

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Peace Education: A Psychological Perspective

"Peace education, broadly defined, is the cornerstone of a culture of peace."
- Michael Wessells (1994, p. 43)

Achieving a culture of peace requires developing peaceful people. Peace education, broadly defined, includes all efforts to facilitate development of peaceful people. Peace education often takes place in schools, churches, families, community learning centers, counseling centers, clinics, prisons, and the workplace. Of course, it may occur anywhere, and the learners may be anyone--including young children, graduate students, United Nations peacekeepers, and police officers.

Harris (1999) delineated five types of peace education and described examples, goals, and content for each. "Global peace education" includes international studies, holocaust studies, and nuclear education. "Conflict resolution programs" teach about mediation, negotiation, and communication skills. "Violence prevention programs" emphasize domestic violence, drug abuse, anger management, and teaching tolerance. "Development education" includes human rights education, environmental studies, and an emphasis on power and resource inequities and structural violence. "Nonviolence education" is based on the ideas of Gandhi, King, and other great peacemakers.

The essential content of peace education varies with time, place, and the particular needs of individuals, groups, and societies. Salomon (2002) has described how the challenges, goals, and methods of peace education differ substantially between areas characterized by intractable conflict, interethnic tension, or relative tranquility. Nevertheless, because some needs are common among people everywhere, certain elements of peace education may be seen as more universally essential.

In the 1980s nuclear war education was essential because of the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear holocaust. The continuing proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the possibility that terrorist groups might obtain WMD suggests that knowledge about threats of WMD should be considered an essential component of peace education for youth and adults throughout the world.

Attitudes, concepts, and competencies that generalize across all levels of conflict resolution from interpersonal to international, and that may relate even to intrapersonal conflict, would seem to be particularly important as educational objectives. Democratic and tolerant attitudes, concepts like interdependency and reciprocity, and competencies for empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and negotiation are examples of peace education objectives that are relevant for all levels of conflict.

One approach to defining the essential content of peace education assumes that its primary objective is to develop dispositions within people that will influence them to behave peacefully (Nelson & Christie, 1995). As elaborated by Staub (2002), the aims of peace education are to develop caring and nonaggressive individuals who relate peacefully to others in their own lives, who promote the welfare of others, and who take action to prevent violence in their society and in the world. Perhaps the most important contribution of psychology for peace education is to identify those dispositions -- knowledge, competencies, attitudes, and values -- that most strongly influence individuals' peaceful behavior.

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Another application of psychology to peace education provides guidance for selecting teaching methods and for creating a school climate conducive for learning. Research on teaching and learning has shown that students generally learn more when they are active, as when participating in group activities, engaging in role-plays, or working on projects. Students also “learn by doing” when they serve as peer mediators. Cooperative learning, constructive controversy, and service learning have been shown to promote peaceful attitudes and competencies. Students are more likely to enjoy and to participate in classroom activities that are cooperative, democratic, and inclusive. One way to promote a democratic climate is “negotiated learning” where students play a role in deciding what to study, how to study, and how to be evaluated.

Finally, a psychological approach to peace education emphasizes the importance of scientific methodology in the evaluation of peace education methods and programs. Current levels of violence and the threat of weapons of mass destruction pose an urgent need for effective peace education programs. Scientific methods of evaluation are essential to discriminate between programs that work and programs that don’t work. Schools, communities, and governments are not likely to adopt and sustain peace education programs in the absence of sound evidence concerning their effectiveness.

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PsySR’s Peace Education Action Committee focuses on the many key issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information about the committee’s current work and future plans, please contact co-chairs Linden Nelson (llnelson@calpoly.edu) and Richard Wagner (rwagner@bates.edu). We encourage new members to join us in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.