (cited in Giroux 2004, 372).

If I was going to meet the needs of my typically marginalized and economically disempowered students, my classroom was going to have to be a safe space for them, which meant forgoing illusions of a culturally or economically level playing field. By

opening my classroom to critical dialogue about the systemic violence my students faced as described below, I could at least begin to, in whatever days or weeks I might have with a particular student, foster skills and awareness needed for him or her to become a more empowered citizen.

On Writing and Empathy: Tell Your Story

―Why'd I have to come to jail to read a good book?" ~15 year old male student-detainee

As I have been describing above, what distinguishes ―critical" peace education from peace education more broadly is its foregrounded concern with exposing and challenging violent or oppressive macrosystems, be they cultural, historical, political or economic. Critical peace education bears in the front of its mind that, of course, peace and justice are inextricably linked. Though she is not classically thought of as a critical theorist (in the sense that Freire, Foucault or Habermas might be), such themes run through Boulding's *Cultures of Peace*, which makes the central argument that without critical examination of some of our deepest cultural assumptions, we cannot truly transform the causes of violent conflict. Boulding further reminded her readers that it was peace educators who first called for the underlying causes of violence and possibilities for peace to be the center of classroom life:

> It was peace educators who insisted that peace research should not only undertake general systems analysis of intergovernmental relations but also conceptualize the interrelationships of peace, security, economic and social development, environmental issues, human rights, and the participation of women and minorities as a central problematique of human learning. (Boulding 2000, 118).

What follows, then, is one (and only one) picture of what a critical peace education curriculum can look like, even in the often violent, always changing context of a juvenile detention home. The detained students who came through my door over the course of three years were often both the victims, as well as the perpetrators, of various kinds of violent crime. This ranged from probation violations and truancy to violent gang involvement and even murder. While privacy concerns prevent me from giving any specific details, I can share that my students ranged from ages eleven to eighteen. They were most often from Washington D.C., Metro Maryland or Northern Virginia, but we also housed students from throughout the country and Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) detainees from throughout the world, though most often Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Far more male than female, again they were often both the victims and perpetrators of both nonviolent and violent crimes. Their levels of literacy ranged from illiterate to sometimes confident and quite skilled and comfortable with speaking, reading and writing. Naturally for some English was not their first language. Many were labeled Special Education and/or ADHD. Racially our students were predominantly, but not exclusively, black. The second largest racial demographic was Latino/a. We did see some white, Middle Eastern and Asian students but this was rare. At least two thirds of the students in our classrooms were in some way ―gang related‖ through either membership, parental membership, boyfriends‗ membership or ambiguous ―prior‖ membership. The violence that did occur in our facility was almost always related to gang turf; this was especially true of members of MS-13, the Latin Kings, 18th Street, the Bloods and the Crips. When asked why a particular incident had occurred, they typically referred to revenge for ―disrespect‖ and racial slurs.

One, sometimes even two (depending on class size), detention home staff were always in the classroom with me for security reasons. They were regularly called upon to break up fights, typically in the hallway between classes or after school but at times during class as well. In addition, students (and yours truly) were under literally constant surveillance. A camera sat in the upper right-hand corner of the classroom, its red eye blinking steadily. The staff in ―intake‖ (the first room one entered in the jail, where detainee and visitor processing took place) could view anything in the building at any time. Truly, I was teaching in Foucault‗s panopticon (see Foucault 1995).

This then was both a challenging and compelling context in which to attempt critical peace education, made even more challenging by the reality that most students were in my classroom less than one month. Would the students respond? How does one build any kind of community in such a transient context, let alone a community which was centered on the values and themes of peace and conflict resolution, given some of the experiences my students had survived and given that they often came and went unpredictably, at the dictates of a structurally violent juvenile justice system? Had they ever been asked to think about ideas such as non-violence or peace, perhaps by a family member, pastor, or teacher? Listening to them was the only way to know.

As a critical peace educator, I believed that if I trusted my students with the ―big ideas,‖ at least many of them would respond most of the time. Peaceful pedagogy, as usefully delineated by Harris and Morrison (2003), reminds us that the curriculum and methods should be centered around the interests and needs of the students. In advocating for peace education, they argue that what most students already receive is a ―war education,‖ and that therefore peace education is a crucial corrective to this bellicose

bias. In so doing, they build on the observations of Boulding (2000) which I noted above.

They specify that ―war education‖ centers around selfish behavior, authoritarian methods,

traditional teaching, moralistic explanations of behavior, coercion, and structural

violence. Alternatively, peace education emerges from responsibility, open classrooms,

innovation, social science explanations of behavior, self-motivation and the freedom to

pursue interests. The chart below reflects this (adapted from Harris and Morrison 2003,

211).

War Education	Peace Education
Selfish behaviour	**Responsibility**
Authoritarian methods	**Open classrooms**
Traditional teaching	**Innovations**
Moralistic explanations of behavior	**Sociological explanations of behavior**
Coercion	**Self-motivation**
Structural violence	**Freedom to pursue interests**

Importantly, they identify responsibility as a key value of peace education. I

highlight this because of common misconceptions that critical peace education, especially

in a juvenile detention home context, might be inclined to explain away or excuse some

of the crimes committed by our particular students. I argue that this misunderstands

peace education entirely; there is no empowerment or freedom in excuses. A critical

peace education does, however, as Harris and Morrison note, facilitate student

understanding of themselves as part of a whole, integrating structure and agency. As

Freire (2003) so seminally argued, a critical peace education should guide students to

better understand their social, cultural, political and economic context. A "pedagogy of

the detained" then might pose to students such questions as why they believe they made

the choices that they made, what they desire for their futures, what strengths and skills

they believe themselves to possess, what resources they have or need, and what socio-

political factors constitute their worlds. These problems then themselves constitute

immediately engaging and relevant curriculum. Given its focus on deconstructing

internalized narratives of worthlessness which too many of my students held, posing such

questions also began a critical peace education curriculum for my students. Through our

reading, writing and discussion, I invited students to consider who had told them they

were meant only for prison and why. Whose interests did this serve? Why did they

believe it? Were there alternatives? How had their surroundings shaped their lifeworlds?

How had others achieved significant social change? Could this model relate to them at

all? Again, recalling the observations from the above scholars that an essential goal of

critical peace education is to engage students in the empowering co-naming and shaping

of knowledge and of their realities, I wanted my classroom to be a space where students

could ask and reflect on such powerful questions.

The dictates of state curriculum did not typically encourage individualized

education, but centering my classroom around online journals in which my students told

their own stories, prompted by the focus questions above, provided me with a means of

both satisfying bureaucratic requirements and the basic human need of my students to

connect with others and be heard (Burton 1998). Indeed, I believe this activity can form

the basis of what one might call a *curriculum against recidivism*. In addition to

introducing students to critical social analysis, the activities I designed were meant to

elicit what is arguably the cornerstone of peace-building: empathy. Without this, the open classrooms and innovations which characterize all peace education may not be possible; this is especially true of peace education programs undertaken in conflictual or even violent contexts, such as a prison or war zone. In my opinion, if critical peace educators are to truly transform structurally violent systems and thereby transform and prevent conflict, these are the sorts of contexts where our methods and theories must prove themselves.

What then is the connection between personal writing and social empathy? Through their personal reflective journals, students were able to achieve a number of important educational goals far above and beyond improving (or just beginning to develop) writing skills. Key among these was the ability to connect with others, a skill notably underdeveloped in most of my students in this context. This is especially important for young men and women who have been the victims of and perpetrators of violence. For whatever reason these students lacked the ability, at least at the moment of their crime, to maintain self control and call upon what is for most of us a natural human empathy for fellow humans. Psychologists often argue that the development of a ―self‖ is first necessary for a young person to develop empathy, a key outcome (I hesitate to use such a positivist word!) of peace education. Without the ability to recognize and articulate one's own emotions, how can someone recognize them in another? Journaling was a perfect invitation to explore their emerging identities and to consider what had led them to my classroom behind barbed wire as a first step towards developing the skill of empathy.

In his new work *The Empathic Civilization*, for example, Rifkin (2009) argues precisely for this link between telling one's story and empathy for others. With particular relevance for the humanities, he notes the role of language in the development of empathy. Writes Rifkin, ―The ability to use language to describe one's feelings, tell one's story, and share experiences intensifies and deepens empathic expression….Not being able to tell someone how one feels weakens the empathic impulse and response" (Rifkin 2009, 67). This resonated deeply with any number of times I witnessed students share the most difficult of traumas with classmates and me; such stories too often involved the violent death of loved ones or expressions of fear that the writer would not be able to make the personal changes he or she wanted to make. I witnessed students literally discover ideas they did not know they had, often quite moving and profound thoughts on redemption, love, hate, family and God! Often the very students who insisted that they ―had nothing to say" were the ones who found themselves needing to share a particular insight or experience with the rest of the class. One young man entered my classroom insisting he was not even literate; by the end of our three months together, he insisted on sharing his personal narratives and poetry. Given that their socialization often predisposed them to disdain any sort of school work, and the realities of needing to seem ―hard" in the context of prison culture, students needed to overcome significant socio-psychological barriers to experience this sort of success.

Removal (at least temporary) from society, and the stamp of said society's disapproval, are inherent in being incarcerated. This made helping students to feel heard and valued all the more important if I was to achieve anything like a critical peace education in a juvenile detention context. Because the act of writing often created

considerable anxiety for students, especially the sort of personal, reflective writing I was asking for, I decided to engage their seemingly natural affiliation for technology by creating a class blog. In addition to the publishing parties described just below, this served as a means of connecting students to authentic audiences. Here students could anonymously post memories, questions, rhymes and reflections. Importantly, members of the public could respond and any time a student received a response, I would print it out for her. Both peace educators and the great writing teachers have always known that writing is about making a human connection. Similarly, as theorized above from Habermas (1981), organic community connections and cultural life are a site of resistance to oppression, and so essential to a critical peace education classroom. Thus providing an experience where detained students could build such connections with me, one another and the community at large, I believe, was one (if only one) essential part of empowering students to not reoffend and to begin imagining themselves as agents of social change—what I referred to in my title as a ―restorative classroom." Young people (and adults, I imagine) are far less likely to offend against a community to which they feel internalized connections (Thornton et al. 2000; Zeldin 2004). While other more macro-policies are key to young people not reoffending as well (such as youth employment, mentoring and college scholarships), the emotional and psychological connections young people feel towards their communities are also essential. Critical peace education, especially when undertaken in such difficult or even violent contexts, must endeavor to facilitate students (re)building such ties.

In addition to personal reflections, students also used their journals to analyze society, a use which I as a critical peace educator explicitly encouraged. Many current

theorists on social change write that false dichotomies between ―structure‖ and agency‖ are fading into the past (Jabri 1996, 55-87). Rather, what practitioners and scholars of peace-building (peace education included) increasingly understand is that human behavior is produced by the interactions of both local and global systems (structure) with personal choice (agency). These interactions are highly contingent and contextual. Through a combination of readings centered on themes of non-violent social change, and near-daily personal, reflective writing, I hoped to empower students to make just such connections. While students were always free to write about whatever topic they wished (bearing in mind that I was a ―mandated reporter‖ legally and would have to report any threats to the safety of oneself or someone else), I would often pose prompts directly related to violence and peace. In my experience it is essential to be direct and explicit in engaging students on these issues, which are too often outside of the mainstream of U.S. educational and political culture. Otherwise it is all too likely that students will uncritically reproduce the structurally violent culture which marginalizes them.

Many students, especially those who resent schools for failing to challenge them or take their ideas seriously, were obviously eager to explore connections between their own difficulties and their socio-historical legacy. I recall one young man asking why so many pictures of God depicted Him as white; another young man who consistently expressed determination to be accepted to college, wondered in a journal why he had had to come to jail to access ―a good book.‖ He also began, at the encouragement of our social studies teacher and me, to use this journal to explore his growing interest in local and global politics. For example, he shared reflections on the election of Obama, adult failure to effectively deal with violent crime in D.C., the experience of relating to a child

soldier's memoir from Sierra Leone and human rights abuses in Sudan. Clearly this was a young man beginning to find his voice.

A young Latina woman in my classroom filled a notebook full of memories and reflections of growing up in a gang-related family; many of these entries were shaped as dialogues between her mother and herself. Importantly from a critical peace education standpoint, in these journals she also analyzed U.S. immigration policy and an increasing culture of racism. Another young woman, nearly a senior, spent several days disengaged from any class discussion, writing furiously throughout the entire period. When she finally invited me to read her entry, I found a narrative of rape and homelessness in which older men exploited her vulnerability.

Yet another young man, a high-ranking gang member as I understand it, nearly eighteen, similarly would ignore what was going on in class to fill pages and pages of his journal. He was one of the students in my classroom who did not have to pretend to be hard; he intimidated the other kids just by sitting there. Often he would illustrate his journal entries as well; I can still picture the stick figures holding bloody machetes and wearing facial expressions reminiscent of Munch's *The Scream*. He wrote about his victims and experiencing nightmares and thirsting for forgiveness. Yet what I recall even more vividly is the afternoon, as I was delivering books to students from the classroom library that I kept, he approached me, uncharacteristically quiet and shy. I asked what I could do for him; he asked if it would be alright if he took more time than the other students to finish writing. I told him he was welcome to take all the time he needed. He was among the number of students who asked if he could take his journal with him when

he was transferred. I could continue, but the entries described above are representative of entries I read and responded to on a daily basis.

Because building community is essential to transforming oppressive or marginalizing sociopolitical or economic systems, I felt I would be remiss to not fully realize the potential of these journals for classroom community building. As the foundational critical theorists note, sharing stories in community is an essential means of reclaiming ‒colonized" socio-political space. Habermas suggested this repeatedly when he wrote of the dangers of ‒cultural impoverishment" and the dangers of an increasingly ‒decoupled system and lifeworld" (Habermas 1981, 332-373). In other words, organic human cultural and social interactions were increasingly dominated by a more impersonal, mechanized bureaucracy which served and reproduced the power of the elites. The act then of ‒telling your story" and listening to those of others can be seen as resistance to marginalization. My students were conditioned to roll their eyes when reminded that ‒knowledge is power." I wanted them to experience the larger, powerful *political* truth of that statement through writing and sharing personal narratives.

Hence at the end of each semester, I invited my students into a ‒publishing party." If students were to begin becoming young community leaders, I thought it was essential that they experience themselves as someone with something to say! So I invited each student to share a journal of her choice, which she expanded into a personal narrative, with the rest of the class. Because many of these writings were intensely private, it was important to allow them to make this choice and to be informed in advance that they would indeed be sharing at least one entry.

Nor did these community celebrations disappoint. For example, one young man from Anacostia (a neighborhood in Washington, D.C. which has suffered more than its share of structural violence), who made a point of telling me that he never did any work in other classrooms, wrote about the first time he bought a gun. He had felt unsafe on his walk to school and apparently his father had not been able to respond as he'd needed. His father, in fact, drew on structurally violent narratives of masculinity, telling my student to ―man up.‖ To make matters worse, his mother had been recently diagnosed with cancer and thus could no longer work. This was a clear teachable moment for any critical peace educator facilitating student understanding of oppressive social narratives and systems. In discussing his story, we wondered, for example, if some of these problems could have been solved by more effective law enforcement or public health care. We further wondered if his father would have responded differently to a daughter rather than a son. When he asked if I thought he should share this story during our publishing celebration, I said indeed I suspected it would resonate with many of his classmates. He did, and in this classroom of twenty fourteen to seventeen year-old incarcerated young men, there was not a dry eye.

In my interpretation, the above narratives demonstrate student hunger to be invited into a conversation around the challenges they grapple with. I dwell on this, as I am sure is obvious, to dispel stereotypes to contrary—stereotypes which themselves have a role, of course, in reproducing the ―savage inequalities‖ (to echo Jonathan Kozol, 1991) of the U.S. education system. While writing was often an intimidating experience for many of these students (especially those for whom English was not a first language), the innate human need to make meaning through narrative and to connect with others proved

sufficient incentive. As exemplified above, they also provided a means for me as a critical peace educator to facilitate student understanding and critical analysis of the larger cultural, social, economic, political and historical processes which shaped their realities.

From the Ladder of Hate to the Ladder of Peace

As noted before, since many students in any school system are not explicitly introduced to ideas of peace and conflict resolution, I found it important to be explicit in offering activities, discussions and writing prompts around such concepts. Essential to my understanding of critical peace education is empowering students to understand the social processes through which structural and physical violence is produced and ―justified.‖ For many of my students (typically aged twelve through seventeen) these were novel and abstract concepts. One technique I found successful for introducing them was a simple graphic which I adapted from the Anti-Defamation League (n.d.) and called ―the Ladder of Hate.‖ My critical peace education learning objective here was to facilitate student understanding of stereotypes, how they function on an interpersonal and social (even national and international) level, and how stereotypes are often the root of violence. The graphic I used is directly below.
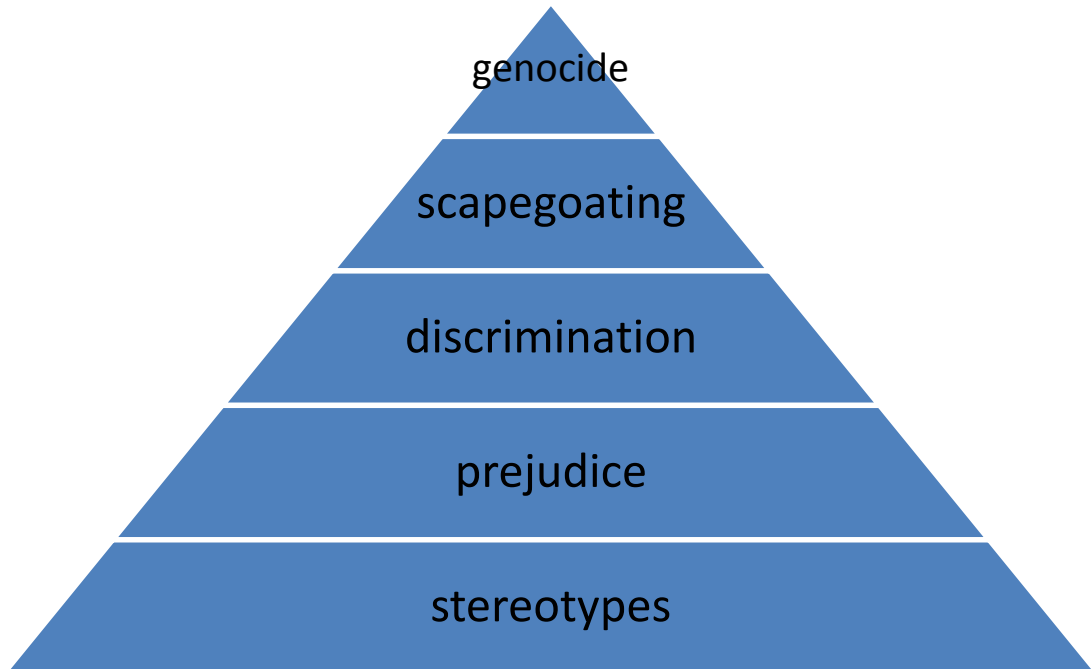
The more I listened to my students tell their classmates and me of (for example) their

dislike for immigrants, or of obvious racial segregation in their classrooms and

lunchrooms, the more convinced I was of the importance of initiating such conversations

with them. Some of my students had had teachers refer to them using racial slurs; other

students—who had never been out of the country—had experienced others telling them to

―go back where you came from.‖ Students confirmed that typically, when left to their

own devices in the lunch room, the white students would sit with the white students, the

black students with other black students, Muslim students with Muslims, Latino students

with other Latinos and so forth. Such experiences were enough to convince me of the

relevance of this content for my students. Often these discussions would extend through

the entire class period, and I would have to reorganize my plans for the week. A

microcosm of larger society, some students were determined to interrupt such dynamics

by engaging a diverse group of friends; others did not think progress was possible. Many

students called out adults for the poor example they felt such adults provided. We debated whether such hate was internal to human nature, or a product of social learning. Nearly all of them wondered (as I did at the age of twelve first reading the *Diary of Anne Frank*) what it was exactly that caused someone to hate an entire group of other people. Student answers to these questions often included fear, media stereotypes, competition for jobs and economic resources, racism institutionalized in schools and beliefs inherited from family.

My challenge then as a critical peace educator was to facilitate their understanding of what the processes and mechanisms of such hate have been historically, as well as to provide examples of nonviolent social change. Again, for a *critical* peace education, peace and justice are axiomatically interlinked concepts. The above graphic was a first step in beginning a critical dialogue but, as a student noted to me one day, it can address only one common mechanism (stereotypes) through which social hate is incorporated as part of a culture. It does not address possibilities for another future, which I believe to be a central (if challenging) goal for critical peace education, especially peace education implemented in violent contexts where fatalism can be a temptation. From this student's suggestion emerged what we called the Ladder of Peace. This was a graphic just like the Ladder of Hate, save of course that it read ―peace" at the top of the graphic. Based on our readings and class debates on such writers as Ishmael Beah, Anne Frank, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi and Thoreau, this student led a class discussion on forgiveness. His thesis was that forgiving one's enemy could potentially start a cycle of forgiveness by inspiring that enemy to forgive one of his enemies, and so forth. (Imagine this from a student who had just been expelled from his school system!)

During this lesson, of course, ―forgiveness‖ then became one of the ―rungs‖ on the Ladder of Peace. Importantly, the Ladder of Peace is given to students blank; the only prompt I provided was simply writing ―peace‖ at the very top of the ladder (where ―genocide‖ is on the Ladder of Hate). Pairs of students would then fill in various steps along the journey, up the ladder. Concepts that they provided included respect, tolerance, communication, trust, equality, justice and education. Hence students were empowered to form their own concept of positive social change and collaboratively articulate values and actions that could, in fact, lead to more peaceful lives and communities, something I have no doubt many of them craved. Below is just one sample of a Ladder of Peace; each group's will almost certainly look different.

Peace
respect
trust
communication
courage

Just as valuable, I believe, was the debate and discussion that always took place during this activity. Students posed to one another such sophisticated questions as, ―How can you have communication without trust?‖, arguing that trust should be the ―bottom

rung" of the Ladder of Peace. Others would respond that you have to communicate in order to develop trust, and so communication must be the first step. Still others argued that respect or tolerance should merit the first step, since without those values, most people will not want to even begin communicating—especially in the context of violent conflicts. Such theorizing exemplifies the beginnings of praxis, where thoughtful reflection and collective action merge. Certainly such discussions do not alone achieve praxis, but together with opportunities to lead and serve in their communities, such curriculum initiates praxis. Otherwise it could not claim to emerge from a critical theory perspective. If I may draw upon Habermas (1981) once again, in such conversations, we begin to reclaim our social and cultural space from the larger political and economic processes, and dominant social narratives, that reproduce oppression.

The structural violence shaping my students' lives was all too real, and I certainly cannot claim that these above activities could cause them to never offend again or to heal from some of the deep traumas which they had both experienced and at times inflicted on others. Yet I do believe that if a critical peace education is to achieve its maximum potential, we must undertake it in precisely these sorts of conflicted, sometimes even violent contexts. This entails the risk of harm and even failure, but I believe that social justice demands engaging those most marginalized in the processes of their own liberation. Because dialogue is so central to this process, I have focused here on two activities which engaged students in critical dialogues on peace, conflict, and their own immediate lifeworlds: dialogues on social change and the telling and sharing of personal narratives. The above activities represented only a part of my curriculum, but because of their dialogical nature, I believe they illustrate one way a critical peace educator might go

about engaging students in a critical analysis of their own lives as well as the larger

forces which have had a role in shaping them. In this sense, a critical peace education

becomes a powerful means of conflict transformation. As Freire phrased it, ―Dialogue

with people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution" (2003, 128). The

dialogues described throughout this article, whether between a group of students or a

student and her journal, can encourage the sense of agency, critical awareness,

imagination and empathy necessary for a more peaceful and just future in students‗ lives

and communities. I would argue that this is an essential first step of a critical peace

education program.

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