



The peace table



"Feeling sticks"

Creating a Culture of Peace in the Elementary Classroom

BY TIFFANY J. HUNTER



Getting a job as a teacher is one thing; becoming the teacher one had dreamed about being is quite another. In my role as a 1st-grade teacher at Redlands Adventist Academy in Redlands, California, I wanted to create a learning environment that embodied the educational values I had learned at La Sierra University (Riverside, California). I wanted a classroom environment that would foster values like inclusive compassion, social justice, service, and active peacemaking. I wanted to address my students' intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in a wholistic way, while creating a safe and stimulating

space in which they would feel free to grow and explore. I wanted them to learn and practice the skills necessary to live at peace with themselves, their community, and their environment. At the end of the year, in addition to their academic achievement, I wanted my students to feel invaluable to their school, church, and local communities.

As I began looking for ways to integrate these goals into the classroom experience, two problems surfaced. The first concerned imposing an additional agenda on the already full and demanding academic expectations. In an era of standardized testing and higher expectations for academic growth, the idea of setting up a classroom that is conducive to social-emotional empa-

thy training can be daunting.

The second problem: identifying an age-appropriate curriculum. Fortunately, as a result of some research and several trips to local school-supply stores, I found a wealth of resources I could use to enhance the required classroom curriculum with standards-based activities that developed students' intellectual, emotional, and social growth.

The Internet proved to be very useful in connecting me to the long-standing conversation on peace education. This field has diverse ideas and agendas, many of which focus on various social-historical contexts. My most exciting discovery was the large body of educators already dedicated to this enterprise. I was not alone in my desire to incorporate peace education into the classroom. These educators provided a theoretical basis for approaches and curriculum that were appropriate for the classroom environment. Educators in peace education have generated units that address issues such as environmental sustainability, international affairs, human rights, conflict resolution, gender sensitivity and equality, multicultural education, and disarmament education.¹ They have thought carefully about the effects of societal violence on classroom structure, socialization, and childhood experience. The rest of this article will review the components of peace education that I



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incorporated into a 1st-grade curriculum, which fulfilled academic requirements and took a wholistic approach.

Classroom Design

My first step in creating a “peaceable classroom” was to design and arrange a structure that was conducive to peace-building student interaction.² One critical aspect was the “peace corner”—equipped with a peace table and chairs. This area was filled with various books and tools that engaged students in learning the key “peace” concepts emphasized in various curricular activities. A bulletin board display adorned with posters and student work also served as a reminder of the values they were learning.

The peace table was where students discussed and solved conflicts.³ It served the same function for children as the United Nations does for nations.⁴ It also provided

a constant reminder of our classroom commitment to non-violence in all its forms. The conflict-resolution process could occur with or without the help of a mediator. As the teacher, I often stopped by to help students create “win-win”

crucial for harmonious relationships.”⁶ I felt this was a key component to the lessons about how to be a good classmate. Empathy skills were included in the first social studies unit, which focused on classroom cooperation. Because emotions are expressed through verbal and nonverbal cues, children need to learn how to identify their own emotions so they can develop empathy for the emotions of others.⁷

Since emotional identity is foundational to empathy training, I reinforced this skill through several activities. One excellent resource to connect emotion identification to language arts curriculum is William Kreidler’s *Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children’s Literature*.⁸ As a part of their literature and reading components, students practiced emotional empathy by identifying the feelings displayed by the characters in various children’s stories. This can be easily integrated into the standard curriculum through classroom dialog and other activities.

“Feeling Sticks,” another activity we enjoyed, uses cups with a picture of various emotions on them, such as anxious, shy, afraid, happy, or excited. Students are then given a popsicle stick to place in the cup that best represents their strongest current emotion.⁹ This activity was integrated into our math skill practice by adding, graphing, and charting the responses once every student had placed a stick. Then we discussed the root cause of their emotions; sad or anxious responses frequently produced a spontaneous hug from a friend. When pos-

solutions.⁵

I designed my curriculum around four major skill sets that would foster a culture of peace among my students: Empathy Training, Diversity Training, Community Awareness, and Conflict Resolution. Mastery of one skill set was not a prerequisite for the next. All of these had to be modeled and integrated into the various academic subject areas and classroom experiences. Each skill set is incorporated into a standards-based curriculum unit. The following activities from these skill sets were adapted from other peace educators’ materials, and corresponded with the state curriculum as well as the developmental stage of my students.

Empathy Training

The first skill set on which I focused was Empathy Training. Empathy has been described as a “critical human capacity,



Comparing skin tones



Student self-portrait

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sible, the class brainstormed ways to help the student solve the problem or move to an emotionally more fulfilling place. This last activity occurred during our “sharing circle,” where empathy was coupled with communication. This exercise focused on attentive listening and extending respect by waiting for a turn to speak.¹⁰ These activities, along with journaling, the study and use of art (color) to represent emotion, dramatic re-enactment of stories, etc., enhanced students’ capacity to recognize feelings and understand them as contextualized responses. The activities increased students’ capacity for empathy and built a firm foundation for our classroom community.

Diversity Training

The second skill set developed was Diversity Training, which “teaches children, at a developmentally appropriate level, how to take concrete social action that promotes greater social equality and justice.”¹¹ Levin describes this training as the experience of activities dedicated to construct “a stereotype and bias-free understanding of people’s similarities and differences.”¹² Diversity training goes beyond standard multicultural education, as it encompasses all aspects of human diversity “from gen-

der, race, economic class, and ethnic background to physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics to thoughts and feelings.”¹³

In my classroom, diversity training began early in the year with an assignment to create a self-portrait, which became part of a larger classroom-community portrait. The self-portraits served to break down racial stereotypes through the use of uncommon skin color names such as cinnamon, peach, amber, hazelnut, and almond.¹⁴ Many students quickly realized that their skin was not just one color, but a mixture of two or even more. As they problem-solved together to create appropriate skin tones, they began to “see” one another in new ways—as individuals instead of racial stereotypes.

An activity I combined with the social studies curriculum was a “global community” unit in which students studied the different customs, languages, food, and lifestyles of children from every inhabited continent. This unit incorporated geography, history, and map-reading skills, and included other areas of the curriculum such as art, music, and language through learning games, dances, and songs from other areas of the globe. The culminating activity for this unit was a “global community day” when students were invited to come to class wearing traditional clothing and to bring food from the country in which their families originated, or their favorite place we had studied.¹⁵

Another important component of diversity training is consciousness-raising and

experience with individuals who have varied physical and mental abilities. Redlands Adventist Academy and its neighbors are a diverse community, so students had the opportunity to engage with people across the spectrum of ability. During the two years that I taught there, assemblies introduced students to athletes from the Special Olympics, Seeing Eye dogs and their training, and involved them in the use of American Sign Language. For more ideas on how to develop curriculum devoted to diversity training, look at the *Teaching Tolerance* Website developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which has curriculum design models that help foster diversity training in every developmental age group.

Community Awareness

The third skill needed to cultivate peace in the classroom is Community Awareness. This term describes activities that empower students to become active and responsible members of their community. It encompasses both environmental and civic education. Children gain insight into their own value and power as they contribute to their



Conservation Unit
 Bring items to recycle
 My Town Project
 Random Acts of Kindness
 Teddy Bears
 Quilts

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classroom, local, and global communities. In order to develop my students’ understanding of communities, as well as individual rights and responsibilities, I started with concrete references to their classroom and family community identities, and then branched out to encompass a local and global context.

One example of how to accomplish this in the classroom was our month-long conservation unit which correlated with the 1st-grade state science standards on phases of matter. In conjunction with many other activities, students collected recyclables both from home and the elementary school lunch room. They then studied the differ-

ent types of matter and sorted the products by their properties. The class graphed and charted the quantities of different products, and wrote creative stories about trash. Students learned about the recycling process, including the different phases of matter that take place during the deterioration process. The class studied the effects of trash on our environment and followed up the lessons with a class trip to the local recycling plant, where we deposited the collected trash. Through this unit, students not only increased their awareness of their impact as community members, but also practiced their science, math, English, reading, music, and art skills in fulfillment of the 1st-grade academic objectives.

At home, students created a *My Town* project, an illustrated book with either hand-drawn pictures or photographs to illustrate their lives to other students. The project utilized students’ basic writing skills to talk about their home, family, and places they frequented in their town. It also fostered individual and mutual recognition of community identity outside of school, and the diverse range of life experiences. This project accompanied a social studies unit on different community workers in various settings (country, town, and city).

Redlands Adventist Academy has had a school-wide focus called *Random Acts of Kindness* that encourages classroom participation in community service projects. Many joint endeavors and school-wide events are a part of the campus culture. These projects are an important way of connecting students with their local and global communities. My 1st-grade class participated in the making and delivery of teddy bears to the local children’s hospital, raising money for national and global disaster relief efforts, as well as the creation and sending of quilts to children living with AIDS in Africa.

Conflict Resolution

The last skill set fostered is Conflict Resolution, which develops student autonomy in personal conflict management. The teacher serves as a mediator, guiding children through the conflict resolution process until they discover and learn to use their own non-violent approaches to problem-solving.¹⁶ This process usually occurs at the classroom peace table. The goal, however, is to equip students with skills they can use



in every area of their life. Learning skills for compromise, negotiation, and mediation helps students find peaceful solutions to their problems.

In our classroom, a three-step process for peaceful problem solving was taught through song and corresponding movements. First, students were taught to “Cool down” when they were angry. Second, they were to “Talk about it”—give each person a turn to describe what happened and how it made them feel. (This helps them recognize that the problem as a shared one.) Last, they were to “Solve your problem together”—to brainstorm possible win-win solutions and find one they both agreed to try. These solutions can be posted on a classroom chart that gives different child-friendly solutions.¹⁷ Each student then takes the appropriate actions. If the problem resurfaces, they agree to try another possible solution.¹⁸

After incorporating these activities in the classroom, I found that a learning environment that fosters the social and emotional well-being of students contributes greatly to their overall academic achievement.¹⁹ Within the peaceable classroom, students can develop the skills needed to live and work constructively and peacefully with others. When they feel valued in their classroom com-

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munities, they are empowered to live as whole individuals with the skills to create positive social change. In a violent world, it is crucial for teachers to offer alternative ways of relating. Breaking the cycle of physical and emotional violence in the classroom is the first step to creating a more just and sustainable society.



By teaching our students compassion, empathy, and the value of diversity, we will begin to take strides toward developing a society where peace is instilled in the hearts of all. ☺



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For more information on Peace Education, consult the listing of Resources on page 46.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An excellent introduction to the field of peace education can be found in Ian M. Harris and Mary Lee Morrison's *Peace Education* (London: McFarland & Co., 2003).
2. The term "peaceable classroom" was coined by William Kreidler in the 1970s. This history can be found in Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti's *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 26.
3. The Peace Table concept is taken from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Curriculum kit called *Starting Small*. This kit

includes a video. Free copies of this curriculum kit and video are available at http://www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/starting_small.jsp.

4. This comparison adapted from the Teaching Tolerance *Starting Small* curriculum kit video (ibid.).

5. "Win-win" solutions and adapted conflict resolution strategies can be found in Diane E. Levin's *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility, 2003), pp. 58-61; as well as in William Kreidler's *Teaching Conflict Resolution Through*

Children's Literature (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1994), Chap. 4.

6. See Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti's *Waging Peace in Our Schools*, op cit., p. 10.

7. More information on the importance of Emotion Identification and Empathy building skills can be found in ibid., pp. 7-11.

8. Kreidler, op cit.

9. Activities for emotion identification can be found in Kathleen M. Hollenbeck's *Conflict Resolution Activities That Work!* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2001), pp. 6-12; as well as in William J. Kriedler's *Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children's Literature*, op cit., pp. 79-90.

10. Activities that enhance effective communication skills can be found in Kathleen M. Hollenbeck's *Conflict Resolution Activities That Work!* pp. 14, 15, 19, 24.

11. Levin, *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times*, op cit., p. 69.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. This activity is found in the Teaching Tolerance *Starting Small* curriculum kit video, op cit.

15. Teachers should plan the event carefully: Often, "multicultural day" activities foster stereotypical thinking about various cultures, regardless of a child's family heritage. The program should promote tolerance for global diversity, with emphasis on local cultures in the community, school, church, and families. Teachers should help students recognize and appreciate the complexities within these groups.

16. To understand the role of the teacher as a mediator or facilitator in student conflict resolution strategies, see Diane E. Levin, *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times*, op cit., Chap. 5.

17. Kreidler, op cit., p. 47.

18. Conflict Resolution strategies adapted from ibid., pp. 55, 56.

19. See Lantieri and Patti, op cit., p. 8.