

# Keeping, Making, and Building Peace in School

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*“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Kathy Bickmore to share her research on the “hidden curriculum” of citizenship education. She shows how a school’s conflict management system can be deliberately designed (or not) for democratic learning.*

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice”  
Editor, University of Washington

Schools are microcosms of society, and the human relations of school life often teach students implicitly “how society works.” Schools employ different approaches to managing conflicts such as bullying or tensions between different social groups. These different approaches, which represent a “hidden curriculum,” can have an important impact on the implicit citizenship learning of students. On the one hand, this hidden curriculum may be authoritarian and minimize the importance of resolving differences in favor of the assertion of hierarchical control.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there are “peacebuilding” approaches to the management of conflict and differences that can deepen democracy through a hidden curriculum that prepares students to be engaged and positive citizens.

I recently completed a study of the safe schools and conflict management practices of three big-city school districts with diverse student populations in Canada. In this article, I share the centerpiece of my findings: three broad yet distinct and consequential ways these schools manage conflict.

Schools handle conflict in three basic ways, each with different goals and with students playing different roles. These ways are known in peace and conflict studies theory as *peacekeeping*, *peacemaking*, and *peacebuilding*.<sup>2</sup> Peacekeeping interventions focus on controlling overt aggressive behavior, encouraging students primarily to comply with existing authorities. Peacemaking interventions also may respond to overt aggression, but focus on resolving the underlying disputes—

guiding students to voice their own needs and views, listen to those of others, and negotiate solutions. Peacebuilding refers to comprehensive, long-term, multifaceted systems for mitigating and preventing destructive conflict through social transformation.

Peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding reflect a continuum of approaches to conflict (see figure 1). At one end, peacekeeping initiatives restrict opportunities for democratic agency among students. Peacemaking approaches aim to resolve disagreements and problems that can result in aggressive behavior. Finally, peacebuilding initiatives disrupt social hierarchies and rebuild relationships, presenting substantial opportunities among broader populations of students to have their voices heard. Effective peacebuild-

ing systems in schools include peacekeeping for safety and peacemaking to address daily disagreements, but they also go beyond post-incident conflict intervention by inviting students and teachers to constructively confront conflicts as a way of democratizing the school climate while provoking learning.

## Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping approaches are aimed at security. They include surveillance, punishment, and monitoring interventions to establish control and limit violence. On one hand, peacekeeping is a necessary condition for democracy: the incidence and even the threat of violence limit opportunities for education, constructive dialogue, and social development. However, the punitive ways in which violence is typically handled in schools can impede human rights and disproportionately marginalize and stigmatize students of color.<sup>3</sup>

Peacekeeping initiatives include restrictive and often punitive codes of conduct and many anti-harassment initiatives.<sup>4</sup> Student support services such as social workers, psychologists, behavioral pull-out programs, and cultural-community liaisons often contribute to peacekeep-



Students sit in a circle during a class at a peace-building institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, June 5, 2007. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot)

ing by managing disruptions, though they also may contribute to peacemaking by facilitating problem-solving conversations. Teachers use gentle peacekeeping when, for example, a student who acts aggressively is told, “that’s not acceptable behavior in this classroom.”

In the three urban districts I studied, the scarce staffing and energy available for handling conflict was focused on two peacekeeping goals: anti-disruption and anti-bullying.<sup>5</sup> For example, several schools had trained selected high-status students to serve as peer monitors or advisors who intervened to curb aggressive peer behavior on the playground. Many of these peacekeeping activities appeared to improve the safety of some students who would otherwise have been targeted by violence. At the same time, these initiatives addressed visible behavior, not the social relations or conflicts that caused it, which suggests they might not have lasting effects outside adults’ spheres of influence.

Prototypical examples of peacekeeping

initiatives included physical devices such as security cameras, regulations such as mandatory identity badges or dress codes to discourage visible gang affiliations, procedures such as strict discipline and school suspension, and practices such as playground surveillance. In schools and classrooms that emphasized peacekeeping responses to conflict, most students were mainly practicing passive compliance with authorities. Students designated as peer monitors might be affirmed as “good” students while others were treated as “problems.” Such initiatives, although helping to keep the peace, tended to reinforce adults’ and students’ unequal status and deny many students the opportunity to practice handling their own conflicts constructively.

### **Peacemaking**

Peacemaking is dialogue, negotiation, and deliberation—often assisted by third-party facilitators—aimed at the resolution of disagreements and problems that might

otherwise motivate aggressive behavior. Peacemaking includes some aspects of peacekeeping (intervention at the point of visible conflict to re-establish safety), but beyond controlling violent symptoms, it focuses on developing mutual understanding, creativity, and critical thinking to resolve underlying conflicts.

Peacemaking approaches in schools include mediation and, increasingly, various “restorative” problem-solving practices. These include “peacemaking circles” and “conferencing” initiatives based on aboriginal traditions.<sup>6</sup> One conferencing circle dialogue approach, now used around the world as a peacemaking alternative in mainstream school and justice system contexts, is derived from the ancient traditions of the Maori people in New Zealand. A somewhat similar, healing-oriented talking circle process, based on the traditional conflict resolution practices of the Cree and other aboriginal communities (in North America), is also becoming

widely used. In this process, supporters of alleged perpetrators, victims, and the wider school community are prepared in advance and assembled in a circle. A facilitator asks a series of questions to facilitate understanding and problem solving. A talking piece is passed sequentially around the circle to give each participant an opportunity to speak on each question. In both of these peacemaking circle methods, diverse stakeholders take joint responsibility for problem solving, restoring healthy community relationships instead of emphasizing blame or retribution. Because power and voice are shared among multiple stakeholders, circle processes are able to resolve even complex, power-imbalanced conflict situations, such as bullying, and reduce the recidivism associated with mainstream punitive practices.

Whereas most peacemaking circle processes are facilitated by adults, in peer mediation student mediators are trained to intervene to facilitate peer negotiation for dispute resolution. Peer mediation programming may be effectively infused in regular classroom curriculum, but more frequently it involves co-curricular student leadership cadres who serve on playground duty or by referral. Well-implemented peer mediation programs have been found to reduce aggressive behavior (and associated school suspensions) and to develop participants' reasoning, social skills, and inclination to handle conflict constructively.<sup>7</sup> Co-curricular and whole-class conflict resolution education also may effectively reduce aggression and build conflict competence when it includes explicit, long-range instruction, regular practice in conflict management and equity, and support for teacher development.<sup>8</sup> This includes both conflict resolution education infused into regular subject-matter lessons (such as examining contrasting views of historical events or dialogue on controversial political issues) and co-curricular conflict management practices such as those reviewed below. It is not

surprising that both students and teachers tend to become better at handling conflicts nonviolently and effectively, when they have plenty of opportunities for guided practice—discerning and “hearing” diverse viewpoints, communicating persuasively about their own perspectives, predicting consequences of various options, and negotiating toward mutual understanding and agreement are examples of academic skills that are also life skills.

In an elementary school peer mediation initiative I studied a few years ago, various schools interpreted and implemented the same training and program in remarkably different ways.<sup>9</sup> The training program emphasized facilitation of dispute negotiation by diverse cadres of student leaders. However, what some schools actually implemented looked more like peer monitoring—excluding less-compliant, less-successful, and language minority students from the peer leader roles, insisting that mediators “model good behavior,” and using mediators to keep peers quiet more than to facilitate autonomous problem-solving. All of these adjustments, while making the program fit more seamlessly into prevailing school norms and roles, tended to reduce opportunities for students, especially lower-status and struggling students, to take responsibility for resolving their own conflicts.

In a few schools trained by the same program, however, adult advisors were skillful in supporting a much wider range of student leaders in ways that did sustain their involvement in mediation. These schools recruited student mediators to represent all of the student body (not just “good” students), and empowered them to use peacemaking to resolve their own conflicts. Instead of kicking students off the mediation team when they got into fights themselves or fell behind in schoolwork, mediation teams negotiated fair, restorative solutions such as second chances and peer support; and adult advisors mediated or advocated on behalf of student media-

tors with other adults. Because mediator diversity was thereby maintained, just about every student in these schools could identify and communicate comfortably with somebody on the peer mediation team. The schools empowered diverse cadres of student mediators to actually mediate conflict resolution, and these student leaders were more successful in expanding peers' voluntary use of the peacemaking option—thereby increasing many students' inclinations to use nonviolent responses to conflict, and reducing rates of suspension for fighting. These schools also increased average scores on standardized tests more than comparable schools during the project year—presumably by helping to resolve problems that would otherwise distract students from schoolwork but also by building on the academic relevance of peacemaking skills (e.g., listening, articulating a viewpoint, brainstorming and evaluating potential solutions).

In my study of urban schools' conflict management practices, several schools had recently replaced peer mediation with “anti-bullying” peer monitoring.<sup>10</sup> For example, many of these schools continued to have student leaders on duty on the playground, but when these students intervened in peer conflicts, instead of facilitating their negotiation of solutions to their own problems (mediation), the “anti-bullying” leaders simply advised peers to stop bothering one another, and/or referred them to adult monitors. In these cases, the emphasis shifted from facilitating autonomous student problem solving to control. A teacher in one school explained that the school's new student leaders “educate students about bullying ... and help students figure out what to do if they feel they're being bullied.... Usually, it's to go tell [an adult].” She reflected that, whereas in the past peer mediators had tried to help peers solve problems, the new anti-bullying monitors were “more proactive” in controlling peer behavior to avoid conflict. She and several others preferred the efficiency of



Figure 1: **Three approaches to managing conflict: Lived citizenship education practices**



directive peacekeeping (students assisting adults to control peers), compared to facilitative peer peacemaking (relatively autonomous student problem solving). While one can certainly understand the impulse to try to prevent or de-escalate problems early, this policy shift would tend to reinforce the school's existing hierarchies.

To summarize, examples of peacemaking initiatives from my research included conflict mediation by adult administrators or counselors, peer (student-facilitated) conflict mediation, a conferencing process designed to facilitate "restitution" by students for alleged wrongdoing, and peacemaking (problem-solving) circles that used a talking piece. Whether adults or students mediated or facilitated circle processes, peacemaking processes (unlike peacekeeping) involved sharing authority with students so that students could voice their own concerns and propose their own solutions to problems. Clearly, the skills and roles of peacemaking—including shared responsibility, attention to diverse needs and viewpoints, and collective decision making—are important ingredients of democratic participation. Thus peacemaking practices are likely to reinforce (and be reinforced by) dialogue and discussion practices in classroom lessons—a powerful potential overlap between the hidden and explicit curriculum.

### **Peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding aims to redress systemic violence such as inter-group division, marginalization, and exploitation. It does this by transforming education so as to de-normalize violence and rebuild just social relationships. While peacemaking addresses particular incidents of conflict, peacebuilding transforms the underlying relationship injustices that have led to or exacerbated the harm arising from that conflict.<sup>11</sup> Peacebuilding includes peacemaking practices such as dialogue, collective decision-making, and problem-solving, but also changes institutional patterns to make these processes inclusive.

Democracy is a system for addressing conflicts nonviolently. Consequently, the creation of more meaningful and inclusive school and classroom governance procedures is a form of peacebuilding. One principal described how her staff "had to retool the school to re-establish relationships." Roundtable meetings of students, parents, and staff brought people of different communities together. "Part of the shift started when they talked to each other," she said. This is an instance of changing school practices to repair inter-group ties and to make the school community more willing and able to address conflicts constructively. Other schools supported student self-organizing for peacebuilding through affinity and advocacy groups, such as Muslim students' associations or gay-straight

alliances. In one high school, over 300 students had participated in that year's Day of Silence. They wore signs that read, "Please understand my reasons for not speaking today. I support and represent those silenced every day by hatred, oppression and violence against sexual orientation and sexual identity. Think about the voices you are not hearing." This is an example of an activity designed to contribute to peacebuilding by de-normalizing violence and social exclusion. Such co-curricular peacebuilding activities have the potential to broaden the democratic climate for expressing diverse identities and views—not merely handling conflicts after they arise, but raising conflict issues for discussion and putting potential adversary groups together in cooperative contexts. The aim is to transform the relationships and mutual misunderstanding that underlie social conflicts in school and society.

Like peacemaking, peacebuilding can take place not only as part of the school's hidden curriculum but in the formal, implemented classroom curriculum. A key example is anti-discriminatory (globally and locally-oriented) citizenship education. In my study of three urban districts, examples of peacebuilding initiatives included a few teachers leading classroom discussions of controversial public issues (such as a contemporary city council debate in a social studies class), and other curriculum units examining questions of discrimination and human

rights (such as a Holocaust and genocide education course, and a unit on gender identity and homophobia in an English class). Co-curricular initiatives included a social action and service learning effort that paired mainstream students with newcomer immigrant students and their families, and a student governance charter at one high school that explicitly facilitated the creation and empowerment of diverse student organizations and affinity groups. These inclusive dialogue opportunities can have positive impacts on students' ability and inclination to engage in democratic citizen action.<sup>12</sup> Government curriculum mandates across Canada (similar to many in the USA) rhetorically embrace aspects of peacebuilding such as the value of diversity, critical thinking, and dialogue, especially in the social studies, yet such curricula are often minimally implemented in practice.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, standardized reforms and testing, especially in public schools serving poor and marginalized young people, tend to disproportionately narrow those students' opportunities for peacebuilding learning opportunities. Education for democratic peacebuilding rejects "taken-for-granted realities about problem solutions and about 'difference.'"<sup>14</sup> This is challenging and complicated for schools and teachers, but research shows that it is possible and worth the risks.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, school faculties and administrators are continually teaching citizenship—not only through explicit lessons, but also through the ways they facilitate student participation in voicing and managing conflict throughout school life. While the prevailing hidden curricula in the schools I studied often emphasized top-down peacekeeping responses to conflict, shining exceptions in all three districts demonstrated the feasibility and efficacy of peacemaking and peacebuilding. This was true both in the formal curriculum and the co-curriculum of conflict management

in school life. Educators who had implemented explicit, pre-planned, conflict education said that it provided students and teachers with "something to build on." It helped them "be prepared to have that conversation" about oppression and transformative peacebuilding—before, as well as after, incidents of interpersonal or group friction arose.

I believe students will learn how to handle social conflict democratically and nonviolently only through having opportunities to learn and practice this. Such opportunities in social studies classrooms are extended (or undercut) by the lived opportunities diverse students have (or are denied) to voice and to hear alternative viewpoints in the context of the inevitable social conflicts in schools. 🌱

## Notes

1. For the effects of the hidden curriculum, see, for example, Philip Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968/1990); Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (London: Routledge, 1979).
2. Ian Harris, "From World Peace to Peace in the 'Hood: Peace Education in a Postmodern World," *Journal for a Just and Caring Education* 2, no. 4 (October 1996): 378-395.
3. Stephen Jull, "Youth Violence, Schools and the Management Question: A Discussion of Zero Tolerance and Equity in Public Schooling," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 17: online: [www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/](http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/); Catherine Gewertz, "Reactions to School Climate Vary by Students' Races," *Education Week* (2006): 5 & 16.
4. Stacey Scheckner et al., "School Violence in Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Current Interventions," *Journal of School Violence* 1, no. 2 (2002): 5-32.
5. Kathy Bickmore and Angela MacDonald, "Student Leadership Opportunities for Making 'Peace' in Canada's Urban Schools: Contradictions in Practice," *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy/Revista Interamericana de Educación para la Democracia* (Forthcoming).
6. Brenda Morrison, *Restoring Safe School Communities: A Whole School Response to Bullying, Violence and Alienation* (Leichhardt, New South Wales, Australia: Federation Press, 2007); See also Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* (St. Paul, Minn.: Living Justice Press, 2003).
7. Laurie Stevahn, et al., "Effects of Conflict Resolution Training Integrated into High School Social Studies Curriculum," *Journal of Social Psychology* 142, no. 3 (2002): 305-333; Tricia Jones, "Conflict Resolution Education: The Field, the Findings, and the Future," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 22, no. 1-2 (2004): 233-267; Robert Harris, "Unlocking the Learning Potential in Peer Mediation: An

- Evaluation of Peer Mediator Modeling and Disputant Learning," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2005): 141-164.
8. W. Garrard, and M. Lipsey, "Conflict Resolution Education and Antisocial Behavior in U.S. Schools: A Meta-Analysis," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2007): 9-38.
  9. Bickmore, "Student Conflict Resolution, Power 'Sharing' in Schools, and Citizenship Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2001): 137-162.
  10. Bickmore, "Policies and Programming for Safer Schools: Are 'Anti-Bullying' Approaches Impeding Education for Peacebuilding?" *Journal of Educational Policy* (Forthcoming).
  11. John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, Penn.: Good Books, 2003).
  12. D. Hess and P. Avery, "Discussion of Controversial Issues as a Form and Goal of Democratic Education," in *The Sage Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, eds. J. Arthur, I. Davies and C. Hahn (Los Angeles and London, Sage Publications, 2008): 506-518.
  13. A. Sears et al., "Canadian Citizenship Education: The Pluralist Ideal and Citizenship Education for a Post-Modern State," in *Civic Education across Countries: Twenty-Four National Case Studies from the IEA Civic Education Project*, eds. J. Torney-Purta, J. Schwille, and J. Amadeo (Amsterdam, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999): 111-135.
  14. Lynn Davies, "Preparing for Peace," accessible at [www.inglewhie.net/pfp/davies.htm](http://www.inglewhie.net/pfp/davies.htm)

## USEFUL WEBSITES

[www.peacebuildersinternational.ca](http://www.peacebuildersinternational.ca)  
Peacebuilders International—Canada  
(offers training)

[www.creducation.org](http://www.creducation.org)  
The Conflict Resolution Education  
Connection (includes some resources for  
teachers)

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