

EDUCATING YOUNG CHILDREN FOR A PEACEFUL WORLD

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Introduction

What a privilege and pleasure it is to be with colleagues around the world, gathered here in Singapore, a multi-racial, multi-cultural city, “with its head in the future and its soul in the past”, to exchange creative ideas and quality experiences on behalf of children all over the globe!

Children hold the future in their delicate hands, and they need us to enable them to shape that future, to inspire them to image and dream of a new world order, of hope, peace and love, and to empower them with the concepts, values and attitudes, skills and practices to make their dream come true.

Nan Whitcomb, an Australian poet, in her book, Believe in the Dream, writes:

Let us not take away
the dreams of children –
let them ride in the silver moonbeams
of imagination –
at least
until we can offer them
something better

One who had such a wonderful dream to offer was Dr. Martin Luther King, a dream he believed in for his children, and the children of the future, and for which he paid dearly with his life. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” He accepted the Nobel Peace Prize given to him in Oslo, Norway on 10 December 1964, as “a profound recognition that non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time, that we need to overcome violence and oppression, without resorting to violence and oppression,” that indeed, peace is the only way to peace.

Towards a Culture of Peace

At this singular moment of our human history, the dawn of a new century and of a new millennium, I believe that we who have been blessed to be alive today have something better to offer our children: the transformation of the culture of war and violence to a culture of peace, tolerance, and non-violence, where people learn to live together in peace and harmony which was brought untold suffering to young innocent children.

The year 2000 has been proclaimed by the UN as the International Year of the Culture of Peace, and by the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, as the Great Jubilee Year of the coming of the Prince of Peace. Furthermore, of special significance to us, is the UN declaration of the years 2001-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. An Appeal of the world’s Nobel Peace Prize Laureates proposes an Action Plan for the Children of the World founded on the practice of a culture of peace. It states:

“Today, in every single country throughout the world, there are many children silently suffering the effects and consequences of violence. This violence takes many forms: between children on streets, at school, in family life and in the community. There is physical violence, psychological violence, socio-economic violence, environmental

violence and political violence. We wish to contribute to reduce their suffering. We believe that each child can discover, by himself, that violence is not inevitable. We can offer hope, not only to the children of the world, but to all of humanity, by beginning to create, and build, a new Culture of Non-violence.”

(Let us meet in the Third World Forum to be held in Athens next year, the start of the Decade for Children.) Let us join this appeal and find ways to come together to show our care for children through the proposed consultation process of the Plan of Action for the Decade, and help unify the human community in contributing to build a caring society where our children can grow and develop in trust and in love instead of in fear, suffering and want.

This confluence of factors together with the on-going global efforts of the Hague Appeal for Peace happens only once in our lifetime. Call it synchronicity, or destiny, but I would like to call it destiny for each one of us. Not one of us will live to see yet another millenium, or even another century. There may not even be a tomorrow, if we don not seize the moment today. Let us help build the dream together with our children. Let us empower them to envision a culture of non-violence where they can learn to love, to care and to share, to live and to work together in peace and harmony. Let us teach them to respect others who are different, to cherish uniqueness as well as those shared values that bind us together in our common humanity and spirituality. Let us check on our practices: our curriculum, ourselves and our language of communication, our facilities, activities, toys, books, games, our teachers, to see whether we are advocates of peace or instruments of violence.

Let us prepare our children for peace; let us help them become peace builders and peacemakers. This is the only way we can look forward to a peaceful world for our them children and for future generations to live in.

Preparing Our Children for Peace

Early education for peace is not so much teaching children about peace, as it is enabling them to be peaceful. Becoming peaceful begins with the earliest childhood experiences. Early childhood caregivers and service providers, parents and educators, GOs and NGOs must recognize their shared responsibility to provide appropriate programs and activities to make children's early years most positive and most conducive in nurturing peaceful individuals. We must be keenly aware of and sensitive to our role in advocating and providing young children with the climate and the experiences to grow into adolescence and maturity free from injustice, violence and fear. Only then can we expect that our children will have the desire, the skill and ability to build and live in a peaceful world.

Thus, early childhood education for peace is first of all, good education. It consists primarily in providing high quality experiences and activities that ensure wholesome growth and development. It is during these early formative years that children develop their first concepts, values and attitudes, principles and skills to become lifelong learners. It is also during the period that they build their own value-systems towards peace and non-violence. Children learn the foundation blocks of peace: basic trust, a positive self-image, self-esteem and confidence, initiative and creativity. They develop the ability to relate with others, to express themselves, to communicate, to listen, to settle conflicts and quarrels amicably. They begin to value peace and harmony, empathy and compassion, friendship and forgiveness.

Peacemaking concepts, attitudes and skills can be nurtured in very young children, beginning in infancy. Nurturing self-esteem, developing social relationships and building autonomy and self-discipline are the foundations of peace education. Self-esteem is necessary for anyone to care for others. No child can be compassionate towards others unless she/he is secure about her/his own self-worth. Self-esteem is needed to be able to deal with others, to be tolerant of other's opinions and differences, whether racial, physical religions, social, economic or political. Self-esteem begins with

the development of trust in oneself, and in significant others, acceptance of one's feelings and inadequacies, learning to deal with emotions of fear, anger and jealousy positively, communicating in verbal and non verbal language, listening patiently and actively, acquiring autonomy and responsibility, - first through identification with primary care providers, who through modelling, affirmation, provision of choices, guidance towards self-discipline, encouragement and support, surround the child with the positive climate of warm family relationships and networks. (Cite conflict-resolution techniques like the Peace Table and the Family Council.)

Peace Education, the 4th R

(Title adopted from the speech of Cora Weiss, President, Hague Appeal for Peace, Vice President of the International Peace Bureau and Co-Director of the Peace Boat Global University, a Conference on Teaching About the UN, at New York, January, 2000.)

About two months ago on a flight to Kuala Lumpur, where I served as a UNESCO consultant to the Malaysian Department of Education to assist in the review of their Moral Education Program, I came across a news item on the front page of an American daily, which shocked me to the bone, as I am sure it did parents everywhere in the world.

Boy, 6 years of age, shoots his classmate dead, a girl, also 6 years old, before his terrified teacher and classmates, on their way to the school library. Questions rushed to my mind. Why? What made the young boy do it? Who was at fault? Was he responsible for his actions at such an early age when he was not even criminally liable by law? What went wrong? What is happening to our school system? the family? society in general?

As I read further, I found out that the day before, the young boy and girl had a quarrel in the playground. Then I thought of the speech of Cora Weiss, President of the Hague Appeal for Peace, entitled “Peace Education, the 4th R”.

Cora Weiss talked about teachers being the most powerful people on earth, because if they implemented Art 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stating that education shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship there would be no need of guns, bombs, dynamite and other destructive weapons. She reiterated the appeal to leave behind the culture of violence and campaign to introduce peace education into every school at every level in every country around the world.

Cora Weiss is right. If the 3Rs, Reading Writing and Arithmetic are considered the basic tools for learning, the foundation skills for any curriculum no matter the language or the country, why not (Peace Education) a 4th R? Why not Reconciliation? Why should negotiation, learning to manage our emotions, putting a stop to our biases not be considered fundamental? Why should it not be a requirement that everyone learns to face violence with nonviolence, to resolve conflicts constructively and peacefully? Why should the ability to listen and to understand others, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness not be considered basic skills? Why should we not teach our children the values of tolerance and compassion, of kindness, generosity, honesty and sincerity?

What is the use of our children growing up to be highly intelligent, knowledgeable and skillful, if they will not be able to live and work with others, if they grow up to be self-centered, egoistic individuals instead of loving and caring persons? Today’s increasing incidence of violence, cruelty and aggression flashed daily in the screen before our young children, the upsurge of crime among juveniles, the ease with which guns and weapons of mass destruction can be made accessible, the rise of drug abuse and teenage suicides, make it imperative for us to integrate peace education into all the subjects of the school curricula at all levels as well as in non-formal programs for the continuing education of all adult citizens in the community.

It is not enough to teach conflict resolution, we must also teach conflict prevention, seeking alternatives to violence, understanding its root causes, and developing that set of values, attitudes and behaviors that promote respect for life and all human rights, rejection of violence in all its forms, and commitment to the principles of justice, freedom, democracy, tolerance, solidarity and cooperation. This is the essence of the culture of peace. If we wish to educate children towards this culture of peace, we must begin as early as possible.

We must teach them to be peaceful. To be peaceful, children's basic needs must first be met, their self-esteem developed. They must feel valued to be able to have trust and confidence in themselves and in others. They must be aware of their feelings, doubts, fears and insecurities. This can happen only when they know they are loved and accepted.

We can best prepare our children for peace by being peaceful ourselves. Children mirror the problem solving and conflict resolution techniques they see adults practice. If adults discipline children violently, or interact violently in front of them, they will adopt violence as a natural part of their world, as normal behavior. If their environment is unpredictable and discipline inconsistent, they may soon view the world as governed by sheer power, brute force or mere chance.

Peace education is in fact wholesome and holistic education, which takes into consideration the whole child, body and soul; mind, heart and will. It aims to develop the total human person's powers and potentials: cognitive, affective, volitional, behavioral. Children must be taught to think clearly, critically and creatively; to love and care deeply, to choose wisely, and to act responsibly.

Modern educational programs are in a hurry to adopt the latest technologies, to introduce children to a world of new information and knowledge, but neglect the education of emotions. Thus, children discover many facts about the universe, acquire skills to cope with the speed of the information and communication revolution, but are

unable to handle their own feelings and emotions, or to resolve their conflicts positively, to relate to others, to work or to play peacefully with children from different backgrounds.

We have trained their minds and limbs to be quick and accurate, but we have not educated their hearts. We have taught them to think and to reason, but not to value or to love, to give and to receive, to care and to share, to forgive and to be forgiven. We have not been able to teach them how to be peaceful, first with themselves, and then with others.

Values Education for Peace

Thus, peace education is essentially values education. If we want our children to think clearly, critically and creatively, we must teach them how to love truth and value freedom and creativity. If we want them to be fair, sincere and honest, they must be able to value justice; if we want them to be peaceful, we must teach them to value peace, tolerance of other's differences, acceptance of other's opinions, respect for life and the environment. Learning to live in a diverse society is an essential task of peacemaking.

If we want our children to be peaceful, they must be able to experience peace within themselves, then they can have peace with others. They must be able to recognize and handle their feelings, clarify their values and be helped in modifying them when change is needed. We must teach them how to live for something or someone beyond themselves. Indeed, "the heart of education is the education of the heart."

Values can be integrated into every aspect of children's education: in each and every subject of the school curriculum, in their work and play activities, in the learning atmosphere of the whole school: the library, classrooms, playground, - and especially by the warmth of the human climate and the trusting and caring relationship that exist therein. (e.g. The Futures School and the Wise Cultures Classroom with Values

Clarification and Advocacy integrated in each subject; Aldgate Elementary School, South Australia, Miriam College, Philippines, Declaration of a Zone of Peace Child Study Center. Schools can become zones of peace and a peace zone declaration can be adopted especially to children. Yes, children can be helped to be peaceful and become peacemakers and peacebuilders. They are not born with preconceived ideas of alienation or marginalization, with feelings of superiority or inferiority, with discrimination, bias or prejudice, with hatred, revenge or violence. They learn these through their interaction with adults, media, their environment and their culture.

Can children themselves be involved in peace education and movements that will influence the world? Of course, they can! An excellent example is the Children and Peace Movement in the Philippines. I am sure you have other cases to share with us.

We must not underestimate the “infinite capacity of the child as the foundation of education for peace.” All children need are wise and caring adults who believe in their infinite worth and dignity, and who love and care enough to commit themselves to safeguard their rights, among them the human right to peace, and to develop their capacity and ability to help build a new world order, a culture of peace and non-violence, as the necessary and sustained environment for them to grow into free and responsible, happy and wise human persons, who are able to learn to love and to live together with others in peace and harmony.

This is the dream we can offer our children. Let us believe in the dream and we can make help our children to make the dream come true!

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