

Education for Peace & Justice

midterm writing assignment



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October 2016

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Promoting Peace through the Biology of Education



Our society is rife with conflict. If the 2016 presidential election has revealed anything, it is that from conflict springs more conflict. Because children have a tendency to mirror adults, when a hateful adult enters the public eye in a praised position, his actions are mimicked elsewhere. Donald Trump's rhetoric has spread like wildfire. Now, whether the principles he espouses were already lingering in forgotten crevices of this country or whether his notions have conformed otherwise reasonable citizens, this election shows how epidemic-like emotion can spread. We are seeing an uptick in schoolyard bullying, in cyberbullying and in hateful public rhetoric.¹ However, because of that same childlike tendency to follow the leader and uphold what authority says, schools can promote helpful values. Society is an interconnection of systems, where no sole actor is truly isolated. Everyone's words matter, from adults to children. Because of the organic nature of society, I strongly believe that education can be a catalyst for good. In fact, viewing education as a biological organism can help us find solutions to the drop out crisis, the school to

¹ Costello, Maureen B. "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on Our Nation's Schools." Teaching Tolerance (n.d.): n. pag. SPLC. Southern Poverty Law Center. Web.

prison pipeline, the achievement gap and the phenomenon of No Child Left Thinking, through the promotion of individual peace.

Society acts organically on a grand scale, especially if culture is viewed as a growth medium. For example Bio13 students use cultures to grow and observe different bacteria. The same culture cannot be used for every species. Perhaps some will survive, but for the whole container to flourish, a culture specific to that strain of little organisms is needed. In that same way, a one size fits all approach to education will not properly instruct all children. Education must match its students - individually and as whole beings. Thus, we are led to the individualization of education. Focusing on the individual, while perhaps costing more initially, will produce a variety of positive effects and eventually save society (money).

To start with, the U.S. must decide what sort of young adults we want. Do we want students who can navigate the internet and code, who can create the most moving pieces of art, who can follow a group or who can think critically and act democratically? As the Ottawa professor, Joel Westheimer, says, “choices about how we teach our children are choices about the kind of society we believe in.”² I believe, we must choose to educate American students to be global citizens, and that includes fostering democratic values as well as an outstanding sense of peace.

The current American school model teaches our students how to take a test — teaches math, literacy and conformity. Testing is so stressed that, in addition to needing to teach how to take a test and regulating a teacher’s classroom time, seventy-one percent of districts have cut back funding for the social sciences and two-thirds of teachers have had to give up science, social sciences or art in favor of test time.³ As the public school system exists now, there is no time for creative exploration, let alone for meditation and breathing practices. There are exceptions, but why are schools that teach the whole child exceptions to the rule?

Why is the U.S. so focused on achieving better score results in math and literacy? As our market competes globally, must our school scores also? We cannot directly compare the US to other countries, because the medium with which we have to work is different. Our governments vary, we have vastly differing

² Westheimer, Joel. (2015). *What kind of citizen?: educating our children for the common good*. Columbia University, NY: Teachers College Press.

³ Ilona Boniwell, Dr. "Educating For Happiness and Resilience." YouTube. TEDxHull, 20 May 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.

population sizes, and frankly we are starting from different places. So, what can we do? If we want critical thinkers, we must encourage debate. If we want peaceful actors, we need to cultivate peace. If America decides that social and emotional behavior matters, we will choose to educate for peace. One way to do so is by acknowledging human biology and using that as a tool for said peace.

Of the many the issues in education, a core one is our current emphasis on standardized tests. But what if instead of solving this education crisis by looking for new widespread decrees and exams, we focus on the individuals? This approach may be possible. There are proven, scientific ways to improve our schooling systems and data to show lawmakers — a necessary factor in creating legislative change in this country. Although America's education system does not currently employ this idea, there is hope, as Sir Ken Robinson, an international education advisor, explains with a phenomenal example: Rain will allow flowers to grow even in Death Valley, California, because the seeds are there — dormant, but there.⁴ There is hope that perhaps our education system has not fully stifled creativity and peace. Democratic passion awaits a compelling teacher; our seeds of peace lay dormant.

Meditation can educate for resiliency, since each individual child has the ability to learn and to spread peace. If teachers were enabled to take time out of their day to teach their classroom how to access their inner calm, their students would then learn more effectively. If a child can be taught to find that calm within themselves, then they can and do pass it on. Of course there are many other considerations to fix our education system and many other solutions for fostering peace, like respecting our teachers enough to increase their pay or restrictive gun laws so that toddlers do not need to learn how to duck and cover, but creating a generation of peaceful actors seems like as a good a starting place as any.

The ability of individuals to learn peace and to be taught peaceful ways of living is an ancient idea with new scientific backing. A sense of calm can be fostered in many ways: empowering the child, ensuring food security, etc. Likewise, various practices can prime the brain for peace: meditation, conversations of self awareness and our own class's Time for Pause. Such practices grow inner strength, allowing students to be present and emotionally responsive. Even if the United States staunchly states that its only goal is to produce literate and math savvy

⁴ How to Escape Education's Death Valley. Sir Ken Robinson. TedTalks, Apr. 2013. Web. 23 Oct. 2016.

students, then these peace building skills are still useful, because “practicing mindfulness facilitates awareness and self-regulation, and develops the capacity for a calm, focused mind... for optimal learning.”⁵ While the U.S. cannot agree, or has not yet agreed, on what type of student it wants to produce, our lawmakers have decided the more data the better. If we want a government that acts in line with our values, it is increasingly important for scientists to study previously dismissed subjects like happiness, positivity, democracy, and peace.

The human brain is astonishingly adaptable. In fact, scientists have coined the term neuroplasticity for the brain’s incredible ability to physically change based on experience. Neuronal cells need to be fired in order to sustain themselves; the more they fire, the more nutrients they acquire. This process can occur in either a building or a lagging direction. For example, once a person goes blind, neurons in their occipital lobe can die off from lack of use. Conversely, the neurons involved in peace instilling practices like meditation can strengthen and multiply with repeated use.⁶

Two notable quantified effects of meditation involve grey matter, which is the neuronal cell bodies, found most often on the outer rim of brain structures. The more grey matter, the better and faster a certain structure can perform its job. Because of our brains’ ability to be so plastic, the amount of grey matter can change over time. Because humans are animals, we can be trained, and one of the many ways to train us towards peacefulness is meditation. As a child or adult practices peace, certain changes occur. The benefits of meditation include improved attention, learning, memory and regulation of emotions. Brain scans back these findings. With daily meditation, grey matter in the amygdala (the fear and stress center) decreases and grey matter in the prefrontal cortex (the planning and decision making center) grows.⁷ These findings are present after only thirty minutes of meditation a day!⁸ Even simple intentional breathing exercises can calm a person down, by activating the parasympathetic system.

⁵ "About." CARE for Teachers. NPR, n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.

⁶ How Meditation Can Reshape Our Brains. Perf. Sara Lazar. TEDx Talks Cambridge. TED, 23 Jan. 2012. Web. 20 Oct. 2016.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Deep breathing can calm a person's vagus nerve, allowing them to breathe deeply and calmly. With deep breathing, over time, students can "respond as human beings" to conflict.⁹ Using this idea from positive psychology, the Holistic Life Foundation was formed in Baltimore, in order to "breathe love into communities."¹⁰ Three young men teach children how to produce peace, from themselves throughout their neighborhoods. These three men teach yoga classes in Baltimore's elementary schools. Their children learn how to access calm within themselves — how to breathe and basically observe a tangible neurofeedback system between their breath, their emotions and the side effects of those emotions.

As the cognitive behavioral technique shows, there is an unbreakable cycle between our behavior, our thoughts and our emotions. If we can improve one of those, like by breathing deeply, we can improve the others. The hope, and real effect, is for students to spread that newfound sense of calm, that propensity towards peace, to heal their communities. After about three months of this yoga class, previously labelled "problem kids" implement these strategies for regulating their behavior and empowering themselves, removing themselves from that derogatory label and no longer needing disciplinary action.¹¹

Through interconnection, diseases, ideas, and everything else can spread organically. Thus, social epidemics are common. An organization called Seeds of Peace attempts to utilize this idea, by fostering peace through at a Maine summer camp. Seeds of Peace recruits 14 to 16 year olds from areas divided by conflict. They have a "focus of personal transformation and then wider societal changes" — a model our education system should follow.¹²

Education is a means to treat an epidemic, in the same way that a cold can spread to every member of a family or that violence during wartime propagates from soldiers to families, battlefields to marketplaces. The interconnectedness of society will not dissipate and should be utilized. There exists a whole spectrum of values between Seeds of Peace and the Trump chants now sprouting in middle

⁹ "Why CARE for Teachers Matters." YouTube. CARE for Teachers, 30 Sept. 2013. Web. 24 Oct. 2016.

¹⁰ Smith, Ali, Atman Smith, and Andres Gonzalez. "Breathing Love into Communities." YouTube. TEDxCharlottesville, 29 Dec. 2014. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Our Values - Seeds of Peace." Seeds of Peace RSS. N.p., 2016. Web. 24 Oct. 2016.

school hallways — such a large spectrum, that I feel pained placing them in the same sentence. This is a spectrum that teachers must learn to navigate. “Educators can play a powerful role in transforming conflict, particularly in preparing young people for peace” and teaching them how to find peace within themselves.¹³

Society is an organism. When one organ becomes diseased, the whole becomes ill. In this way we can see the police shootings of men of color lead to citywide marches across the United States. No action goes unseen and no effect is too small to be noticeable. Hate speech can spread, but thankfully so too can movements of peace, actions of democracy, and words of love.

¹³ Ibid.