Conceptualising critical peace education for conflict settings

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Abstract

This article explores the conceptual frameworks of critical peace education and their relevance for scholars and practitioners working in conflict settings. Insights and frameworks for analysing violence are offered from existing theoretical models and built upon to address the complexity of contemporary conflicts and the role of education within them

Key Words

Conflict

Education

Peace

Agency

Introduction

At the intersection of peace, conflict and education lie many potential realities, including (1) education for indoctrination and the perpetuation of violence; conversely, (2) education contributing to peace, human rights and social justice; and, (3) instances in which educated members of a society, or schools in particular, come under attack from non-state actors or are targeted by state violence. Initiatives towards peacebuilding through education exist across the globe with differing conditions, orientations, and objectives. In order to contribute to the ongoing global conversation on peace education, this article explores the following question: what can the conceptual frameworks of critical peace education offer to scholars and practitioners working in conflict settings? The term 'conflict settings' used in this article is inclusive of armed conflict, protracted conflict, post-conflict, and underlying forms of social, economic and political conflict that have not erupted in widespread violence. This article first charts the conceptual underpinnings of peace education followed by a discussion of the rise of critical peace education and insights from this subfield for scholarship and educational practice in conflict settings.

Critical peace education in context

Peace education is a field of scholarship and practice that utilises teaching and learning not only to dismantle all forms of violence, but also to create structures that build and sustain a just and equitable peace (Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016). Since World War II, peace education has formally emerged as a field of scholarship and practice that is global in scope. One seminal moment in the field's early creation was at the 1964 convening of peace studies

scholars through the International Peace Research Association at which a call was issued for 'peace research, peace action, and peace education,' noting the important role that education can play in dismantling structures of violence and promoting peace (Galtung, 1973: 317).

Betty Reardon, a pioneer in the field of peace education, has highlighted the need to teach about peace as well as to teach for peace. In other words, peace education requires 'the transmission of knowledge about requirements of, the obstacles to, and possibilities for achieving and maintaining peace; training in skills for interpreting the knowledge; and the development of reflective and participatory capacities for applying the knowledge to overcome problems and achieve possibilities' (Reardon, 2000: 399). Peace education thus requires transforming content, pedagogy, structures, educational practices, relationships between educators and learners, and the systems by which we measure the outcomes of education as well.

Scholars have importantly distinguished between two core concepts in the field of peace studies, namely 'negative peace' and 'positive peace' (derived from the work of Galtung, 1969). Negative peace is defined as the absence of direct, physical violence. Direct violence is exemplified by torture, war, militarism, rape and other forms of aggression; efforts to promote negative peace include disarmament and peacekeeping initiatives. Positive peace requires the absence of structural and cultural violence and emphasises the promotion of human rights to ensure a comprehensive notion of social justice. Indirect violence, according to seminal peace studies scholar Johan Galtung (1969), refers to structural and cultural forms of violence—systems such as racism, sexism, colonialism, culturally-condoned exclusion, among others—that privilege some to the marginalization of others. The identification and analysis of the many forms of violence—through critical and participatory education and dialogue—offer a necessary prerequisite to any efforts to interrupt violence in all its forms and prevent its further spread. Education further plays a significant role in promoting both negative and positive peace by equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and values required to interrupt and transform historical modes of domination that permeate the education system.

Birgit Brock-Utne (1989) identifies different levels at which violence must be addressed from a feminist perspective, distinguishing between the 'organized' level, referring to state involvement or negligence to act despite knowledge of violent acts, and the 'unorganized' level, highlighting violence that occurs in micro-structures, such as in families and communities (Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016). One such example of the latter is Galtung's concept of cultural violence, which often occurs at the unorganised level through practices that are culturally legitimised (and often strongly tied to structural inequalities) (1990). For example, while illegal across all of India, the practice of female infanticide remains rampant in many parts of the country. A recent article noted that when the value of gold increases (and hence raises the expectations of the dowry amount by an eventual groom's family, although dowry is also technically illegal), the rate of female infanticide increases (Bhalotra, 2018). This example demonstrates how 'cultural' practices are also deeply informed by economic realities and unequal social relations that render girls' lives disposable in conditions of scarcity. By understanding the root causes and manifestations of different forms of violence, peace education—through analysis, critical thinking and informed action—seeks to disrupt and dismantle them.

In recent years, there has been a rise in critical approaches to peace education that both bring in theory from a variety of disciplinary frameworks, as well highlight marginalised voices and histories to inform peace education theory and practice (Bajaj, 2008; 2015; Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj and Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016). As Brantmeier and Bajaj (2013: 145) have argued:

> Critical approaches offer peace educators and researchers the contextual and conceptual resources for understanding the structural impediments to advancing the possibility and promise of peace education in diverse locales across the globe. Rather than status quo reproduction, critical approaches in peace education and peace research aim to empower learners as transformative change agents (Freire, 1970) who critically analyze power dynamics and intersectionalities among race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, language, religion, geography, and other forms of stratification.

Critical peace education in particular considers the ways in which human agency dynamically interacts with structures and forms of violence; and, in turn, contemplates the potential for educational spaces—formal and informal—to be sites of individual and collective transformation (Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj, 2008; 2015). What distinguishes critical peace education from 'regular' peace education are some key underlying principles. First, while all peace educators draw from analyses of violence, critical peace educators pay attention to how unequal social relations and issues of power must inform both peace education and corresponding social action. Second, critical peace education pays close attention to local realities and local conceptions of peace, amplifying marginalised voices through community-based research, narratives, oral histories and locally-generated curricula. Lastly, critical peace education draws from social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to view schools as both potential sites of marginalisation and/or transformation (See also, Hantzopoulos, 2015). Further, it considers multiple spaces within and outside of state-run schools—which often serve as forces of exclusion—as conduits for possibility, liberation, and social change (Bajaj, 2015; Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016). Critical peace education is similar to transformative human rights education in this way as they both question the normative prescriptions offered in each field, and suggest more sustained attention to local context and knowledge generated by communities and social movements (Bajaj et al., 2016).

When examining the root conditions of violence, as critical peace education requires before designing any type of intervention, the conflict triangle developed by Galtung (1969) offers a useful tool and a holistic assessment mechanism that forces us to look beyond the surface-level of direct violence. In this modified conflict triangle for critical peace education in Figure I, Brock-Utne's (1989) levels of violence are added in and the forms of violence are deliberatively historicised to take into account legacies of colonialism, genocide, forced displacement and other forms of exclusion that endure long past their official end.
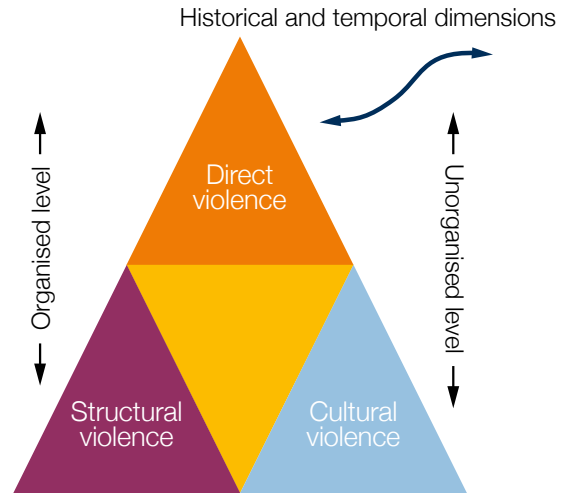

Figure 1: Galtung's conflict triangle reconfigured

Applying Galtung's triangle, it becomes evident that there are always larger historical and structural forces that cause manifestations of direct violence. Through such an analysis, most societies are indeed 'in conflict,' not just those experiencing outbreaks of direct or armed conflict (indeed, the United States is a prime example of a conflict-ridden society where police brutality, state-sponsored violence and disregard for international humanitarian law are rampant, though it is rarely considered a 'conflict zone' in conventional analyses). In the following section, the analytical tools of critical peace education offer useful frameworks for exploring conflict and its causes.

Insights from critical peace education for conflict settings

When examining violence (structural, cultural or direct), several tools emerge from peace education and its critical variant. As Figure I demonstrated, analyses of violence require not only different understandings of forms, but also levels, as well as historical tracing of the roots of violence. Tailored efforts to intervene in conflict, and studies of them, constitute much of the field of peace education with varying degrees of knowledge about the context. In Figure II, the Core Competencies for Critical Peace Educators and Learners that I developed in 2014 are slightly modified for conflict settings to situate the learner and researcher within a holistic framework for analysing violence and possibilities for peace (Bajaj, 2015).
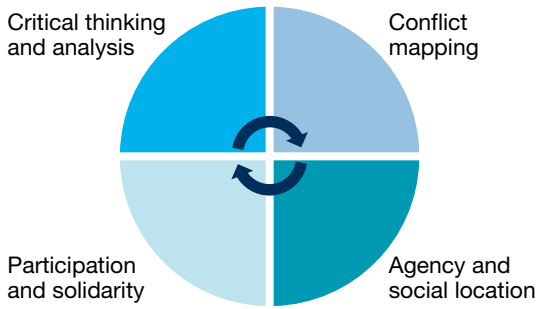
Figure 2: Critical peace education competencies for conflict settings

Conflict mapping

What are the historical roots of this conflict? Who benefits from conflict? What power relations and asymmetries in material conditions contribute to this conflict?

Agency and social location

What forms of individual and collective agency might be possible given the conditions? What factors and strategies are needed for such agency to be sustained and long-lasting?[1]

Critical thinking and analysis: What narratives are being presented (in the media, textbooks, etc.)? What are other narratives? Who controls the production of narratives? How might we interrogate received notions of identity and unequal forms citizenship?

Participation and solidarity

What forms of participation are possible and meaningful? How might trauma influence the forms of participation that can be taken, and what forms of individual and collective healing might be required before action is possible? What solidarities are needed for the advancement of peace and human rights in this context?

Each of the elements listed above may contribute to the preparation of the learner-actor who is equipped with the skills and capacities to teach for comprehensive visions of peace in a variety of settings. Critical peace education efforts would do well to engage in Freire's (1970) cycle of praxis wherein action is taken, reflected upon and

analysed, then revised for new action in a continuous cycle of learning and simultaneous social and political engagement.

There are many more competencies that may be elaborated depending on context, and the educator should undertake a situational analysis attending to the power dynamics in a particular setting before engaging in any form of peace education.
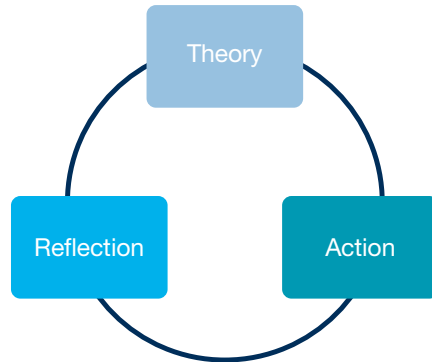

Figure 3: Freire's praxis cycle

Concluding thoughts

Critical peace education offers frameworks for conflict analysis that can provide a foundation for any effective intervention or research endeavour in what we consider emergency contexts and other contexts that are not engaged in violent conflict. Ahistorical and short-term projects that do not attend to the roots of conflict offer band-aid 'solutions' that may actually exacerbate violence rather than contribute to its mitigation. The questions posed above under the competencies in Figure II can be useful for guiding further scholarship in critical peace education by utilising such analyses for inquiry and research. For example, a recent dissertation completed by Ion Vlad at the University of San Francisco (2018) draws on critical peace education to understand the narratives, intentions and pedagogical approaches of peace and human rights museums in North America. Another recent dissertation by Katie Zanoni at the University of San Francisco (2018) examines continuities and disjunctures between peace education discourse at the national level in Kenya and local-level practice through a school for girls focused on educating for peace and leadership

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[1] I have theorised notions of agency and social location more extensively in my multi-year research on human rights education in India (Bajaj, 2012) and also discussed its role in education for peace, human rights and social justice in a recent article (Bajaj, 2018).

(Zanoni, 2017). Such forms of scholarship—neither of which in a context of armed conflict, but where diverse forms of conflict drive extreme inequalities and disparate social conditions—contribute to the larger field, as well as informing practice on the ground and offering reflections on the possibilities of such work as well as potential contradictions and constructive reflections for the practitioners involved.

Critical peace education aims to better align the promise of education for peace and greater justice with more effective tools for inquiry and practice in order to better realise this expansive vision. The frameworks offered here can contribute to discussions of education in conflict and emergency education, as well as in other settings, and such a dialogue between fields is indeed necessary and generative. As international initiatives and funding streams, such as through DFID, USAID, Dubai Cares, etc., continue to concentrate necessarily on education in conflict and emergency contexts, attention must be paid to research and practice grounded in local knowledges and to expanding sites and opportunities for transformative education for social change.

Author Bio

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