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Peace education through emotional development in ECE

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In a world filled with conflict and violence, early childhood teaching can help create peace. A discussion of the meaning of peace education, how it is relevant to early childhood education, and how peace education is supported in Aotearoa/New Zealand through *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is presented. Differentiating between creating peace around the children and fostering peace from within the children, this article explores the possibility of using mindfulness practice to help children gain inner peace.

Kia tau te rangimarie

Kia whaka tapua tātou katoa

Me ngā mea e whakapono ana tātou

Let there be peace amongst us

Let us have respect for each other

and what we believe

(New Zealand Kindergartens Inc. 2013)

We live in a world which is full of conflict: millions of people across the globe suffer from discrimination, abuse, and violence caused by a range of conflicts (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], 2011). The causes for these conflicts can vary, but some common reasons are political, economic, ethnic, civil, or religious (Evans, 1996). There is also conflict within ourselves. These inner conflicts can take different forms such as having to choose between two undesirable options, having to choose between two desirable options, or having both positive and negative feelings towards one option (Balasooriya, 2001). Balasooriya (2001) states that these internal conflicts actually make up most of the conflicts we have to face in our lives. How we react to conflict, however, is a learned behaviour (Evans, 1996; Grille, 2005), which means that it should be possible to learn ways of dealing with conflict of any sort in a peaceful manner. In this article I will first look at what peace education is and why it should be part of early childhood care and education. I will then explore literature on peace education in Aotearoa/New Zealand and link *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996) to peace education, before considering ways to foster peace from within in early childhood care and education.

Peace education is difficult to define, as it is commonly considered to be cross-disciplinary (Andersson & Zaleskienė, 2011; Hinitz & Stomfay-Stitz, 1996) and multifaceted (Hinitz & Stomfay-Stitz, 1996). It is not a final goal, but a process (Evans, 1996; IFRC, 2011). Some of its facets are promoting human rights (Andersson & Zaleskienė, 2011); nonviolent behaviour and conflict resolution skills; children's rights; and concepts and language of peace (Evans, 1996), as



well as social justice, concern for the environment, economic wellbeing, and political participation (Hinitz & Stomfay-Stitz, 1996).

In his teacher's guide to peace, Balasooriya (2001) outlines how it was the focus on cognitive learning which moved education away from moral, social, emotional, and humanistic aspects. He claims that, before this advent of cognitive learning, every culture saw peace as an integral part of education. Grille (2005), on the other hand, believes that the further we look back in history, the more abusive and neglectful behaviour towards children was. Still, Balasooriya (2001) and Grille (2005) agree that to move towards a more peaceful society, there needs to be a focus on emotional development and away from purely cognitive learning. The IFCR (2011) strengthens this argument by calling for learning that does not start with the intellect but focuses on feelings, the body and experiences, and nurtures interpersonal social skills and values. This makes arts, music and songs, stories, sports, and games ideal tools for teaching peace (Evans, 1996; IFCR, 2011). Peace education is holistic and includes the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the child.

As peace education is value based, it is important to keep in mind that each culture and each person might view peace and peace education differently (Andersson & Zaleskienė, 2011). This is also reflected in the different categorisations made around peace education and its content matter. Balasooriya (2001) differentiates three aspects of peace education: *inner peace*, *social peace*, and *peace with nature*. Haskins (2011), likewise, presents similar categories, which are *inner peace*, *peace with others in the classroom/community*, and *universal/global peace*. Andersson and Zaleskienė (2011), on the other hand, distinguish between *education about peace*, *education for peace*, and *education in peace*. However, no matter how peace education is defined, there are some common underlying values that guide it, such as *respect for diversity*, *empathy*, *non-violent communication*, *love*, and *harmony*.

In the past, the debate around peace education was often more focused on primary and secondary schools. Collinge (1993) explains this with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that young children are only able to refer to concrete situations and are not able to discuss complex concepts such as peace and war. However, Haskins (2011) points out that Maria Montessori already proclaimed the need for peace education for young children, as she believed that a change in human society could only be brought about through children. Edwards (2002) also mentions that Montessori was not the only educational model in the time around the First and Second World War which moved towards reconstruction and peace, but that Rudolf Steiner and Reggio Emilia did so as well in their own way. Unfortunately, those early calls for peace education in early childhood care and education were not taken up by many.

Even though peace education is still not a widely researched topic in early childhood care and education today, there is evidence that it should be included. Evans (1996) mentions that peace education is often introduced too late and instead needs to be part of all young children's lives in all settings. Ilfeld (1996) supports this belief, as the abilities which are needed to create a peaceful society, such as the ability to share, respect different viewpoints, articulate opinions and needs in a non-violent manner, and to compromise, are all learned from an early age. Grille (2005) also believes that how we interact with infants, toddlers and children influences their development and growth. He uses science and



psychology findings to highlight the need to improve children's emotional life as the key to peace. Hinitz and Stomfay-Stitz (1996) draw attention to neuroscience findings which support this argument. Ritchie (2015) also points out research, which indicates that gaining emotional competence in the early years "through attuned sensitive interactions with empathic adults" (p. 39) benefits children.

As has been established above that peace education is vital in the early childhood years, I will now explore the notion of peace education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and if and how the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) is supportive of peace education.

Ritchie, Lockie, and Rau (2011) and Ritchie (2015) are significant in their focus on peace education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Both articles explore peace education in Aotearoa/New Zealand from a bi-cultural perspective, including indigenous views of peace and peace education. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) is a bi-cultural document by design, and even though it does not have a direct focus on peace education, it can provide guidance in this area, according to Ritchie (2015). Looking for the word 'peace' within *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), one only comes across it in one of the learning outcomes for the strand Contribution – Mana Tangata Goal 3, which reads: "Children develop a range of strategies for solving conflicts in peaceful ways, and a perception that peaceful ways are best" (p. 70). However, this is not the only learning outcome in *Te Whāriki* which relates to peace. Ritchie et al. (2011) translate several parts of Part B in *Te Whāriki* which is written completely in Māori. These parts talk about children being nurtured in a peaceful environment and through peaceful interaction, as well as children feeling peace (Ritchie et al., 2011). So peace is holistically integrated in the Māori part of *Te Whāriki* but teachers and educators in Aotearoa/New Zealand who do not speak te reo Māori might not be aware of this.

Looking at the different mentions of peace within *Te Whāriki*, there is a differentiation that stands out. While the English text focuses on developing peaceful ways of conflict resolution within the child, the passages translated by Ritchie et al. (2011) highlight the need for creating a peaceful environment around the child. Thus, a differentiation is suggested here between peace education focusing on building a culture of peace *around the child* and fostering peaceful behaviour, conflict-resolution skills, values, and ethics *within the child*.

Since *Te Whāriki* does not directly make peace education an integral part of the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it is left to teachers to implicitly include peace education, both in the form of fostering peace from within the children and building a culture of peace, in their practice. However, it has been argued that *Te Whāriki* does accommodate and, when looked at more closely in parts, encourages the inclusion of peace education.

Even though building a culture of peace and fostering peace from within are integral to peace education, there has not been a lot of research conducted around fostering peace from within, which includes peaceful behaviour, peace within children, non-violent communication skills, and peace related values and attitudes within early childhood education. Instead, building a culture of peace is often focused on. Ritchie (2015) mentions three studies undertaken in Aotearoa/New Zealand which focus on building a culture of peace. As building a culture of peace and fostering peace from within are interconnected and influence each other, building a culture of peace will also lead to fostering peaceful



behaviours and values. In this part of the article, however, I am going to focus on literature which is supportive of fostering peace from within. Haskins (2011) believes that all peace comes from inner peace and this is supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] Constitution (UNESCO, 2014) which states that, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” (p. 5).

So how can we foster inner peace within the children we work with? Balasooriya (2001) lists learning activities for discovering inner peace, which include meditation, practicing awareness, and fostering imagination in children. Evans (2011) adds in this context that a vivid imagination can help children cope with and work through stressful events. Haskins (2011) views stillness and silence, gratitude and appreciation, as well as mindful awareness and presence as beneficial to children and recommends experiences that expose children to these for developing inner peace. Fisher (2006) advocates to use meditation practices with children, such as mindfulness. According to Hooker and Fodor (2008), mindfulness is a practice which focuses the attention on the present moment. Greenland (2013) is developing a programme to introduce mindfulness to schools, and Hooker and Fodor (2008) also advocate the use of mindfulness practice with children. The benefits they see for children using mindfulness include cognitive change, self-management, relaxation, and acceptance. Mindfulness practice is also judgment free and increases one’s awareness of self and the world around (Balasooriya, 2001). It is the calm and relaxation, as well as the non-judgmental nature of mindfulness practice and meditation that can help children discover inner peace. Mindfulness practice can also help build non-violent communication skills. Rosenberg (2015) shows the need for being aware of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting while communicating. This awareness allows us to not fall into habitual responses and instead communicate openly and non-violently. Non-violent communication is also a key, according to the IFRC (2011), to living together peacefully.

It can be summarised that peace education is a value-based, cross-disciplinary, multifaceted, and holistic part of education. It is a way into a more peaceful future through equipping our children with the skills to deal with conflict in a non-violent way and to value and respect diversity and difference of opinion. It is vital to include peace education in early childhood education, as children should learn about peace and conflict right from the beginning. Unfortunately, it is not clearly stated as part of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). However, teachers and educators in Aotearoa/New Zealand can incorporate peace education in their practice and links to *Te Whāriki* have been explained in this article. However, more research needs to be conducted around peace education. There is little research on how to foster peaceful values and behaviours within children. Mindfulness practice might be a way to go forward in fostering inner peace, respect, and non-violence within children.

Most importantly we need to keep in mind that if we want to build a peaceful society, guided by respect and love, we need to start with our children. This includes fostering inner peace, peaceful behaviour and values within them as well as the way we treat them, the role-models we are to them, and the environment we create for them.



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