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Nonviolence as a Way of Knowing in the Public School Classroom

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“The opposite of war is not peace- it is creativity”¹

The moment I decided to become a teacher is very clear. I was taking a graduate International Relations course at the London School of Economics entitled “Gender, Justice, and War.” The students in the department were intelligent, progressive, and well-read individuals from around the world. One morning we were asked the question, “what can we do with a rogue state if we don’t want to use either sanctions or war?” No one had an answer. No one had ideas. There was thoughtful, but lasting, silence. In that moment I realized that war is indeed inevitable... not because of ‘man’s inherent nature’ or the state system that we’d been reading about, but because of a simple lack of creativity. I wondered how violence can be prevented if it is- literally- the only thing that we can think to do? I decided then that an important part of overcoming war must come

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from a deliberately innovative education. As teachers, we can bring peace content and a way of thinking that can foster and further creativity, and hence, peace.

As articulated by the policy of “No Child Left Behind,” the US educational system is based on certain measurable standards whose mastery is demonstrated by nationalized testing. In practice, the structure of a classroom requires an omniscient teacher, who ‘knows’ the right answer. Creativity of the learner is encouraged within very defined boundaries: write about greed in this text, for example. However, there is neither time for nor widespread acceptance of truly transformative thinking (why are we learning this, anyways?) At the same time, students demand that their education be relevant: they are constantly curious about how a subject relates to them, how a skill will be useful to them, and where exactly will they use Algebra? What an opportunity! Our students are begging us to make their educations more real and meaningful. We are responding through raising standards, but we are also pulling subject matter further and further away from our students and their day-to-day lives as dynamic, creative, thoughtful individuals. “Learn it” (i.e. memorize it) has superceded “think about it...” a move of coercion rather than working-with that permeates our schools.

Peace education is a growing field, and most commonly means either adding content relating to peace—peace movements, nonviolent leaders etc. to the curriculum² or conflict resolution skills, peer mediation, and communication skills.³ Both of these are valuable additions to every child’s education and every teacher’s training. However, if we emphasize the linkages of peace and creativity, the beginning of successful peace education begins at a more basic level than content can allow. It begins in how we

know— in what I call a “nonviolent epistemology.” This is built upon with specific subject matter that informs and broadens students’ understanding of peace and living without violence. In this paper, I will examine a method in which education can become ‘peace education’ through a shift in epistemology. I will show violence to be an avoidable choice not inherent in either human nature or political structure, and I will emphasize the connections between peace and creativity. I will then examine feminist epistemology, standpoint theory, nonviolence theory, and educational philosophy to suggest another way of knowing and teaching. Lastly, I will examine how a nonviolent epistemology can transform a classroom into an environment that supports peace, both theoretically and practically, through new knowledge and new methods.

What is violence? What is Nonviolence?

For hundreds of years, political scholars have questioned whether violence is inherent in human nature, the state system, or both.⁴ In any case, violence is considered to be inevitable and the best a nation can do is to prepare to *win* wars when they do occur. Peace theorists, on the other hand, argue that violence is a result of the world humans have *made* rather than a biological inevitability⁵ and hence can be avoided. Indeed, the nonviolent actor trusts in the inherent *goodness* of humanity to make their strategies work. Thinking of violence as the symptom of a system rather than a natural and inevitable condition creates a space for the educator to make change, for by studying peace and removing knowledges that assume violence, we can change an aspect of the system that legitimizes and perpetuates violence. In any case, as Michael Nagler explains, “We are not hard-wired for war, and we’re not hard-wired for peace: we’re

hard-wired for *choice*.”⁶ As educators, our role is to make this choice available to all of our students.

Pacifism is the moral renunciation of war.⁷ War is the most extreme act of oppression, it is organized political violence and its means are also violent. War involves dehumanization, separation, abstraction, dichotomization, hatred, and prejudice.⁸ The pacifist view is that “violence turns those who use it into the likeness of the oppressor,” thus violent means cannot produce nonviolent ends.⁹ To be lethally violent is to “assume a position of moral infallibility that suppresses the ‘truth’ of the other,” thus one can never have the *knowledge* necessary to carry out violence.¹⁰ For these reasons, nonviolence emerges as the only appropriate method of change for absolute pacifists. At the same time, pacifism places responsibility for effective nonviolence in education, for it is from our particular knowledge that we choose either violence or nonviolence.

Johan Galtung describes violence as “avoidable insult to human needs,” and distinguishes between what he termed ‘structural violence’ (“exploitation built into a social system” such as poverty) from direct violence (such as war).¹¹ For Ivan Illich, violence is a compromise to diversity and racism, marginalization, and essentialism are considered violent.¹² Michael Nagler writes, “dehumanization is the beginning of all violence.”¹³ Simone Weil agrees. For her, violence is “whatever turns a person into a thing.”¹⁴ Dehumanization thus emerges as essential for all acts of violence, while humanization (achievable through knowledge) is both a way towards and a component of peaceful interaction.

Nonviolence appeals to the universal human needs of integration, bonding, and belonging.¹⁵ As Michael Nagler defines it, nonviolence is a ‘positive force generated by self-sacrifice in the cause of truth.’¹⁶ The nonviolent approach is not “with a view of trying to prevail at any cost” but with seeing “the truth prevail—trying to see that the best solution emerge.”¹⁷ Nonviolence works through an appeal to ‘heart-unity’ (connection), and Satyagraha (“truth force”).¹⁸ If violence is rooted in dehumanization, nonviolence works by re-humanizing oneself and others. It is effective because “there is enough innate rejection of violence inside a person that (nonviolent struggle) can often work just by making the violence in a situation unmistakably visible.”¹⁹ In bringing *suffering* to the surface, the nonviolent actor gives his/her opponent the opportunity to see the suffering, at which point it can be rejected. Nonviolence relies on connecting with the “goodness” of others, and is adamantly constructive: it works by building and creating, not just dismantling.

From this perspective, peace emerges as a struggle for truth and creative solutions that prioritizes the sanctity of life over materialistic or egocentric concerns. Creativity, in this context, is well defined by photojournalist Dewitt Jones. He writes,

Creativity is the ability to see the ordinary as extraordinary. Creativity really is... falling in love with the world.... Think about it. First, when we're in love with something, it really is extraordinary. We see its uniqueness, feel its potential, celebrate its excellence, are open to its growth... when we're in love with something we take care of it; we treat it with respect and compassion.... The essence of creativity... is not a technique but an attitude; an attitude of curiosity, openness, and celebration.... I found the real key to creativity... in another lesson from my photography: There's more than one right answer.”²⁰

Similarly, peace is brought about by working on what is held in common and by finding ways to work together. There is, indeed, no one “right answer.” For these reasons, peace

requires thinking that is inherently and constantly creative. Peace is characterized by humanization, imagination, multiplicity, tolerance, and justice, and, most importantly, it can be learned.

Epistemology in the Classroom: In Theory and Practice

Epistemology is the “philosophical study of knowledge,”²¹ but can be simply defined as “the ways in which we know.” These are value and power laden, and as Patricia Hill Collins writes, “far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why.”²² Thus, attention to epistemology is a way of understanding our place in the world and a means by which it may be changed.²³ In proposing a nonviolent epistemology as a basis for teaching, I take as my starting place feminist standpoint theory. Standpoint recognizes all knowledge as situated and partial, and claims that we can learn from our distinctive opportunities and locations in ways not available to those with other experiences.²⁴ As such, standpoint sees transformative potential in marginalized knowledges. It works towards the attainment of ‘truth.’ Thus,

Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups’ standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups’ partial perspectives.²⁵

Kimberly Hutchings argues that standpoint theory is useful in bridging the distance between the subject and object of knowledge, so that the “feminist standpoint brings the scientist closer to the truth of at least some aspects of... reality.”²⁶

Lorraine Code argues that personal subjectivity is as important as the object being studied in the pursuit of ‘truth.’ As politically motivated, biased, and located subjects, frameworks of understanding and life experiences shape the knowledge produced. In ‘locating’ the knower, we see that all knowledge is situated and partial, however this does not mean that it is not ‘true.’ Code advocates for a “knowledge which is always *relative to...specifiable circumstances.*”²⁷ Knowledge and truth are thus contextual, specific, flexible, situated, value laden, and relative.

In developing a nonviolent epistemology for teaching, feminist standpoint allies with the Gandhian principle of Satyagraha. Satyagraha is a struggle for the truth. As explained by Robert Holmes,

The central idea...is to approach disagreements not in a spirit of conviction that you are right and your opponent wrong but rather with an openness to the possibility that each of you may have hold of a part of the truth, and that only by taking seriously that possibility are either of you likely to make progress toward a completer truth.²⁸

Satyagraha requires humanization, we must recognize others and their perspectives as equally important to our own. As Lennon and Whitford write, “what is required is the acknowledgement of others as persons, the recognition that there may be points of view other than one’s own and a preparedness to re-evaluate our own position.”²⁹ Satyagraha prioritizes connections between antagonists rather than differences, not in search of ‘sameness’ but in search of an understanding that accounts for and meets individual needs in the shared pursuit of liberation from oppression. It begins in seeing others as equal to ourselves, and with whom we can produce better, fuller understanding.

Satyagraha is also ongoing struggle for truth, not for a single, replicable, universal truth but for a relational one reached by communication, humility, and consensus. A nonviolent understanding is different from both a modern approach that calls upon a stable notion of truth, and a postmodern approach that denies the possibility of a single ‘Truth.’ Satyagraha calls upon truth as a flexible notion, best forged by a contextualized understanding of the realities of all relevant parties. Truth can be achieved, but requires a commitment to listening and to humility regarding one’s own perspective, as incomplete and maybe even incorrect.

In addition to feminist standpoint theory and tenets of Satyagraha, a nonviolent epistemology is articulated in “heart-unity,” a nonviolent principle meaning the “emphatic desire for the welfare of others” that can also be called “rejoicing in diversity.”³⁰ It is an invocation to resolve conflicts from the perspective of “you and me against the problem” rather than ‘you against me.’³¹ Heart-unity is at once re-humanizing and a ‘positive’ response to difference. “Heart-unity,” Michael Nagler writes, “means that I want you to be happy, notwithstanding our differences. In fact, to feel heart-unity with others is to enjoy differences.”³² Difference, in this interpretation, is not as a stopping block but opportunity to learn more; specifically and carefully, to get closer to the ‘truth.’ Through focusing on what is held in common, on connection, and on goodness, a nonviolent classroom will encourage students and teachers to discuss and learn about difficult issues without falling into the pitfalls of discrimination and distance—requisite precursors to violence.

An important part of a nonviolent epistemology that cannot be generalized is awakening and empowering our students to their own value. Nonviolence asks us to see the ‘good’ in others, to connect with that, and to move together towards a higher truth. Thus, teachers often need to help their students to believe in their own inherent goodness, for the student must experience their own value and potential before they see it in others. As a humanizing practice, peace education is intrinsically education for the whole child, a being with a mind, body, and spirit.

This way of teaching is supported through much existing educational philosophy. In his comprehensive study of Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Hazrat Inayat Khan, David Marshak writes that the three educational philosophers are united in the belief that “the task of the human being is the attainment of divinity” and that the purpose of education is to foster and nourish this goal.³³ Further, the job of the parent and teacher is to “help guide and nurture (the youth)... to develop her own instruments, faculties, and capabilities.... To help the child... learn to recognize and validate her own inner knowing, her *inner teacher*.”³⁴ In other words, we must recognize the humanity, experience, and knowledge of our students and see them as they are: human beings living lives that are complicated, challenging, and divine in purpose, and encourage them in succeeding at *this*, at living and believing in their personal highest potential. Changing how we teach to emphasize this full and ‘divine’ humanization can be done with any subject matter, in any classroom, with any age student. The change begins in the way in which we *see* them. It is beneficial to our students and also brings teachers closer to our *raison d’être*—making real and positive change in the lives of others.

As peace educators, our work is to privilege the struggle for connection over separation, commonality over difference, sufficiency over scarcity, and what ‘works’ over moments of failure. We must learn to see and teach ‘good’ human beings about humanity, a world peopled with human beings who live remarkable lives and make choices that we find admirable, impressive, and appalling, and whom we can choose to either emulate or move beyond.

In terms of content standards, peace educators must actually put peace in the picture. We need to teach about the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and learn about what they did that worked. We need to learn about those who have resisted violence, why, and how. For, if we teach social studies, for example, and grant the warriors dominance in both time and value, we are doing our part to keep the war system thriving. When violence becomes “what we know” as a collective culture its students, to an extent, can’t be blamed for war’s continuation. We must learn about peacemakers and alternative ways of responding to conflict if we want to see them manifested. This is difficult because we have to look not only at where violence happens and why, but also at where it does not happen and ‘should.’³⁵ These challenges are not simple for the educator, and it is in this realm that we need more knowledge and research in order to be effective facilitators of such paradigm shift.

In brief, a nonviolent epistemology for the peace educator is this: we recognize that all truth is partial for all people have a unique and correct experience of the truth. We relinquish our role as knowledge-broker in the classroom, and accept the wisdom of our students to supplement and direct learning. We model heart-unity through

acknowledging and rejoicing in differences. We remember and teach that all human beings carry goodness within them, and that violence is neither natural nor inherent. We believe that all humans have a divine core and purpose, and we demonstrate this understanding with our own behavior and interactions. Lastly, we are mindful that what we teach is important, and perhaps equally important is what we leave out.

The Classroom: Benefits of Peace Education

Approaching education as the pursuit of ongoing and relational truths empowers the student in learning and maintains curiosity and agency for the learner. Importantly, it is not about lessening or loosening standards, but for creating space within them for discovery and personalization. For example, in studying science we learn to ask very specific questions, to pay very careful attention, to gather facts and use previous knowledge, to infer, to record details, and to try and do it all over again. Science demands that we are curious and creative and rewards this type of thinking with a trophy of *truth achieved*. Science at the K-12 level is presented as a set of attainable and knowable truths. However, what is profoundly and enduringly interesting about science is that so much is unknown, and “answers” frequently become new questions. By emphasizing the inquisitive aspects of science, we maintain its appeal. This is useful not because it muddles science, (in fact, it makes it more real) but because it curtails the belief that one can ever be 100% ‘right’ about anything—a belief that is often dangerous in the ‘real world.’ At the same time, this method of *truth pursued* keeps the integrity of the student as a valuable player in knowledge production very much relevant and alive. In Social Studies, supplementing standard history texts with Howard Zinn, (who tells the

story of the US from the perspective of the oppressed) is not confusing, but helpful to the student of peace. Through it, we learn a more complete story, and we also learn that in this cacophony of truths is a better, truer, more real, legitimate and full way of knowing. In the messiness of history lies the best and *truest* story. In other words, peace education is fundamentally about keeping the curiosity of the student awake and their relevance as a learner intact. It allows for moments of wow, of confusion, of “I get it!” and of creative thinking. Ultimately, peace education also supports individual value and meaning for the learner and knower.

Direct instruction of peace and nonviolence increases the world-view of students, broadens their creativity, and changes their conception of the possible. This, in turn, may manifest as alternative reactions to violence that make the choice of nonviolence more frequent and, ultimately, normal. Learning peace content educates and empowers students to live differently and make more informed choices, as they have not only learned from one perspective-- the perspective of violence. If we study the history of the world's wars but not it's peace, we graduate from school as experts on violence and we expect to see it in our own lives. This perpetuates a cycle of violence that begins with partial knowledge, thus teaching peace has the potential to remove an unhealthy selective knowledge and replace it with a healthier and fuller one.

Lastly, by educating the whole child and recognizing each as a valuable human being, a teacher may be providing a child with a unique and precious experience of feeling fully human—which the child may now also recognize in others. This aspect of

peace education offers the child the potential to be a happier and more effective human being... one who can realize her or his own role in the urgent task of making peace.

Conclusion

As an 8th grade public school teacher who strives to teach peace through standardized curriculum, I have developed this “nonviolent epistemology” through practice. At the most basic level, however, I define myself as a peace educator simply because I constantly encourage my students to think creatively. It is that simple. Violence, in the context of my classroom, is believing without examination that something is impossible. Once again, I take inspiration from Dewitt Jones: “To find an extraordinary photograph, I need the right lens on my camera. In other words, if I don't view the challenge from the right perspective, I won't have a chance of finding a creative solution.”³⁶ Peace education is about being open to all the ‘right answers’ that exist at a given moment, and to taking the time to find the right perspective. Our students are experts of their own complicated young lives. As their teachers, we can value their wisdom, ideas, and experiences, and build on them with content that uplifts, transforms, and promotes peace, in our personal and our public lives.

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²For example, <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/peace/index.asp>, 2007.

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⁴ Waltz, K. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University, 1959.

⁵ See Tickner, A. (1992), Robinson, F. (1999), Hutchings, K. (2002).

⁶ Nagler, M. Personal communication, January 31st, 2007.

⁷Coates, A.J. *The Ethics of War*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 77.

⁸ Nagler, M. *The Steps of Nonviolence*, Nyack NY, Fellowship Publications, 1999, p. 2.

⁹ Coates, A.J. p. 87.

¹⁰ Coates A.J. p. 88.

¹¹ Nagler, M. *Is There No Other Way? The Search for a Nonviolent Future*, Berkeley, Berkeley Hills Press, 2001, p. 48.

¹²Nagler, M. 2001, p. 302.

¹³Nagler, M. 1999, p. 2.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ruddick, S. *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, London, The Women's Press LTD, 1989, p. 164.

¹⁵ Nagler, M. 2001, p. 45.

¹⁶Nagler, M. 1999, p. 5.

¹⁷Holmes, R.L. *On War and Morality*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 291.

¹⁸ These terms will be more fully explained in the first chapter.

¹⁹ Nagler, M. 2001, p. 232.

²⁰ Jones, D. http://www.dewittjones.com/html/seeing_the_ordinary.shtml, 2007.

²¹Tanesini, A. *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 1999. p. 3.

²²Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge 2000: Ch. 11, p. 253.

²³Tanesini, A. p. 3.

²⁴ Harding, S. "Introduction," in Harding, S. (ed), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 7.

²⁵Hill Collins, P. p. 270.

²⁶Hutchings, K. "The Personal is International: Feminist Epistemology and the Case of International Relations," in Lennon, K. and Whitford, M. (eds), *Knowing the Difference*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 156.

²⁷ Code, L. *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations*, New York, Routledge, 1995. p. 54.

²⁸Holmes, R.L. p. 287.

²⁹Lennon, K. and Whitford, M. in Lennon, K. and Whitford, M. (eds), *Knowing the Difference: Introduction*, London, Routledge, 1994. p. 10.

³⁰ Nagler, M. 2001, p. 289.

³¹ Nagler, M. 1999, p. 7.

³² Nagler, M. 2001, p. 191.

³³ Marshak, D. *The Common Vision: Parenting and Educating for Wholeness*, New York, Peter Lang, 2002, p. 9

³⁴ Marshak, D. p. 20

³⁵ In other words, the conditions that typically lead to violence are present, and yet violence does not occur.

³⁶ Jones, D. http://www.dewittjones.com/html/seeing_the_ordinary.shtml, 2007.