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Defining Violence—Defining Peace

Many young people today endure extreme poverty, suffer violations of their human rights, and live in violence-riddled environments. For some, there appears to be no decent future in sight; they often feel that no one listens to them and that society has abdicated its responsibility to care for them. These youth have become marginalized. Due to social, economic, and political trends, they have become part of the periphery, possessing limited voice. But the question is: Do they have something to say? I believe they do. I believe that youth have a substantial amount to offer regarding their own situation and the condition of the world. In presenting the beliefs, opinions, influences, and motivations of inner city youth activists, this book will give voice to some of these young people. This book explores the influences and motivations of a diverse group[1] of exceptional young people who have chosen to become activists addressing issues of direct and structural violence. It examines how their influences and motivations affect their involvement as activists and seeks to uncover their perceptions about themselves as activists. Furthermore, this book contains an examination of what kind of impact youth activist involvement has on them, their families, peers, and community. This investigation of inner city youth activists offers insight into what is needed in both society and educational systems to empower youth to be agents of change.

On a personal note, this research is a reflection of my educational beliefs and my belief in young people as agents of change. I feel strongly that education should serve as a means for social change, mainly through the development of critical consciousness, and the development of a socially responsible citizenry. The activists described in this work support my notion of the common good—a society that is founded upon justice, dignity, and equity.

As a peace educator, from the very beginning of my research I considered the activists I spoke with as peace builders since they address violence in its many

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The names and identifying details of the youths discussed in this book have been changed.

forms charged in order to promote justice. Working for peace is complex. The word peace often causes people to smirk or laugh; the concept of peace (and the idea of peace work) is often dismissed as utopian and unattainable. As the youth described in this book demonstrate, this is far from the truth. Their actions show some ways we can make peace even when we are deeply mired in a culture of war. One route to peace demonstrated by the work of the inner city youth activists featured in this book is through education. Specifically, the work of peace education can more fully be realized in nonformal settings; there are no standards, set curricula, or administrative pressures driving the agenda. Although if we are truly interested in seeing a global transformation—a paradigm shift from a culture of war/violence/competition to a culture of peace—then comprehensive peace education enacted at all levels must be implemented in both formal and nonformal educational settings. Until that time we can look to the work of youth activists to see the personally and socially transformative power of peace education.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

One common factor between the activists represented in this book and their activist predecessors is an attention to violence in all its forms. To understand their work, we must first have a clear understanding and definition of violence. Typically, when violence is studied the aim is to understand the roots of aggression and/or conflict. This type of research is usually done from a psychosocial or anthropological standpoint. However, the field of peace research—my point of departure—is committed to broadening our conception of what violence is and where it comes from. According to noted peace researcher Johann Galtung:

> A good typology of violence should: 1) conceptualize violence in a way which brings under the concept of violence phenomena that have something very important in common, yet are sufficiently disparate, and 2) subdivide violence along a dimension that is theoretically important . . . permitting us to say something not only about the differences between the types, but also about the relations between the types.[2]

When conceptualizing violence, it is important to incorporate all aspects of violence while allowing room for understanding the relationship between the forms. A broader paradigm is required—one that includes not just war, torture, homicide, and other physical abuse but also emotional abuse, oppression, and exploitation. Peace research makes connections among these different forms of violence, thus elucidating root causes.

To distinguish between types of violence, Galtung establishes the concepts of direct, structural and cultural violence:

> Direct violence is intended to insult the basic needs of others (including nature), structural violence with such insults built into social and world structures as exploitation and repression, and cultural violence, aspects of culture (such as religion and language) legitimizing direct and structural violence.[3]

From this perspective, violence is "anything avoidable that impedes human self-realization," including misery or alienation.[4] Examples of direct violence, also known as personal violence, are acts of war, torture, fighting, gun violence, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. The fundamental ingredient in direct violence is an actor or actors—making direct violence a personal act. Generally, this is the only type of violence that is acknowledged as "real" violence. This is unfortunate since, although there is no actor or single act in structural violence, what exists is a permanent state of violence. The mechanisms of structural violence are exploitation, penetration, segmentation, fragmentation, and marginalization.[5] Galtung states that "these are short-hand formations for complex matters in economic, social and political orders that have consequences such as shortage of nutrition, lack of freedom, lack of togetherness, deprival of well-being in general. . . ."[6] In corroboration of the existence of structural violence, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks of the Giant Triplets, which he believes are the cause of all violence. The Triplets—Racism, Materialism, and Militarism—are examples of structural forces that propagate violence.[7] Also known as indirect violence, structural violence is embedded in the social, political, and economic structures that make up society. Since such indirect violence is deeply rooted in pervasive societal forces, its effects are as diverse as racism, sexism, poverty, hunger, violation of human rights, and militarism. As indirect violence, structural violence is perhaps especially pernicious because it is often camouflaged and accepted as the norm.

THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE

Starting with the notion that violence breeds violence, the reproduction of violence manifests itself in society in four different scenarios.[8] First, direct violence leads to direct violence, which could also be seen as an action-reaction relationship (i.e., fights, gang violence, retaliation/escalation of war, etc.). The second case is when structural violence leads to direct counterviolence, which in turn leads to direct counter-counterviolence. For example:

> Structural violence in the form of repression and alienation will also eventually lead to direct counter-violence [by those being repressed/alienated], one way or the other. In all cases, there may be revolts, efforts at liberation, and then oppressive counter-violence [by the elites] in

> order to protect the structure of status quo with such means as counterinsurgency and torture.[9]

In this situation, the oppressed form a violent revolution that provokes the oppressors to retaliate with even more severe direct violence such as torture and mass killings. In the third scenario, direct violence leads to structural violence. This example is best seen in acts of conquest or war (or through "capitalist imperialism"), where direct violence sets up systems of exploitation, penetration, segmentation, fragmentation, and marginalization. In the fourth scenario, structural violence leads to structural violence, a contagion effect, if you will, in which, "misery may lead to repression and repression to alienation."[10]

These scenarios establish some pretty clear relationships between the forms of violence in society. Of particular relevance to inner city youth is the dynamic in which structural violence leads to direct violence. There are clear correlations between structural violence such as poverty and racism and direct violence such as assault and homicide. Many researchers and educators have determined that structural violence also creates limited opportunity for social growth.[11] Obviously, as a result of structural violence, sometimes young people can make poor choices or practice behaviors that further embed them in the structural violence that surrounds them. However, inner city youth activists such as those described in this book know that once structural violence is recognized, it can be overcome.

Analyzing the nature of oppression and the effects of oppression on both the oppressed and the oppressor, Paulo Freire clarifies the relationship between structural and direct violence. He explores oppression through the concepts of violence—more specifically dehumanization (the loss of one's dignity)—and relationship of violence/dehumanization and liberation. He contends that oppression keeps the oppressed from being fully human and is therefore inherently violent. Furthermore, the imposition of structural violence in the form of oppression often leads to direct violence acted out laterally (i.e., extreme poverty leading to neighbors harming neighbors). This is seen in the striking out against one another among the oppressed, as well as in the self-depreciation of the oppressed. Freire states that "once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior."[12] In inner cities, for example, the structural violence of poverty, where injustice breeds despair and hopelessness among many youth, results in war zones where neighbors kill neighbors.

Geoffrey Canada describes this kind of laterally acted-out violence in his compelling personal history of violence *Fist Stick Knife Gun*,[13] in which he links structural inequalities to violent crime in New York City's poor minority neighborhoods. Canada points out that many youth are driven into a life of direct violence as the only means of survival in the war zone–like conditions of the ghetto. He describes how these war zone–like conditions are exacerbated by the introduction of handguns into the community and the subsequent lack of attention the establishment gives to the killing of poor black children (another manifestation of structural violence). Canada contends that "the explosion of killing we see today is based on decades of [either] ignoring the issue of violence in our inner cities"[14] or responding to violence by enacting control through more police (who are not trusted by most inner city residents) and more prisons.[15] Subsequently, communities plagued with manifestations of structural violence become breeding grounds for direct violence where very little is done to provide young people with a way to feel safe and express their feelings and fears. Therefore, adults are largely responsible for the surge in youth violence because, by abdicating their responsibility to keep children safe, they have made youth feel that no one can or will protect them. The adults Canada speaks of are not only the parents or neighbors of the afflicted youth, but all those who are involved in the political, social, and economic processes in our society.

A constant exposure to structural violence leads to distrust of government and authority, causing feelings of alienation, rage, and cynicism that often result in direct violence.[16] While, in the past, disillusionment with authority sparked student involvement (i.e., Vietnam War protests, the civil rights movement), it now more often than not leads to depression and apathy coupled with an eroding ethic of social responsibility and reciprocity.[17] These responses are consistent with findings that show that children experiencing traumatic events lose interest in the world and often will alter their behavior to hide fear.[18] These altered behaviors, which include using tough actions, aggressive play, and uncaring behavior, often lead to achievement and behavioral problems in school, thus allowing the cycle of violence to continue.

Looking to global war zones such as Mozambique and Cambodia, James Garbarino et al. solidify the connection between direct and indirect violence. Making comparisons between these war zones and inner city neighborhoods, they show that children who grow up surrounded by violence and poverty risk serious developmental harm. In the absence of family or community support, this developmental harm manifests itself in learning and behavioral problems in school and a lack of (or rather a loss of) moral development. Many children adapt to violence in pathological ways that lead to feelings of "futurelessness," the acting-out of risky behaviors, and expectations of more violence and early death. Some coping mechanisms, in which many youth begin to identify with the aggressor, include: (1) joining gangs, (2) modeling violent behaviors, and (3) obtaining guns.[19] Naturally, this is not the case for all inner city youth. However, these negative direct violence outlets for youth are readily available and fill the public's perception of "what inner city youth do."

DEFINING PEACE

There are two definitions of peace: negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace, as a concept, focuses on reducing/ending war and all physical violence. Education for negative peace develops a citizenry that is well informed to take action for the achievement of peace through eradicating direct violence and working for disarmament. Examples of education for negative peace include the many skill-based programs that have emerged in the areas of nonviolence and conflict resolution, such as the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and after-school violence prevention programs in urban schools. Positive peace requires the amelioration of all structural and systemic obstacles to peace, and thus the creation of true peace. In addressing the need for justice, equity, democracy, and an end to structural violence, positive peace takes concern beyond the end of war and physical violence. (see Figure 1.1). One way to conceptualize the terms *negative peace* and *positive peace* is by considering a drinking glass. In society today, the glass is full of violence and war. Removing these forms of violence empties the glass, creating a negative amount of violence, therefore it is termed negative peace, meaning something has been taken away. Now, when that glass is refilled with justice and equality and other values, beliefs, and practices that counteract structural violence, a state of positive peace is reached. In other words, we have refilled the glass with true peace.

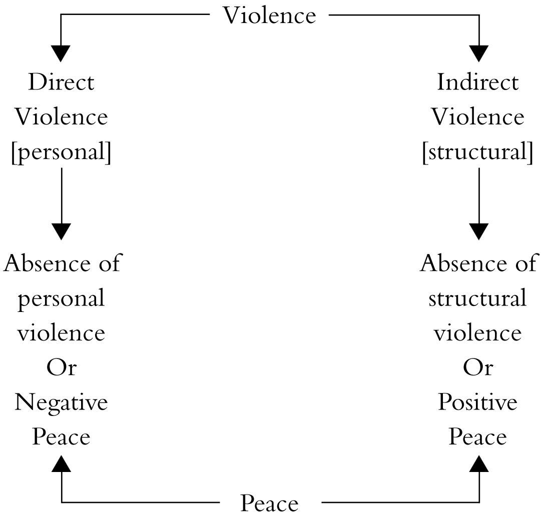
Violence
Direct Violence [personal]
Indirect Violence [structural]
Absence of personal violence Or Negative Peace
Absence of structural violence Or Positive Peace
Peace

FIGURE 1.1 Negative and Positive Peace. Adapted from Hicks, 1988

Positive peace requires global justice since "changes in global society and economic systems are seen as the necessary preconditions for authentic world peace."[20] The major areas of concern to education for positive peace are: (1) problems of economic deprivation and development; (2) environment and resources; (3) universal human rights and social justice.[21] The study of injustice is central to peace education; by exploring issues of inequity and injustice and the structures that perpetuate them, learners begin to understand their place in these structures, thus allowing them to begin self-exploration of their values and behaviors. This questioning of the system and of one's place in the system is requisite for taking action to change the system. Furthermore, identifying options and deciding to take action are empowering acts and are consistent with two goals of peace education: the acquisition of decision-making skills, and the development of a sense of agency.

Consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of developing change from within, rather than imposing top-down mandates, the overall method of peace education is to raise critical consciousness. Raising critical consciousness can only occur if the education process allows for multiple possibilities to be examined. For example, rather than focusing on a prescribed history curriculum, peace educators allow students to examine issues of violence, war, and/or security in a more meaningful manner: First, learners unearth their assumptions on these topics, then examine and analyze a variety of perspectives on the issues. Then, learners generate alternatives to physical violence, war, and nuclear weapons and, finally, develop strategic plans. As this pedagogical example shows, peace education is not indoctrination. Rather, in promoting the discussion of causal relationships and multiple perspectives, learners learn to think critically and make well-informed personal decisions. The informational process of peace education is to elicit awareness and understanding. As Reardon states:

> In eliciting awareness, the intent is to strengthen the capacity to care, to develop a sincere concern for those who suffer because of the problems and a commitment to resolving them through action.[22]

As consciousness raising occurs learners can begin to understand the relationship between the micro and macro.[23] Peace educators believe that education must allow for these cause and effect connections to be made because it facilitates understanding contradiction in a wider context. This methodology makes it possible for learning to be generated from students' concerns—they discuss and explore contradictions they perceive, and develop an intellectual and action-based agenda.

THE CORE VALUES OF PEACE EDUCATION

Many youth see media portrayals of "youth issues" as misguided and the focus on direct violence and youth as smokescreens that keep the real conversations at bay. Contrary to what the media would have us believe, there are young people interested in using their voices to alter negative images of youth and to create positive opportunities for youth as members of global civil society. They are interested in issues of structural and direct violence—especially, topics that directly affect their communities. They want to direct and develop their own learning and to participate in peer education—developing materials and workshops to share with other members of their organizations, as well as outside learners of all ages. Their concerns, which include racism, militarism, poverty, sexism, neo-imperialism, environmental degradation, and hypocrisy, all revolve around the three core values of peace education: Humane Relationship, Global Citizenship, and Planetary Stewardship.

HUMANE RELATIONSHIP

Locally, urban activist youth are involved in campaigns that address police harassment and brutality. In their neighborhoods, they are regularly victims of these practices and they use educational outreach to bring the matter to light and to teach youth and adults about the roots of this issue. For example, one organization (Youth Force) provides trainings to young people (and provides them with a "cheat sheet" to keep in their wallet) on their civil rights and how to respond when approached by a police officer. Prejudicial behavior is also a concern with regard to the treatment of women and girls in their communities and through the media. Both female and male activists want to expand the dialogue on gender relations to counteract the continued objectification of women (in the media and in their communities) and harassing treatment of girls by their peers (both in and out of school). Finally, young people mention institutional issues such as prisons, the death penalty, and inequitable educational opportunity as relevant concerns. They are aware that more money goes into the prison system than to schools; they know that men of color have a greater chance of incarceration; they consider the inhumanity of killing another person in the name of justice; and they recognize that education budget issues often leave the neediest communities with the most deprived schools. Central to each of these aforementioned issues, which represent questions of bias and intolerance, as well as injustice in the forms of racism, sexism, institutional manifestations of economic inequality, and harsh treatment of individuals, is the notion of humane relationship. The goal of humane relationship is to recognize the inherent dignity of all living things, and youth activists are committed to having dignity become a focus of local and global thinking.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Through their activist work, youth see themselves as part of a larger picture—of a global movement rethinking how we envision the world and our future. For many youth organizations, a key component of this global mindedness is the expansion of human rights. Youth activists focus on economic human rights by addressing local and global poverty and inequality. For example, Bronx youth address local housing issues—the lack of affordable housing and the quality of said housing—as well as tenants' rights and responsibilities, by organizing local residents for education and activist experiences. Other groups are concerned with American international policy as it impacts Americans and other world residents. A concern for the welfare of all citizens leads them to create workshops that address issues of globalization and the impact of economic inequality on local communities as well as underrepresented members of society. These youth actually know about the United Nations and its work and utilize human rights documents, primarily the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as peer-education tools. Another manifestation of global citizenship is the desire to build networks. To this end, youth do coalition building and carry on dialogical work with other youth in a variety of locations around the world. Through educational exchanges, film festivals, and conferences, activists meet other youth like themselves and build bridges to strengthen their praxis. Clearly, the concept of citizenship, especially as it is understood in a global context, is of primary concern to these young people.

PLANETARY STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship in the traditional sense means caretaking. It implies the maintenance of and caring for a place, an object, or even an individual. Planetary stewardship is based upon the ecological conception that we are all caretakers of the Earth; that every citizen has a responsibility to respect and care for the planet. Often the idea of stewardship is focused on a specific place—one's bedroom, classroom, city block, or a local park. Planetary stewardship supports the practice of local caretaking but expands the underlying consciousness to include "all of existence." For instance, youth who are replanting a local park (such as Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx) are doing so for the immediate benefits—an improved aesthetic, a chance to nurture living things—but they also understand the farther-reaching benefits; that this improved environment will have an impact on migratory birds, for example. In this sense, conservation efforts at any level become global conservation efforts because activists are able to see the connection between the local and the global. In some way, most youth have an awareness that their activism must address the health and well-being of the planet. While local groups address site-specific environmental conditions others focus on stewardship, conservation, and sustainability, including the impact of humans—in particular, American policy—on the fate of the planet.

PEACE WORK AND YOUTH ACTIVISM

In that it addresses issues of both structural and direct violence and finds ways to support humane relationship, global citizenship, and planetary stewardship, youth activism is peace-building. The New York inner city youth activists described in this text are part of a global grassroots peace movement working toward transforming our culture of war into a culture of peace. These youth demonstrate that they are valuable members of global civil society and a necessary component of a functioning democracy. This text will describe inner city youth activists who are members of Global Kids, Global Action Project, TRUCE, ROOTS, and New Youth Conservationists, activist organizations based in New York City.

Education has long been viewed as a means for personal change and social transformation. By incorporating aspects of peace education—content, methodology, core values—educators can facilitate these transformations. Young people recognize the urgency for peace and are interested in working toward it. This text will share stories of urban activists who use a variety of methods to work for peace. While the majority of their activities are done in the nonformal sector, certainly their work demonstrates the potential for educational change at all levels. The personal transformations illustrated by the students' voices are a crucial indicator of how potent learning based on peace education principles can be. These young activists are the hope for the future and society needs to give them all the support we can muster.

In this book, you will read the stories of inner city youth who witness and experience structural and direct violence on a regular basis. Media scapegoating of youth would have us believe that the most common response observed to such violence is that of direct violence. Youth activists represent an alternative view: they choose to become peace builders and agents for social change. For these young activists, finding their own path is key. Through nonformal education settings such as youth organizations, they become aware of the structural and direct violence that surrounds them and are also given the opportunity to take action. In the case of inner city youth activists, the path of structural violence leading to direct violence is altered and the route from structural violence to social action is established.