

Peace is not a dirty word

There has been a tendency for those of us in the peace education field to shy away from referring to it as such. In an effort to sell education for peace, we have packaged it to fit with the PSHE and Citizenship agenda, calling it human rights, conflict resolution, anti-bullying... anything to make it less problematic for schools. Each of these is an element of educating children and young people to be peaceable, to appreciate the potential of conflict when handled creatively, and to celebrate difference. But, as we concluded at the last Peace Education Network (PEN) meeting, 'peace is not a dirty word'. I can't imagine that many would disagree with this. And yet, providing education for peace to schools can be so controversial.

Herein lies a quandary. Why is it that the concept of peace is so applauded, but working in a non-violent way to achieve it is suspect? Should we present our work in a way that will cause least offence and get us through the door of schools, or does this reinforce the reticence and infer that working for peace is somehow distasteful or, worse still, tantamount to indoctrination? Should we be upfront about our message even if this presents schools with a challenge and may reduce the direct work we are able to do?

I personally believe that education for peace is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not just about teaching children about their rights or putting on an Africa day where children learn that the continent exists and that they eat different food there. I believe that this pragmatic response to getting into schools actually compromises the tenets of what we are trying to achieve. I figure it's the approach taken that makes the difference between providing peace education and educating for peace.

I don't think it is possible to teach students that child-on-child bullying is wrong, without challenging bullying behaviour between teachers, parents and on the international stage. To try undermines our credibility and makes nonsense of what we are teaching. Equally, citizenship education must be about more than turning out young people who will vote every four years and won't speed or drop litter. It is about encouraging young people to look at the community and world they live in and question what they see.

I guess this is where the controversy comes in. But I work for the Religious Society of Friends, and Quakers generally don't have a problem with being viewed as controversial. Because of their involvement in, and position on, activities such as non-violent direct action, they have, collectively and individually, regularly been viewed as subversive over the years. Quaker Faith & Practice (1999: section 24.11)

advises, 'we should not automatically accept the categories, definitions and priorities of the world'.

Although not a Quaker myself, I chose to work for them because I am in sympathy with the beliefs and values they aspire to; values of truth, integrity and peace, which I believe are integral to education for peace. Quakers acknowledge the realities of conflict and of evil, but contend that war and violence are not effective means of dealing with them. Instead, they determine that we must 'wage peace', using tools which include 'speaking truth to power', and living and working as a 'witness' to these values. According to the Quaker way, how each individual undertakes this is for personal discernment.

So how do I relate all this to getting peace education into schools? To witness means not only telling, but demonstrating to children that truth and integrity are important in working for a more just society. And whilst 'speaking truth to power' usually refers to engaging with those who are central to political, economic and military decision making to present an alternate worldview, I believe the concept can be similarly applied to the 'gatekeepers' in schools and LEAs.

The current fact-driven education system, with its emphasis on testing, creates an environment where structural violence is almost inevitable. This academic violence undermines our educational system and creates a generation of passive learners. Education should not inhibit children, it must teach them to think for themselves and empower them to learn for learning's sake, not simply to pass exams. Affecting the way in which children are educated is an integral part of educating for peace.

Education for peace is about identifying that young people have the power to change things they see as wrong in their community and more widely, as well as developing in them the imagination to find alternative responses to conflict. I believe that the means we employ to provide education for peace are indistinguishable from the content of the lessons. We must be uncompromising in presenting what we provide for school otherwise we compromise what we offer young people.

Reference: Quaker Faith & Practice (1995) published by the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

This article was previously published in DEA (Development Education Association) Journal, October 2006.