

Collaborative Dialogues and Peace Education

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Abstract

Education in general, and school education in particular, is critical to overcoming sociopolitical violence and promoting peace building. This article proposes the implementation of collaborative dialogues in peace education for countries that were, or are, still involved in intractable conflicts. The article explores a number of collaborative principles in order to examine how these ideas can help in peace building from the classroom. Through this exploration, the reader will find a theoretical and practical framework of reference for pedagogical practices that promote a culture of peace from a collaborative perspective.

Key Words: *Collaborative practices, peace building, positive peace, peace education, collaborative dialogues, peace culture.*

Methodological Challenges of Peace Education

In countries such as Colombia, with its contexts and dynamics of armed conflict, education is critical to transform social practices that maintain and legitimize a culture of violence. But, how do we teach people to reject violent interactions? An answer to this question is peace education. The primary aim of peace education is the reduction of violence by empowering people with skills, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors to address both direct and structural forms of violence (Harris, 2004; Reardon as cited in Bajaj, 2008; Salomon, 2002).

Although reduction of violence is the overarching objective of any peace program, the methodologies, immediate goals, and contents, of peace education initiatives often vary. These variations depend largely on the type of conflict, its duration, the cultural context, the population to whom the program is addressed, and how concepts such as violence and peace are defined. “Even though their objectives may be similar, each society will set up a different form of peace education that is dependent upon the issues at large, conditions, and culture, as well as views and creativity of the educators” (Bar-Tal, 2002, p. 35). Thus, the challenge in peace education lies in designing creative proposals from the very life of the community in which we are working. We cannot simply replicate experiences from other countries where the contextual conditions have been very different.

Lederach (1988) highlights two essential elements that any peace education program should take into account to attain sustainable social change. First, the project should define what is meant by peace. Second, the project should outline a methodology that, according to the chosen definition of peace, specifies what peace building looks like in concrete, everyday situations. Considering these two aspects proposed by Lederach, and in order to create a framework to guide pedagogical practices from a collaborative perspective, I will define my own understanding of peace. I opt for a positive notion of peace wherein conflict is understood as something inherent to human relationships and as resolvable through non-violent, empathetic, and creative means. “Most peace builders perceive conflict as often leading to needed change and therefore potentially a creative force that can generate new options for solving existing problems” (Abu- Nimer 2010 p.15). In

this sense, the transition from a culture of violence to a culture of peace implies the making of education as a practice of cultural transformation. But to achieve this, it is necessary to be aware of our pedagogical practices and the type of relations we want to establish between students and educators. “Using education as a sorting device is problematic for peace educators, since the idea of peace itself is antithetical to vertical social relations and hierarchies in any form” (Galtung, 2008 p. 986). This brings us to the second aspect raised by Lederach; methodology.

A common challenge faced by the people and educational institutions that develop proposals of peace education is the coherence that must exist between the peace education content and the methodologies used to present this content. “Peace education focuses on the processes involved in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Not only the subject matter, but also how it is taught, in what context, and how this knowledge is reproduced later” (Spruyt, B., Elchardus, M., Roggemans, L., & Van Droogenbroeck, F., 2014, p. 4). If we are addressing content such as peaceful resolution of conflicts, justice and human rights, diversity and plurality, political participation or reconciliation, the pedagogical practices must generate reflexive and transformational processes in students.

The methodological aspect is crucial in any peace education program because collaboration, as a philosophical stance (not as a technique), represents a new thrust toward a culture of peace. For this reason I propose collaborative dialogue as a way to allow students to generate new attitudes through the re-significance of previous experiences. This process includes learning to understand the position of others, valuing dialogue as a mechanism for conflict resolution, and the incorporation of memory as a way to explore possibilities of forgiveness.

The Emergency of Collaboration in Post Modernity

In addressing the concept of *collaborative practices*, the first thing we must make clear is that they are much more than a set of methodologies and techniques applicable in any context indiscriminately. Standing from the collaborative perspective implies assuming an epistemological (regarding the concepts of truth, objectivity, knowledge) and ontological (as a form of being and existing in the world) posture anchored in the postmodern discourse. Harlene Anderson (2006) refers to postmodernism as a broad umbrella under which there are different practices and different—although interrelated—currents of thought. They are interrelated because—having emerged from hermeneutic philosophies, language, narrative and social construction theories—they emphasize the social construction of knowledge, objectivity as a relational achievement, and language as a means through which we assume what is constituted as true (Gergen 2007). “These thinkers substantially contributed alternatives for a linguistic and narrative analysis of knowledge (e.g., truths, beliefs, and expertise) and knowledge systems, leading a movement away from an inherited classical view of assumed often invisible traditions of knowledge and related notions of language, understanding, interpretation, reality, subject object dualism, and core self” (Anderson, 2010 p.9).

According to Gergen (2001), among the different approaches that have related postmodern and constructionist assumptions the following characteristics can be identified: they are flexible and non-fundamentalist, they have a clear awareness that the world is constructed, a variety of ideas about truth are prioritized, and realities are presented as multiple rather than absolute. Language has a central place in these approaches because they share the idea that language constitutes, rather

than represents, reality. From a postmodern perspective, language is the medium through which we create knowledge, and both knowledge and language are relational processes.

Derived from the assumptions discussed above, collaborative practice emerges based on the understanding of human systems as language systems. In the words of Harlene Andersen (1997) the collaborative is: “a language system and a linguistic event that brings people together in a relationship and in a collaborative conversation, it is a joint search for possibilities” (p. 28). Thus, the main question that arises from a collaborative approach is about the kind of conversations in which we participate and the possibilities that these conversations have for transforming the lives of people who take part in them.

From this perspective, the construction of positive peace is a dynamic process that is built into the network of relationships from which we make part through language and joint actions. In line with this comprehension of peace, collaborative practices enable peace educators to: promote a culture of peace and democracy; seek solutions through interaction with others; learn to understand the perspectives of others; transform conflict in nonviolent ways; locate avenues to enable political participation, and; construct new narratives, meanings, and interactional patterns through language.

The Collaborative Dialogue as a Tool in Peace Building

As Anderson (2013) points out, dialogic practice requires a collaborative architecture to be possible—that is, to become a living option and not simple rhetoric. Collaborative dialogue contains a series of distinctive features that should be incorporated into peace-building pedagogies. The first characteristic of collaborative dialogue that we have to keep in mind is that conversation is not linear. It is an interactive process that requires participation and willingness to learn from each other: “Dialogical space refers to room in one’s thoughts to entertain multiple ideas, beliefs and opinions. It is critical to the development of a generative process that promotes fluid, shifting ideas and actions” (Anderson, 1997, p. 112). Dialogic practice is, therefore, an invitation to dialogue from a relational horizontality, wherein conversation enables the creation of new understandings that result in changes in the life of people as well as new options for interacting and responding to conflicts. The idea is to create pedagogical spaces where through dialogue we can focus on the everyday life experience of people, rather than content and texts selected by the professionals responsible for peace education.

A second crucial aspect of this type of dialogue is intentionality. Intention will determine: what topics will be addressed, who will be involved, when, where, and for how long. But being that collaborative dialogue is relational, intentionality will be shared—that is, it doesn’t lie in the individual mental processes of those who talk, but rather arises from the dialogic interaction between people (Shotter, cited by Anderson 1997, p. 172). If conversation doesn’t proceed as a joint action with a shared intentionality, it becomes a monologue wherein those involved don’t listen to each other but rather try to impose their points of view to each other. This aspect is very important when we talk about creating learning environments that promote peace building since one of the major difficulties in countries with sociopolitical violence is the polarization of discourses, which reveal the difficulty of considering the opinions of others, to be respectful of different arguments (the one with a different opinion that certainly puts our certainties into crisis) and to share different versions of the world. However, if we want to generate transformation among students, and achieve the construction of a culture of peace, it is essential to not hold on to our

beliefs and points of view as the only valid ones and to dialogue and co-exist with the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations of the conflict.

In this sense the dialogic conversation proposed by the collaborative approach involves an open conversation and an authentic listening that seeks to create a space where many thoughts, ideas, beliefs, prejudices, and emotions can exist—thereby creating a different everyday context.

Another important element is the kind of questions used to energize and make sense of the conversation. The teacher should offer reflexive questions that invite and open conversation. In this conception, the teacher can be considered as an “expert” to facilitate conversational spaces wherein both students and teachers are transformed in the flow of dialogue. It is similarly important that students participate in the construction of the curriculum and choice of topics. Allowing students to express their expectations and dreams (as well as what is interesting or not interesting to them) about peace, violence, historic memory and conflict resolution encourages the feeling that all people take part in the dialogue in equal conditions. Similarly, the priority should be on what students bring to dialogue. That’s why it is important to start conversations with the understandings that students bring to the topic. This not only allows for the strengthening of students’ voices, but also facilitates the ability of the teacher to see their different perspectives. This kind of space can allow conversations that the students may not be able have in their ordinary life and wherein they can access a wide range of possibilities. In that sense, topics, content, knowledge and stories can be narrated and discussed in ways that provide opportunities for peace building.

I also want to mention the importance of the position of “not knowing” (Anderson & Goolishian 1992) in collaborative dialogues that aim towards peace building. Being curious to know what students say, and knowing from where they are perceiving and constructing their narratives, is crucial to achieve shared engagement with the dialogue. This implies that peace educators have to move away from their claim of knowledge and objectivity and instead create new understandings thorough joint action with students. This doesn’t mean that teachers have to put aside their previous knowledge about peace building, but rather they must strive to understand the experiences of participants as potential resources to enrich the conversation. As a result, the teacher will be more sensitive to new meanings that can be constructed from the comprehension that students bring to the dialogue. Thus the position of “not knowing” allows recovering and demonstrating the knowledge and experiences of students as well as recognizing the expertise they have about themselves, their lifestyles, and their contexts. Conversations need to be adapted to students’ circumstances, preferences and judgments. This is done with the aim of co-constructing meanings and narratives that support collaborative action projected toward common goals regarding peace building.

Access to others’ knowledge and experiences is achieved by allowing knowledge to be constructed through dialogue and with a collaborative attitude. With this frame, it is assumed that a collaborative conversation never begins or ends but it is always in process—it is dynamic and open to finding new practices and understandings that promote changes developed collectively. The teacher is positioned as an active agent that can contribute significantly to dialogues, which are rich in resources that engage the critical and imaginative thinking of students. The above contrasts with conversations and pedagogical practices that are structured and run from a pre-established script in which the transmission of contents, the evaluation, and the hierarchical relationships are privileged.

When people have conversations where they experience mutual openness and can recognize each other and interchange without any fear, but rather with empathy and deep listening, they experience the power of dialogic transformations. In peace education we must intentionally seek for these moments throughout dialogue since this is one of the most promising pathways in peace education where “the form of peace education has to be compatible with the idea of peace, that is, it has to exclude not only direct violence, but also structural violence” (Galtung 2008, p.942).

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