

Peaceful Play
Conflict Resolution and Social Justice in the School Yard

Eve Selver-Kassell
Bank Street College of Education

Fall 2008
EDUC 530 - Foundations of Modern Education
Frank Pignatelli

Introduction

In this paper, I will use the goal of teaching toward social justice as a lens through which to examine the work of Dr. Martha Eddy and her Peaceful Play program. Defining social justice as work that fosters equity and a true democracy, I will argue that through offering students a voice, a model for fair problem solving, and choices for how to interact, Eddy's work teaching conflict resolution skills is social justice work.

What is Peaceful Play?

Nine fourth grade students sit around the table eating lunch and chatting. They are joined by three adults, their Dean and two educators who have come to train them to be peer mediators. After several sessions of training, these nine students, plus a tenth who is absent on this day, will spend recess with the kindergarten classes helping the younger students resolve conflicts. One of the educators, Dr. Martha Eddy, reminds them of their homework assignment from the previous session, to notice conflicts during recess, and asks if anyone has an example to share. One student tells a story of her little brother bothering her and her mother stepping in to end the conflict by requiring that the boy stop his irritating activity. The children discuss this conflict and Eddy offers them the word "arbitration" to describe how the mother stepped in and solved the problem. In a few short sentences she describes the difference between a mediator and an arbitrator. "Your job is to mediate," she explains, "that means that you have to listen to learn about the situation that caused the conflict." She uses this conversation as a bridge into the "active listening" activity that she has planned to boost the listening skills of these students who she described in an interview as "superior interrupters."

Lunch is put away and the group forms a circle of chairs away from the table. Eddy initiates a role play about active listening by asking the students what a bad listener might do. The students explain that a bad listener doesn't make eye contact, talks to other people and continues other activities while listening. Eddy pretends to be a bad listener while a student approaches her with an issue. She flips through a book, looks down and turns away from the student. She talks to another student and interrupts the child talking to her. He is visibly discouraged and skulks away. Then Eddy models good listening using student suggestions to give her undivided attention with eye contact and verbal responses. She looks at the student, turning towards him and making eye contact. She responds to his request and asks someone to please wait until she is done meeting with her student. The focus of this role-play is the body language of the listener, Eddy is demonstrating and asking students to notice what active listening looks like as well as what it sounds like. After the demonstrations, students are given the opportunity to practice active listening. Working in pairs each student has a chance to listen, to talk and then together they reflect on their experience of being listened to. During this reflection students are encouraged to offer their partner tips about how they could have been a better listener. Eddy then facilitates a group check in and elicits student explanations of how active listening relates to being a Peace Keeper (peer mediator). Student responses make it clear that they are beginning to understand that the role of the mediator is to listen, not to punish.

A part of listening is using visual and verbal cues to attend to the emotions present during a conflict. Eddy explains that as peer mediators, this group will be "helping kids with their emotions." Again she asks for student participation, asking for

examples of emotions that might arise. She allows time for everyone to “try on” these emotions and notice the body language that accompanies being sad, angry frustrated, embarrassed or scared. “When you feel this way,” she asks, “how do you like a teacher to approach you?” Through suggestions and demonstrations Eddy gathers a consensus that it is best to approach someone slowly and gently, to ask questions and to let your face show that you care.

Aware that these students are relinquishing recess to participate in the Peace Keepers, Eddy concludes the session with a cooperative game that gets students out of their chairs and moving around. She places a lunch box between two students’ stomachs and asks them to walk sideways using only their torsos to keep the lunch box from falling. Students work together to step in unison, exerting just enough pressure to hold the box up until they make it to the finish line. Some students use verbal cues to while others walk silently as each pair navigates their way across the floor. They are released to the school yard for some fresh air before their afternoon classes.

This hour long session, packed with conversation and interactive role-play, is an example of one manifestation of Martha Eddy’s Peaceful Play program. Peaceful Play is a multifaceted program that uses a kinesthetic approach to decrease conflict in schools through a variety of avenues ranging from staff development to peer mediation trainings. As described by Eddy “Peaceful Play was specifically developed as a way to enhance either physical education and/or recess by infusing conflict resolution skills.” The structure of Peaceful Play is flexible and varies depending on the needs and structure of the individual school. At the school described above, Eddy is working with an assistant educator, Mary X, to implement a peer mediation program as well as

facilitate a series of staff trainings for recess aids. As described by Mary and Eddy, this school is a relatively safe environment with effective peace keeping strategies in the classrooms and hallways. However, the free structure of recess was resulting in increased conflict so the Dean hired Eddy to implement Peaceful Play. As an outside contractor, Eddy visits a school for an individual workshop or a series of sessions over the course of several months. As she explained, the programs that are the most successful are those where there are one or more staff members invested in the work who apply the conflict resolution skills and carry out the suggestions made by Eddy during the trainings. In this particular school, Eddy and Mary will visit twelve times. They began their tenure at the school by observing the programming already in place and developing a relationship with staff. They then moved into facilitating workshops with the recess aids, asking what they think is working or not working before making suggestions. They will spread the rest of their visits over the next several months to train the ten students selected by the Dean to be peer mediators and help the recess aids provide more structured activities. During the weeks that they do not visit the school it is expected that the Dean will facilitate the Peace Keepers work as peer mediators during the Kindergarten recess.

While the structure and implementation of Eddy's work varies between settings, it is consistent in its use of kinesthetic approaches and participatory activities to support a peaceful school environment. Eddy's focus on mediation and constructive participation speak to her commitment to empower students through increasing their self-awareness and offering them choices for how to behave. Her inclusion of body language and creative expression when addressing emotionally charged situations offers students a

kinesthetic inroad to understanding and coping with conflict. In describing Peaceful Play, Eddy stated “more and more I’ve been talking about teaching social emotional skills, social emotional development, social emotional learning. The reason we’re doing conflict resolution is beyond just resolving the conflict, it’s to help the development of people’s social emotional ability.” Thus Eddy indicates that she views the work of Peaceful Play work as addressing the whole person, not just the person in conflict.

Teaching Social Justice Through Peaceful Play

As a holistic program, that trains staff and students to give students tools to reduce conflict and give them a voice to resolve conflict, Peaceful Play can be understood as a part of the movement for social justice in education. As indicated by the opening of her training session with the Peace Keepers, Eddy’s model for conflict resolution is based in mediation rather than arbitration. By definition, mediation offers a voice to those involved in a conflict. Mediation provides the opportunity for students to express their perspectives and participate in resolving a conflict. This stands in contrast to top-down arbitration where the symptoms of a conflict are addressed through punishment and the cause is left unexplored.

In her article on learning to teach for social justice, Cochran-Smith (1999) puts forth six principles of practice that promote social justice in education. In delineating the principle that teachers need to “build on what students bring to school with them,” Cochran-Smith argues that “working for social justice explicitly rejects transmissions of models of teaching and instead operates from the twin premises that knowledge is fluid and socially constructed and that curriculum is co-constructed by teachers and students

through their interactions with one and other and with a variety of texts, materials and experiences” (p. 122). While this statement focuses the development of curriculum and models of classroom teaching, it can be applied to models of resolving conflict.

Imposing a standard of right and wrong through punishment causes the teacher to dictate the social experience of the child in conflict. By offering student a voice in resolving a conflict through the model of mediation, as Eddy does, educators allow students to have a hand in constructing their experiences and developing their own sense of what is right and what is wrong.

The power of having such a voice in a world full of imposed rules and societal demands is articulated by Anzaldua (1987). Anzaldua relays her experience of being an Hispanic American whose preferred language, Chicano Spanish, is a mixture of English and Spanish that is marginalized in both English and Spanish speaking communities. She describes her experience with language as representative of the shame present in her dual identity. She then goes on to describe the converse experience of having her identity validated when she found a bilingual book by a Chicano in print. “When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people” (pp. 59-60). Anzaldua’s words bring to life the power of having one’s voice recognized and heard. While the experience of all school age children does not mirror that of Anzaldua, the fact that they are children subject to adult rules and values diminishes the strength of their voices and places them at the mercy of those dictating dominant values. Thus by offering students a voice educators can actively respect their perspective and validate their existence. An example of this is found in the peer mediation training described above. As Eddy encourages students to give each other

feedback after their active listening role-play she is telling the students that they deserve to be heard and that they have the right to ask the listener for what they need. She is also teaching them how to listen so they can carry the right to be heard to the Kindergarten students when they do their work as Peace Keepers.

If we view the work of Peaceful Play as helping students to develop social emotional skills, not just resolve acute conflicts, then not only are students being offered a voice but they are also being offered the skills to use that voice. Students often demonstrate their ability to fight for fairness through physical and verbal resistance to the rules and punishments imposed on them. In this form, having a voice is not equal to being heard. The words of Richard Rodriguez (1982) underscore this point as he describes the development of his public self through his acquisition of the English language. After weeks of barely speaking in school he found the voice to speak boldly in English. “That day, I moved very far from the disadvantaged child I had been only days earlier. The belief, the calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold” (p. 22). Rodriguez was empowered by his ability effectively use the dominant, socially accepted language. Similarly, students who advocate for themselves through socially acceptable modes, as Eddy teaches them to do, increase their potential for being heard and thereby empowered to fight for personal justice. Even the seemingly simple skill of listening, rather than ignoring or interrupting, is extremely important for garnering respect in the school setting and has the potential to influence the way a particular student’s voice is received in the community.

Furthermore, allowing students to speak on their own behalf, and facilitate others in doing the same through peer mediation provides them with an early experience of fair

decision making or democracy. As Mary articulated, there is great value in witnessing and participating in conflicts being dealt with fairly as that is what these students will come to expect throughout their lives. Dewey (1938) argues that “the quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness and there is its influence upon later experiences... Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experience” (p. 27). Thus students accustomed to teachers dictating their fates will come to expect such imposition from people in positions of power. In contrast, students who are encouraged to participate in the creation of their experiences, as the Peace Keepers are, will come to expect that their voices will be heard. They will expect to that they can participate in a democratic society.

Schultz (1989/May 2005) furthers the relevance of Dewey’s argument for the continuum of experience as he argues that resistance in preschool age children begets lifelong resistance to injustice. Just as allowing space for student resistance to occur can foster an understanding that resistance is an option, so can offering space for students to experience justice in the resolution of conflicts in school empower them to expect and demand such justice throughout their lives.

Eddy’s her perspective on how Peaceful Play teaches towards social by is evident in her words. “In terms of helping schools contribute to the development of social justice in our culture, dealing with learning disabilities and emotional social delay or emotional social road blocks helps move the system forward. Ideally it helps democracy, citizenship, and involved participation - a sense of everybody being a valuable contributor to society.” Thus, the belief that democracy in school carries over into an

expectation of justice in society at large is a thread that is woven into the structure of Peaceful Play.

While I have argued that Eddy's Peaceful Play program teaches toward social justice by promoting student participation in conflict resolution and thus provides a model for the promotion of justice within the school community, the question of how this program respects multiple cultures while promoting peace remains to be examined. The emphasis on resolving conflicts through verbal communication rather than violence excludes the values of those cultures that promote physical expression in anger and defense. How then does Peaceful Play accommodate these differences? In the words of Eddy "In my model, which is how I learned conflict resolution, it's about choice. So you are not telling people not to punch ... but people can get educated to the consequences of their behaviors, ... and hopefully some other choices. So we focus on [the idea that] you can't tell a student that it's bad to hit because that is disrespecting their cultural tradition. Part of social justice is also [being] respectful of people's cultural background and people's cultural behaviors and then trying to find a win win situation."

Furthering the argument that what happens in school carries over into adult life and emphasizing the importance of respecting all cultures in the school experience Levine (2000) states "there is little doubt that the interactional modes and formal learning environments we favor or reject, sustain or seek to alter, both reveal and predict a great deal about our democratic society. Renowned educator Deborah Meier (1984) reminds us of a still elusive aim: 'The heart of the democratic dilemma is how to make the formal culture accessible to all without requiring renunciation of a student's own culture' (68)" (pp. 95-96). In the case of Peaceful Play, the aim is to offer students an acceptable way

of coping with conflict in school while respecting strategies that they may have learned at home. An example of this is Eddy's distinction between mediation and arbitration. In responding to the student's story about her mother and brother, Eddy validated arbitration as a problem solving strategy and then explained that these students would be learning a different strategy, that of mediation. Similarly, in teaching students to listen rather than interrupt, Eddy avoids placing a value judgment on interrupting as at times it is socially appropriate. However, she takes the time to teach the students how to listen so that they have this skill as a part of their repertoire when they need it.

This aim of teaching new options, such as verbal mediation, while respecting the teachings of diverse cultural backgrounds relates back to the six principles put forth by Cochran-Smith (1999). Emphasizing cultural diversity, three of the principles urge educators to actively respect the backgrounds of students by allowing space for them to manifest in school and urging educators to work with families to broaden the school community. By labeling each skill taught through Peaceful Play as a "choice," rather than as the "correct" way to cope with conflict, Eddy is able to simultaneously teach values that permeate the dominant culture of school and respect the teachings of diverse cultures. Furthermore, Eddy promotes social justice by adhering to the sixth principle of "making activism, power and inequity explicit parts of the curriculum" (p. 131). By bringing conflict to the forefront, rather than leaving it as a marginal part of the school experience, Eddy encourages educators and students alike to take action and directly examine and address issues of power and inequity. By teaching skills to help address these large and complicated issues, Eddy is helping establish a foundation from which students can work towards personal and social justice throughout their lives.

Conclusion

Dr. Martha Eddy's Peaceful Play program works on many levels to teach toward social justice. Both in the content and structure of the program Eddy offers students a voice, respects their cultural diversity and offers a model of democracy that they can carry with them through life. The words of Dewey, Cochran-Smith and Levine, among others, shed light on the lifelong significance of such work. Central to Eddy's educational philosophy and vital to the success of this program is her use of the kinesthetic realm as a mode for teaching and understanding the world. Working through role-play, frozen tableaux, movement check-ins and cooperative games, Eddy draws attention to body language as a mode of communication and self-expression. As the opening vignette demonstrates, Eddy teaches through active participation and draws students' attention to the power of the body to communicate emotions and intentions. In addition to providing a model where student voices are heard and respected, she works to expand the definition of voice to include the kinesthetic realm and thus she broadens students' repertoire of choices. Using this innovative approach, Eddy empowers students to actively participate in the shaping of their school experience and in so doing she teaches towards social justice in school and beyond.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan (Movements of rebellion and cultures that betray)*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1999). Learning to teach for social justice. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *The education of teachers NSSE yearbook* (pp. 114-144). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books; Macmillan Publishing.
- Levine, L. (2000). Everyone from everywhere is in my class now: what anthropology can offer teachers. In N. Nager & E. Shapiro (Eds.), *Revisiting a progressive pedagogy: The developmental interaction approach* (pp. 95-113). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger for memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Schultz, S. (1989/May 2005). Finding meaning in the resistance of preschool children: critical theory takes an interpretive look. *Rethinking resistance in schools: power politics and illicit pleasures. Bank Street occasional paper series*.