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Peace Education and the Ethos of the School

Abstract

This paper will consider, both from the theoretical and practical points of view, ways in which schools in both East and West, and in reasonably symmetrical development can reflect the uneasy "peace" of our day. At the same time, it will explore ways by which schools, through the establishment of an appropriate ethos or school climate, can contribute more fully to the building of stronger and more durable sets of interrelationships within the community, within the nation and across international boundaries.

When I think back to my days in school during World War II, I remember workmen mixing cement to build air raid shelters which were located close to the doors at each end of our four-roomed building. When the shelters were completed, student prefects were posted at all times by the headmaster at the front of the school. The prefects' task was to ring a hand bell as an alarm, whenever they heard any approaching enemy aircraft, so that we could quickly exit to the shelters. A compulsory part of our curriculum was gardening, an activity designed to encourage each of us not only to grow vegetables at school, but to have a productive garden at home so that we could do our part to help our country to be more self-sufficient in food at a time when merchant navy ships were in danger of being torpedoed by enemy submarines. The knowledge that food was scarce was reinforced at school lunches: we must not waste precious food by leaving anything on our plates.

At recess, besides playing the usual games, we traded cigarette cards which had profiles of friendly and enemy fighter and bomber aircraft. Most of my classmates became quite expert in aircraft identification. From time

to time we had gas mask drills in order to get us accustomed to fitting them on quickly and to breathing filtered air in the event of a gas attack. The school had two major continuing projects. One was the collection of silver paper, which most people knew was aluminum, to be used in military aircraft construction or to be dropped in thin strips by aircraft as a means to foil enemy radar. The other continuing project was the purchase of savings certificates (government war bonds) to assist in the financing of the war.

It is quite revealing, when these experiences are recalled now, to see how effectively the school became an instrument of the state in both responding to the conditions of war and in contributing in its own way to the national war effort. As a result of ministerial policy, or of conscious decisions by the school administration itself, the physical plant was altered; the curriculum modified; and informal school projects noticeably changed.

The above example is given so that we can see in very concrete terms something of what the culture of the school had become under the conditions of war. Schools have always had an interactive role with the society of which they are a part. As in the case of all large-scale social, political, and technological movements in this country and in others, the schools reflect large-scale environmental forces. They have also been seen as institutions that can result in correcting social ills and, in the long run, of contributing to economic development, and to important social and political innovation.

In this paper, I would like to consider, both from the theoretical and practical points of view, ways in which schools in both East and West, and in reasonably symmetrical development can, in contrast to the example above, better reflect the uneasy peace of our day. At the same time, I would like to explore ways by which schools, through the establishment of an appropriate ethos or school climate, can contribute more fully to the building of stronger and more durable sets of interrelationships within the community, within the nation and across international boundaries. First, we need to examine the concept of society, as it relates to our schools.

The school and society

The term "society" has often been used very loosely when it comes to discussing the social context of the school. Obviously the society that is most important to any school is the environment in which a school is immediately located and from which it draws its school population – sometimes referred to as the catchment area. This environment is important because it is the one in which the students live their day-to-day lives. It is the place in which they build a large stock of experiences and make decisions that affect that environment.

Any social, economic, or political analysis of the immediate environment, whether rural or urban, would show that it cannot be fully understood within itself because of the many links that bond this community to the "outside." Those links may be economic (as in the case of transportation and trade), social (perhaps inward and outward migration), or political (part of a larger jurisdiction). For this reason, education within the catchment area must take into consideration the realities of interaction that take place within the web of relationships in the province, in the nation, or further afield.

One of the historically common beliefs about education is that it should go from the known to the unknown, and perhaps by incorrect implication, that it should proceed in concentric circles from the home, school, and catchment area to larger entities beyond. Such a conception of learning about our world would seem to add successively one layer of knowledge to another. Its major weakness is that it does not recognize that children at an early age see stars in the universe; that is to say, that local systems are not perceived as being integrated into successively larger ones. The effects of this kind of miseducation are harmful to the sub-system and detrimental to the larger system. When people do not perceive that they are an interactive part of the same social, economic, or political system as others with whom they really have a common interest, it may result, for example, in an increase in social prejudice against groups viewed as "outsiders," to the growth of economic inequalities or even to the aggravation of civic strife.

Increasingly, our world has been developing more and more complex international systems and global systems in which our various other units are sub-systems. For example, in the tiny community of Igloolik in Canada's Northwest Territories there is a weather station. The local Inuit record daily temperatures, air pressure, precipitation and other data, and convey this information to the local radio station for local consumption. The data also go to Canada's Department of Transport and therefore, as well, into the international meteorological system which together with satellite information contributes to our knowledge of the global weather patterns for virtually all countries. Interestingly that larger information comes back to benefit Igloolik and thousands of other communities the world over.

The same networking of systems is true for pollution control, air traffic control, transportation, telecommunications, trade, and countless other systems in the global environment. Virtually every community and every country has a common interest in the growth and maintenance of these kinds of international systems. In documenting the transformation of national economic systems as a megatrend, John Naisbitt has concluded that the world's people are becoming increasingly involved in each other's affairs and are forming an increasingly interdependent global economy (Naisbitt,

1984). From the vantage point of the impact of electronics and automation, McLuhan and Fiore (1986) have asserted that these developments, too, "make mandatory that everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if it were his own little home town" (p. 11).

What, then, is the society with which the school should interact as part of the educative process? It is the local community (or system) of which the school is a part as well as the successively larger systems which mesh with that community and with each other. In earlier decades social organization, based upon what is often regarded today as more rudimentary technology, was somewhat simpler. McLuhan has pointed out that it is extremely difficult for us to discern new systems, such as the global ones, and we therefore tend to perceive as the current reality, patterns that we have long passed by (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968).

It is still possible, for example, to read school books that describe in highly over-simplified terms the export and import of commodities and manufactured goods as a set of bilateral relations between various countries. In reality today, a bicycle company in Nation A may have a bicycle designed by a corporation in Nation B, assembled in Nation C from components manufactured in Nations D, E and F. It will be shipped from Nation C by a shipping company registered in Nation G to Nations H, I and J, while being insured en route by an insurance company in Nation K. A school in any one of the nations A to K should certainly study local industry and its involvement with, for example, the design or manufacture of bicycles as part of its real environment, but at the same time, it would be miseducating its clientele if it did not, in the clearest terms, convey an understanding of the relationship with the larger global society to which it is attached.

Given this concept of a systems approach to society (Burton, 1972), two important points emerge in relationship to peace education. One is that as individuals, groups, organizations and states (i.e., systems) are increasingly involved in each other's affairs, they are much less likely to go to war with each other over "vital national interests" so long as they understand their interconnectedness and interdependence with each other.

The second is associated with the fact that both small and large systems change and grow. Because of these changes, tensions frequently arise between the systems as, for example, between multinational corporations and international labour unions or between international press syndicates of developed countries and the counterparts of developing nations. These examples illustrate that the mastery of conflict-resolving skills has become critically important as a means of reducing and resolving inter-system tensions; hence, the field of conflict management and tension reduction has emerged as a vitally important one for education.

Some key elements in peace education

Viewed from the perspective of the above discussion, peace education may be understood to consist of three parts, which are in effect highly integrated together. The first consists of a knowledge base, namely, an understanding of the way in which various systems have evolved in a growing complexity which has brought the world's peoples into interlocking relationships, a closeness which we have never before experienced on such a scale. That new reality is one of which we are only just beginning to be conscious. Hence there is the task of refurbishing all the subjects we teach so that they accurately reflect the real local circumstances and the global environment in which we live.

Quite apart from the above discussions, which have emphasized for purposes of illustration, the fields of business and economics, we need to think of the implications for the health sciences (the world-wide efforts to control and eliminate disease); the biological sciences (including the study of ecological systems of the globe and their interrelationships in the single, global biosphere); the physical sciences (such as physics where discoveries have led to new communications technologies that have led to the greater unification of humankind, and others, including nuclear technology, that has the capability of extinguishing virtually all life on the planet [Brow & Shaw, 1982]); the arts (which have enormous potential for helping each culture to flourish creatively while at the same time expressing ideas, values, and emotions of universal appeal); and the humanities (including literature, which can convey the uniqueness of different cultures yet also the universality of human experience). This is not to mention the significance of many other fields of study, such as international law and foreign languages.

The second key component of peace education is the development of skills, particularly skills in human relations and conflict management. They include the skill of being able to identify conflicts, to discern the source of conflict, to recognize that the parties in a conflict perceive a dispute in different ways, to be able to generate alternative solutions to given conflicts, to recognize the values embedded in alternative solutions, and to anticipate the consequences of alternative decisions. Conflict-resolving skills are needed in every system, from inter-personal circumstances to the family, the school, the work place, and to various associations and organizations of increasing complexity including those of global dimension.

The third key component in peace education is that of values, as it is ultimately the values embodied which give distinctiveness to any society. In the process of education, values, as incorporated into our objectives, really determine what is selected to be learned. There has been considerable controversy over values education, particularly regarding whether it is

desirable to identify a set of values and to inculcate those values into succeeding generations. The puzzle of the tendentiousness of values education seems to lie partly in our innocence in recognizing values implicit in our systems and their interaction with one another, and partly in our capacity to tolerate ambiguity.

If we recollect the society geared for war, referred to at the beginning of this paper, we would recognize that the war effort required a very high degree of cooperation, caring, resourcefulness, and industry among the population. These values in the internal systems of a society at war were not the same as the ones exhibited by the system towards the enemy, where mistrust, hatred, aggression, and domination were clearly manifested. For the most part, the population was able to hold simultaneously two sets of contradictory values towards the two systems, which had severed inter-system relationships with one another. This example makes clear that one of the goals of values education is that the same positive values we hold towards one another in a peaceful national system, must be extended towards those in the external systems with which we have increasing interaction.

If we consider what constellations of values we need to adopt to bring about a better integration of global systems, we have to be prepared to accept not the ambiguity of simultaneously holding two sets of opposing values, as in the case of war, but of cherishing pairs of positive values that are in creative tension with one another. Acclaim for global interdependence, and our sense of involvement with one another the world over, needs to be balanced with the value for independence and the sense of self-control and self-responsibility; our love of the planet as a whole must co-exist with our care for a very special part of it; the value of global oneness and wholeness requires the counterpoise of prizing the uniqueness of individuals and their human rights; the value for creativity and originality must co-exist with the value for imitating and duplicating that which is right, good and durable; and within the microsystems of our selves, self-esteem, and self-respect must be considered with self-examination and self-denial (Smith, 1986).

Peace education may be construed then in terms of providing each person with a knowledge of the realities of the modern world (which, because of increasing global integration, will be increasingly unlikely to self-destruct), in terms of building peace-making skills and of acquiring constellations of values that will optimize the survival of humankind. That education should nudge us forward to build and strengthen those elements that will make for optimal integration and differentiation.

The ethos of the school

The school is a special kind of institution comprising those who have teaching functions in the classrooms, laboratories, gymnasium, and

library, and those associated with its support systems in the clinic, cafeteria, and janitorial, secretarial, and administrative offices. In its totality, it may be thought of as an ecological community. However, studies of school ethos, while often expressed in terms of the climate and modes of behaviour that tend to permeate it as a social organization, tend to focus upon the academic performance of students and the way it is affected by school values and the modelling behaviour of its teachers (Rutter, 1979). In this discussion of peace education, I would like to consider the concept of school ethos or school culture as having a somewhat broader meaning, namely, that it is the expression of a constellation of values in the institution as a whole, which is shared by its entire population, although student leaders, parents, teachers, and administrators may play somewhat more active and more prominent roles in identifying and promulgating values.

In the narrative that has been presented so far, I have argued that the school and its immediate surroundings constitute the most important environmental system for each child. If a school (or its immediate community) has problems such as those of student alienation, vandalism of public property, or group prejudice such problems must be addressed and acted upon. Those same problems in the connecting international systems – state isolationism, world environmental pollution, and international disputes – will be more aptly comprehended when seen in tandem with analogous issues within the school system and its catchment area. How can those who take leadership roles help to build the ethos of the school in such a way as to promote the linkage of the school to other systems, national and international? The educational policies in our schools, whether established by principals, teachers, school committees, students or boards of governors, or various combinations of interests, can play a powerful role in establishing the ethos of the school. Decisions have to be made in a variety of areas that affect the quality of school life in so far as those decisions create opportunities for students and staff to learn about the real systems in which they live.

School leaders have the decision as to whether they encourage, discourage, or entirely ignore processes that can build an appropriate peaceful school ethos. Such is the case regarding exchanges of students and staff with other schools, other provinces, and with other countries. The active and meaningful contact of young people with those of other cultures can help to convey knowledge of other systems and peoples with whom we collectively share the planet earth. Indeed some schools in western urban communities approach being microcosms of world society and have, to some degree, worked towards creating an ethos in which people from every continent both accept and respect each other.

Administrative policy can find expression in school assemblies which are important collective experiences in the life of the school. Some schools have created an awareness of larger patterns of knowledge and

concern by weekly reviewing local, national, and international news, by celebrating special days, such as Human Rights Day, United Nations Day, or World Children's Day. In the shared experience of the assembly, the knowledge and values that the school holds dear are "publicly" upheld, and help to create expectations at the institutional level.

The library of every school, and those libraries to which the school populations have ready access, are also manifestations of community values and outlook. The collection-building policy for magazines, books, audio and video tapes, and computer software needs to reflect faithfully local concerns, local resources, and community authors and artists (which increasingly have international connections) as well the equivalent materials from national and international sources. Increasingly, libraries are becoming places where students can get access to data banks and communications networks nationally and internationally, and the very existence and intensified use of such facilities in a school implicitly help to create a climate of internationalism.

The aesthetic aspects of the interior of the school, whether in the "permanent" display of art, or in rotating exhibits of materials, can carry messages that link the institution to the real world. Art and craft production both local and that from distant lands has the advantage of communicating across language barriers. Some schools which are twinned with counterparts elsewhere, are able to arrange for the exchange and exhibit of school project work, photography, sketches and paintings, stamps, coins, dolls, and other craft work. Such schools have an ambiance of being a window open on the world.

School projects which attempt to help the needy locally, nationally, and globally provide opportunities for young people to learn the values of caring for those in special need. Help may be in the form of reading to the blind, entertaining in hospitals, visiting homes for the aged, or a myriad of other activities. Assistance to those in need further afield usually takes the form of projects to raise funds for the relief of those experiencing famine, or natural disasters, or to help in long-term development. Initiatives for such projects usually can come from the students themselves as a result of publicity in magazines, or on radio and television. In certain cases, organizations like Centraide, Oxfam, UNICEF, and World Vision provide opportunities for tangible, personalized help to specific individuals or communities which are, in effect, their planetary neighbours.

Administrative policy in the school can also put students directly in touch with others of their age elsewhere in Canada and abroad. Building networks of communication between north and south Canada and between east and west, as well as globally, can be achieved through correspondence, school links, and school travel. Such activities can be effectively related to

the school's programs in second languages, social studies, music, computer studies, and other areas and can be begun through contacts with school visitors or through networking organizations. It is through such types of personalized learning experiences that students move our world a small, but positive, measure along the continuum of differentiation and integration.

One further element in the collective life of a school, which both reflects and creates the ethos of the institution, is its publications, including the school newspaper, magazine, or yearbook. Those involved in their production need to consider both the ways in which the publications represent the school as a unique institution, having its own particular purposes and character, and faithfully representing the immediate events and concerns of the time, and yet also in the way in which they inform, or provoke thought, or entertain so that they have, in a sense, both universal appeal and lasting value. It is instructive to examine the yearbooks of different schools to determine to what extent they represent such a balance and to assess the role they have in creating the ethos of the school.

Conclusion

The quality of life in the school is developed through cumulative decision-making on the part of those who live and work in the institution. Administrative policies can be formulated that help to create a school ethos conducive to a peaceful school environment and to peace-building activities in the global society of which the school is a part.

While schools have paid some attention to the way in which world understanding can be developed through official courses of study, the culture of an institution as a whole can have an important influence on both formal and informal learning in school. The key elements in peace education include a knowledge of the bonding between the local community and global society, the skills needed to promote conflict resolution at all levels, and the values that can promote the survival of humankind as a whole.

School leaders can encourage those elements to be considered in all school-wide activities so that members of the school community can truly appreciate local culture and the way in which it is differentiated from the more inclusive culture and, at the same time, recognize ways in which the community is effectively integrated into global society for local benefit as well as for the welfare of the globe as a whole.

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