

Volume 11 Number 1 (2017): 28-31  
<http://www.infactispax.org/journal>

### Book Review

**Understanding peace cultures**, edited by Rebecca L. Oxford, a volume in the series: Peace Education, editors Laura Finley & Robin Cooper, Information Age Publishing, 2014, 344 pp., US \$45.99 (paperback), US \$85.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-62396-505-1

Reviewed by  
Sandra L. Candel  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
[candel@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:candel@unlv.nevada.edu)

In this volume Rebecca Oxford, a professor of Language Education and Research at Air University in Montgomery, Alabama who has also authored books on culture and the language of peace, makes an open invitation to peace education teachers and students, peace organizations, and individuals who want to experience peace from multiple perspectives to share cultural aspects of peace. The book captures the multidimensionality and complexity of cultures by incorporating critical, spiritual, philosophical, linguistic, literary, and socio-political views related to peace and peace education in the chapters.

The book is divided into five sections: Part A, Looking At Peace Cultures, offers a definition of culture, peace culture, and peace, which Oxford defines as “multidimensional” to denote the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, international, and ecological dimensions of peace (p. 5). Oxford spends the first two pages of her first chapter defining culture from the broadest to the most specific levels (drawing on historical, cognitive, affective, material, and artistic dimensions of culture), arguing in the end that culture is “the software of the mind and heart” (p. 4). While some authors made connections to culture in subsequent chapters, others did not explicitly state their notion of culture, denoting the need

for more precision in the definition and analysis of the term. In Chapter 2, authors Rebecca Oxford and Rebecca Boggs introduce iconic peace figures that exemplify the different ways in which people have worked for the creation of peace cultures, including Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh; Aung San Suu Kyi, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to peacefully free Burma; and Mary Robinson, the first woman president of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights.

Part B, Peace Cultures: Creating Small and Large Peace Cultures, is one of the most complete sections of the book, analyzing peace education and curriculum from multiple perspectives. For example, Chapter 3, 'Womanist and critical race theory for peacemaking in multilingual, multicultural classrooms' is a theoretical chapter that critically challenges social injustices by using critical and feminist theories to discuss the experiences of the trauma caused by racism, xenophobia, and war while at the same time offering curricular strategies for peacemaking. Tina Wei, in Chapter 4, discusses the use of reflective essays to explore transformative peace education. Author Rui Ma, uses the Christian Bible in chapter 5 to introduce peace education curriculum to youth in the Middle East. Finally, Wang describes how she integrates peace education into her English language classes with international students in chapter 6.

Part C, Creating Peace Cultures: Spiritual, Philosophical, Linguistic, and Literary Insights, is characterized for the diversity of viewpoints with which it explores peace cultures, ranging from spiritual Buddhist and Islamist perspectives that incorporate experiential knowledge, to Chinese Philosophies on the Wisdom of Peace and semantic explorations of peace. The decision to separate Christian from non-Christian traditions, placing them in different sections of the book, is not discussed by the authors. However, it would have been interesting to cluster them in the same section to give the reader the opportunity to compare and contrast approaches to peace education using different traditions. In addition, it is worth mentioning that within this section we can find an excellent literature review of multicultural children's books in 'Peace lessons in multicultural literature for children' (Chapter 11), which contains an analysis of 44 books on themes covering peace, diversity, equality, and social justice comprising a wealth of resources for those interested in including peace in children's literature.

Part D, Performing Art for Peace: Cultural Understandings for Peace Educators, looks at peace education from an artistic lens. Chapter 12 describes African performing art and its capability to "craft" peace through an analysis of artifacts that include drinking cups, masks, and figurines. The strength of this section, however, is found in Chapter 13, in which Blake, Rudolph, Oxford, and

Boggs make an in-depth theoretical and historical analysis of hip hop music to support their central topic of “what it means to make peace with gansta rap” (p. 266). As the authors contend, it would be difficult to make the case for hip hop as a vehicle for peace with the violence and misogyny depicted in hip hop’s lyrics. Nevertheless, the authors manage to deconstruct those lyrics by going beyond the seemingly negative messages and uncovering the greater meaning of hip hop described as “socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and alighted with progressive forces of social critique” (p. 277). The authors go as far as declaring that hip hop can be socially conscious by promoting civic participation and giving voice to vulnerable populations that might not otherwise be heard. Unfortunately, this section’s limitation consisted of not covering any artistic means of peace education, but restricting itself to only commenting on art and music.

Finally, Part E, Social and Political Perspectives: Challenges for Peace Educators and Peacebuilders, approaches peace education from a socio-political perspective based on international conflicts that include the Israeli-Palestinian as well as the North and South Korean conflicts. This section describes the real-life difficulties one encounters when trying to open dialogue between two parties tangled in intractable religious, ideological, and land conflict, including, for example, the importance of having an acute awareness of cultural norms when addressing Palestinian and Israeli populations. One of the virtues of this book is the inclusion of activities for exploring and practicing peace at the end of each chapter. These carefully crafted questions give experts ideas to further the discussion of the chapter, as well as provide guidelines for novices to further the exploration of a topic of their interest.

The book successfully introduces a multitude of views on peace and peace education, indicating the abundance of perspectives on the socially constructed notion of culture. However, the concept of culture remained elusive throughout the chapters. Oxford incorporates a diversity of authors comprised of peace scholars, including professors, students, anthropologists, and policy analysts that used theoretical and historical analysis to support their arguments, as well as practitioners, including nuns and physical therapists that used experiential knowledge to make their claims. The mixed presentation of chapters, regardless of the academic training of the authors, seems to suggest that Oxford gave equal status to the experiences shared. An added benefit of the diversity of authors is that the book may appeal to the critical peace educator who will appreciate the chapter written from a feminist and critical race theory perspective, as well as to those interested in socio-politically situated peace education, who will find international current issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian and North-South

Korean conflicts discussed in the book interesting. Similarly, this book may appeal to those interested in spiritual and philosophical insights, as well as to those interested in non-academic and artistic practices. On the down side, some of the data presented in Chapter 12 date back up to forty years, raising the question of relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, the book contains a wealth of resources for those interested in children's multicultural literacy and for those looking for strategies to infuse peace building in their curriculum. Overall, the breadth of topics covered may have affected the depth. Some parts of the book seemed more substantial in the support of their arguments – for example, using critical theory to support the claim for peace and justice – than others – for example, using spiritual semantics to deconstruct the word peace – corroborating the idea that less is more. On the other hand, the book's appeal to an audience that is open to exploring the multiple cultural aspects of peace education, and the activities and questions contained at the end of the chapters, make this book an important component of any Peace Education collection.