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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Transforming War
Toys into Peace Art

Open Season on
Oaxacan Teachers

Profits of War in
Pension Plans

Teaching
for a culture
of peace





OUR SCHOOLS
The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
OUR SELVES



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LARRY KUEHN

Teaching peace is still tough

Teaching peace can be a threat. I was reminded of this recently when I read an email message from a group in California called U.S. Labor Against the War. The purpose of the organization is obvious — opposition to the war in Iraq. The email message was telling members of the group that one of their number had seen that a community was having a “Peace Fair” and had sent a request for U.S. LAW to have a literature table.

The organizers came back with a “no.” They said they were sympathetic to the cause, but that they were trying to avoid anything that would disturb the children for whom they were putting on the peace fair.

Teaching peace as a controversial issue

Avoiding disturbing realities happens too often in our schools, but for understandable reasons. Even if students can handle the complexity and ambiguity of social conflict and its causes, fear of parental or public response often makes teachers uneasy and very cautious.

Some schools are encouraging, or even directing, teachers to put lesson plans and student assignments on a web site. This is

so that the students — and parents — can view in detail from home what is being dealt with in the class. The fully public nature of information on the web may constrain even more the willingness of teachers to take on issues on which views on all sides are strongly held.

No longer is it possible to shut the door and teach as you think it should be done. This was always the way that teachers characterized being able to ignore the foolishness of policies and pro-

grams that were counter-productive. Now many forms of technology serve as tools of surveillance. Besides the teacher or school web site being made open to the world, recently some stu-

Ways for the teacher to avoid being the controversy, rather than the issue being the controversy.

dents in a class in Quebec incited a teacher, then captured his response on their camera phone and posted it on the web.

The ubiquity of phones that can capture video and upload to the web is producing a panopticon effect. Jeremy Bentham's design of a prison as a panopticon allowed prisoners to be potentially observed at any time. Because the prisoners could always be observed, they had to act as if they were, even when no one was actually there to observe them. Bentham described the panopticon as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example." Increasingly, teachers, not just prisoners, may be observed at any time, directly or indirectly.

In this context, a cautious approach to teaching controversial issues is understandable. The authority of the teacher is more open than in the past to challenge from many sources. Further, negative reactions may be almost immediate. Despite this, teachers must find ways to put challenging issues before students. Somehow peace has often been seen as subversive — or at least controversial. Pat Clarke in his article in this issue suggests ways for the teacher to avoid being the controversy, rather than the issue being the controversy.

Teachers looking for tips on teaching controversial issues can look to at least two other good sources of ideas as well. One is Oxfam in the U.K., which has an online book on teaching controversial issues at www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/teachers/controversial_issues/index.htm

In addition, *Rethinking Schools*, a publication produced by a group of progressive educators in the U.S., has a section on their web site on “Teaching about the war” (<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/war/>). While discussing Iraq from a critical perspective might have been a problem in some classrooms, with the failure of U.S. intervention in Iraq becoming clear even to supporters of Bush (even if not by him), it has probably become much easier to raise the war for an open discussion in U.S. classrooms.

A call for a return to Canada’s role of peacekeeping, not active combat.

Teacher unions have not been silent on the issue of the war in Iraq, hopefully making their members more confident in teaching about peace. Education International passed a resolution opposing the war at its last Congress in 2004, a motion supported by teacher union leaders from around the world, with some of the delegates from the U.S. supporting it as well.

The American Federation of Teachers’ adopted a motion in the summer of 2006 calling on it to “actively encourage its state and local affiliates to join the AFT in working with the AFL-CIO to end the war in Iraq and bring the troops home rapidly.” During the Vietnam war, neither the AFL-CIO nor the AFT ever came out opposing the war.

The war in Iraq hasn’t been much of a focus in Canadian teacher unions. Even with Canadian forces in Afghanistan, a search of web sites of teacher unions identified little discussion of the war and no policy positions. An article in the newsletter of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association indicated its position has not been to call for immediate Canadian withdrawal from Afghanistan, but one of reviewing the mandate of the Canadian military. Implicit in this is a return to Canada’s more appropriate role of peacekeeping, not active combat, a position which probably reflects a majority Canadian view and the view of most teachers.

No lack of teaching resources, but short on theory

One classic Canadian source of resources is the National Film Board. Still around is “Neighbours,” a short film by Norman McLaren that is still as good for generating discussion with stu-

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dents of any age as it was when I used it nearly 40 years ago. The NFB also has many more recent films, such as “Teaching Peace in a Time of War.”

Other Canadian organizations as well provide material for teachers and students:

The United Nations Association of Canada has web pages full of projects for schools (<http://www.unac.org/en/projects/index.asp>), including model United Nations meetings.

Co-Development Canada has its curriculum unit, “A Culture of Peace: A Teaching Unit on Alternatives for War and Violent Conflict.” Look for it at <http://codev.org/codev2/>.

The Global Peace Hut has a focus on Uganda’s child soldiers, an issue that has a particular relevancy to students. It encourages the development of school “Peace Clubs.” Find out more at www.globalpeacehut.org. The Child is Innocent Foundation supports Ugandan children who have to flee their homes every night to be protected from kidnapping by the so-called Lord’s Resistance Army and has a web site at www.thechildisinnocent.ca

War Child Canada’s web site engages students in activities assisting children affected by war and raising the issue of children’s rights everywhere at www.warchild.ca

Also worth a look is the UN Cyberschoolbus with an amazing array of information and activities at www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/

Lots more can be found on “Give Peace a Link” www.teachingforpeace.org, with some samples of the types of material in an article later in this issue.

Most of the resources related to peace education such as those listed here are activity-oriented. However, not many reflect on the educational theories on which peace education needs to be based.

Some theories on peace education

After World War I and the creation of the League of Nations, peace education was incorporated into some Canadian schools. Articles from the era talk about the need to create the “international mind.” By that, they seemed to mean people who could look beyond the interests and myths of their own country to develop a broader perspective. An organization to generate activities toward this aim was created, a League of Nations Association,

presumably a forerunner to the current United Nations Association. And, at least in British Columbia, a "Goodwill Day" was celebrated every year, with internationalist teaching materials provided that could be integrated into many subject areas.

Goodwill, of course, turned out not to be enough to avoid war. Competing nationalisms, racism, imperial ambitions and economic interests dominated over whatever good will might have been developed in the schools. If there is a lesson in that, it has to be that education is not enough to build peace.

Achieving a culture of peace requires the construction of a pluralistic society.

However, peace is more likely if all our societies have worked to build a "culture of peace." People will be less likely to support military action, just as Canada did not join the Iraq debacle and other NATO countries are unwilling to enter into the type of military action the Canadian Forces are undertaking in Afghanistan.

A recent book, *Educating for a Culture of Peace* (Y. Iram, editor, Information Age Publishing), contends that achieving a culture of peace requires the construction of a pluralistic society. Iram focuses on 'peacebuilding' as the aim of peace education. The overarching aim of peacebuilding is "to help a new generation build a tolerant society by respecting the rights of individuals and groups, and thus contributing to the greater good of all."

Erwin Epstein in Iram's book identifies some barriers to peace building: "A culture of peace can not be achieved through education based on nationalistic propaganda, ethnocentric myth teaching, and the filtering of information." This was the message, too, of Nurit Peled-Elhanan, an Israeli lecturer at Hebrew University, who spoke at the World Peace Forum. She points out that the textbooks used in school too often offer ethnocentric views that do the opposite of creating a culture of peace.

Hmmm. This doesn't sound that different from 1920s teachers seeking to create the "international mind" and the promotion in schools of good will by understanding others.

It's not that anything is wrong with this approach. It is important for us to work to create a culture of peace. The problem is that creating peace also has to address the socio-political realities of power. Otherwise, the best of intentions will simply be overwhelmed by other forces.

Michael Apple addressed some of these when he spoke at the World Peace Forum in Vancouver in June of 2006. He identified four forces that are currently dominant that all lead us away from the possibilities of peace: neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, managerialism and autocratic populism. These are all forces that have been powerful in the U.S. and have an effect on and in the rest of the world as well.

Neo-liberalism places the market above all else and devalues and deconstructs the state as an agency of social good. This has had the impact of creating greater inequalities both within and

Building a culture of peace is an ongoing process, a journey, not an end that can be measured and declared achieved.

between societies and is antithetical to an ethic of caring that is essential for peace.

Neo-conservatism is a social conservatism that actually wants the state to

take a greater role, but for the purpose of imposing conservative social views on everyone in the society. It damages the pluralist and tolerant aspects of a society that are necessary for a culture of peace.

The new managerialism focuses on control of public institutions using the techniques and language of business management. If it can't be counted, it can't be managed. But building a culture of peace is an ongoing process, a journey, not an end that can be measured and declared achieved. It must always be a work in progress and must engage all the people continuously, not just managers and their measurable objectives.

As for the autocratic populists, they have been in charge in the U.S. so far in this century. They create and use fear and animosity as the way of imposing policies. Fear and animosity are corrosive, producing the opposite of a culture of peace.

No justice, no peace

The final articles in this issue focus on Mexico and on issues of social and political inequality that are reflections of the way that global neo-liberal policies affect education and create social conflict. You can see here the impact of the forces that Apple describes: the neo-liberal policies, particularly reflected through NAFTA; the managerialism imposed through an exclusive focus

on outcomes and testing regimes; and the populist authoritarianism that has dominated Mexico for seven decades.

Hugo Aboites describes how the international debt and then NAFTA have reshaped Mexican education. Both of these have accentuated inequality and fragmented sources of social cohesion as government and the majority of the teachers union accepted policies that were destructive of the collective premises of Mexican society.

The rebellion in Oaxaca is arguably as a result of these forces as well. Epstein in describing the conditions needed for a culture of peace notes "the need for children to receive an education based on knowledge inquiry and truth seeking outside the dominant, mainstream center, particularly on displaced and marginalized indigenous cultures, worldviews, and practices."

Oaxaca has an indigenous population of at least 40%. It is one of the poorest of the Mexican states. It has been losing a large part of its population because of NAFTA. One of the provisions of NAFTA allows the subsidized, industrialized corporate agriculture from the U.S. to export corn to Mexico at prices cheaper than the Mexican peasant farmer can raise corn. People are consequently being forced off the land and in large numbers have gone across the border to the U.S. as illegal migrants.

Indigenous cultures, worldviews and practices have been weakened. At the same time, the PRI government in the state still fits the mold of the traditional autocratic populism, an extreme of the type that Apple describes.

A combination of these factors came together in Oaxaca, beginning with a teacher strike that started in May of 2006. The teachers were not only seeking an increase in their salaries, among the lowest in Mexico. They also had many demands for conditions for their students whose families are too poor to provide all the needs for taking part in school.

The police attacking peaceful teachers on June 14 on the orders of the autocratic governor brought an immediate response from the community in support of the teachers. The movement soon grew well beyond a teacher strike, as recounted in the articles included in this issue. The generally peaceful rebellion was met with violence, with reports of about 15 people killed, mostly by plainclothes police or paramilitaries supporting the governor.

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Amazingly, the rebellion went on for six months before the state finally took action to smash it. The article from the local Oaxaca press reporting on teachers being dragged from their classrooms and put under arrest gives a sense of the level of repression.

By all means we should be working to build a culture of peace in our schools and everywhere. However, the situation in Mexico should remind us that a real and lasting peace cannot be built unless it is on a foundation of social justice.

“Protecting” children from social reality, as the “peace fair” in Los Angeles tried to do, ultimately fails. Because a culture of peace that is real must be built on social justice, our work as teachers is not only to teach, but to do it in ways that contribute to social equity.

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