In Pursuit of Peace: A Qualitative Study on Subjectification and Peaceful Co-Existence in Four Elementary School Classrooms

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IN PURSUIT OF PEACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON SUBJECTIFICATION AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN FOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This paper presents qualitative data gleaned from four New York City elementary classrooms and focuses on how teachers attempt, each in their own distinct way, to create educational cultures of peace. Here, classroom vignettes are reconstructed from two months of observational and interview data with attention to how teacher beliefs on peaceful co-existence manifest in the playing field of a child’s subject formation. Drawing from Judith Butler’s concept of subjectification, this study asks: what conditions of possibility do teachers conceive of when thinking about peace in their classrooms? Findings show that teachers create conditions that emerge from their particular theories about children and understandings of peace. The four classrooms presented in this paper suggest to students in four different ways that peace is emergent from and located within specific relationships: namely that between the self and others; the self and law; the self and society; and, finally, within oneself.

Introduction

While Daniel Bar-Tal, Israeli scholar of childhood development and peace education, declared that “peace, together with freedom, equality, and justice is one of the most desirable values in almost every society,” educators faraway in the United States looked across their classroom spaces and thought about principles of co-existence and conflict resolution. These teachers may not have been formally trained in peace education, for very few programs in their country offer peace-oriented coursework and even less are designed for certification. They may not be familiar with the wide spectrum of focal themes in peace education, such as anti-nuclearism, environmental responsibility, human rights awareness, world citizenship, or the skills and knowledge emphasized for conflict resolution, communication, and co-operation. Yet even without such introduction, the work of primary school teaching oftentimes finds overlaps with multiple aspects of


peace education, which by many conceptions include addressing fears, reducing violent behaviors, developing intercultural understandings, and nurturing a respect for life.³

This qualitative study presents vignettes of four primary school classrooms and discusses how teachers, each in their own distinct way, build upon their subjective notions of togetherness and attempt to create educational cultures of peace. While none of the teachers here graduated from a peace education program, each volunteered their rooms with a strong belief that peace did indeed permeate throughout their curricular choices and pedagogical enactments. In teacher education, a focus on the social interactions among children is typically subsumed under the banner of classroom management or community-building, an area of professional development that draws disproportionately from behavioral psychology in order to engrain effective habits, routines, and strategies. This paper, however, places less emphasis on management techniques and instead seeks to capture the frames of thinking that come to light when school teachers consider peace as part of their everyday professional responsibility.

Theoretically, I borrow from Judith Butler’s concept of subjectification⁴ to examine how each of these classrooms reflect conditions of possibility that are intimately tied to an educator’s beliefs about what is essential to teach when working with young children. As found, each teacher folds into their teaching practice particular impressions about what children need to know in a world rife with conflict, violence, peace and love. These are singularly drawn from traces of childhood memories, professional development, as well as psychical fears over control and desires for freedom. From these conditions of possibility, one can study the discursive and paradoxical process of subjectification -- how the child in this case, is both forced to cultivate an attachment to an external ideal set forth by the teacher, as well as the ways in which the condition of the classroom brings into discourse the possibility for subversion and resistance.

In what follows, I describe in more detail a theory of subjectification, share reconstructed vignettes of two first-grade, one third-grade, and one fourth-grade classroom, and illustrate its use in examining the teaching of peace. Although each classroom was markedly distinct from the other, three of them demonstrated conditions of possibility in which peace was borne through the subject’s relationship with something outside of itself, either a child’s relationship to others, to the rules, or to society at large. The final vignette, however, puts a curious perspectival spin on conventional notions of peace as interrelational. In this fourth classroom, the students are encouraged to see peace as already present within oneself, a state of being that can be engaged at will and without direct explanation from the teacher.

Theory

While subjectivity is defined as lived experience, subjectification (or subjection) is understood as the process of becoming a subject and how different kinds of subjecthoods are made possible.⁵ In contrast to theories that see power as an outside force that dominates and determines the individual, theories of subjectification, particularly those discussed by Michel Foucault and Butler, regard power as not only acting on the individual, but also activating and forming the subject itself. Thus, the process of subjectification is considered paradoxical in that the subject becomes subjected within a condition that then brings about the possibility for its radical agency and autonomy. For Butler, then, power works in two modalities: one that is always outside the subject and one that is operative, or rather the willed effect or agency of the subject. “Power,” writes Butler, “is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence.” The formation of the subject depends on both what is external to itself, for example the power that presses on the subject, as well as the power that forms the interiority of the subject and the trajectory of its internal desires.

Subjectification, then, is literally the making of a subject. When applied to the case of schooling, the individual is repeatedly constituted within conditional forces -- the teacher, the curriculum, notions of knowledge and reason, discipline, regiment, science and man -- that act upon the child-student by insisting upon normalizing ideals to which the subject is expected to submit, master, and be recognized. However, the subject, or child-student, is not entirely regulated by an external relation of power, but instead is formed by its discursively constituted identification as a child-student, which in turn produces the condition for its resistance. But it is critical here to note that “forming” is not the same as “causing” or “determining.” The institution does not seek an individual upon


which to unilaterally impose this subjeecthood; it produces a force such that the individual uses its agency to identify and constitute itself as the subject.

Yet, subjectification is even more than just the power that acts upon or enables the individual, it also designates a kind of "restriction in production" that discursively produces the boundaries of the subject, as it is set within a condition of possibility. Conditions of possibility are sets of cultural norms and practices without which subjectification cannot take place. They are not simple inventions or products of the imagination; one cannot just be what they want to be and the possibilities are, unfortunately, never endless. Rather, conditions of possibility are bounded spaces, or fields of power, that precede and exceed the subject. They are constantly reaffirmed and produced by the very process of subjectification and are not embedded in discourse alone, but made, in part, through this constitutive act of becoming. Therefore, conditions of possibilities are essentially an effect of conditions of emergence, and it is because of this extant possibility that room is opened for the subject to initiate forces of subversion and resistance.

Subjectification may be traumatizing or discomfoting. It may require the subject to take up a position that is unfamiliar or uncertain. Given what Bronwyn Davies calls a "radically conditioned agency," the agentic subject, never passive in their dealings, may critically examine its condition with the capacity to disavow and subvert the powers that act. It may agonize over the social and moral orders that overwhelm and dominate it. Although Butler does not explicitly link her analysis to educational settings, the process of subjectification provides an important theoretical lens for understanding the place of educators and students in the making of conditions of possibility that govern and discipline particular kinds of subjeccthoods in the classroom.

Background

In the United States, curricular and pedagogical aims for peaceful co-existence are challenged by ideologies of competition and dominance that are found implicit within the disciplines. History lessons are built upon conflict-based worldviews that exalt battles, rivalry, and conquest. War heroes are glorified. Slavery is justified. Western imperialism reigns. Biology textbooks forward principles of social Darwinism that naturalize human dominance; to survive is to outcompete the meager, the weak, and the seemingly unsuccessful. The subjugation of people is explained through recapitulation theories that place White males as superior within the hierarchy of advancing civilization and mythical progress. Economic theories glamorize rugged individualism and unfettered accumulation. Children are taught to race to the top, to emerge victoriously, to think not of those who get thrown into the margins, and legislative justice comes in the form of public retribution, incarceration, and revenge. All of this serves to establish a certain way of thinking about conflict resolution, compassion, and empathy, and unsurprisingly as the war orientation becomes repeatedly conditioned as a natural and legitimate way of life, new generations of youth begin to view this state as an unequivocal truth against which tenets of harmony, cooperation, forgiveness, and peace are dismissed as improbable and weak alternatives.

According to Ian Harris, peace education in the twenty-first century is typically housed within programs such as international education, human rights education, development education, environmental education, and conflict resolution education. Despite their diverse proliferation, they are usually distinguished as either educating for peace or educating about peace. With aims to improve peaceful relations by cultivating alternative strategies to violent situations,12 the first generally focuses on issues of human relationships and the handling of conflicts in peaceful ways. Slightly distinct, the second promotes a broader awareness of peace and conflict in both schools and the wider global context and is more focused on content-based knowledge of causes, processes, and effects in social condition. A strand of peace education that pays attention to both issues of structural inequality as well as individual transformative agency is that of critical peace education13 which draws its basis from critical theory and includes changes in educational content, structure, and pedagogy.

While some peace researchers have explored teacher subjectivity and ontology as a way to genuinely listen to the voice of others,14 to challenge narratives of power,15 and to work towards a future of equanimity and a curriculum of

difference, what remains largely absent from the academic literature is how teachers, unschooled in the area of peace education, are attempting to forward their individual and subjective worldviews of peace and peaceful co-existence through teaching students ways of relating and being with one another. Gavriel Salomon and Baruch Nevo argue that there continues to be a lack of empirical work that examines the material reality of peace-oriented practices and programs, particularly as they relate to curriculum, pedagogy, and subjective intent.

It is important to note, however, that any examination of teaching must account for its uncertainty and messiness. Therefore, this paper works under the assumption that teaching is anything but predictable application of what has become unquestioningly termed as ‘best practices.’ It does not conclude with the promises of generalizable practice or rule, but rather, is an attempt to understand and honor the epistemological foundation that is central to any pedagogical practice and to provide classroom vignettes that may assist teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators who take up peaceful co-existence as a prerogative of the classroom.

Methods

The data presented in this paper comes from a larger qualitative study involving approximately twenty young children (ages of 7-10) and six adult teachers across four classrooms in four geographically divergent schools in the New York City area. The procedure for sampling included a formal call for participation made via email to personal and blind databases of graduate students, cooperating teachers, and clinical in-service teachers from present and past teacher education programs in which my co-researcher, Molly Quinn, and I were instructors. Recruitment materials included the following description:

Our hope is that the study itself, as conducted throughout each visit and activity, will be educational and enriching for all of us involved—in reflecting on our own experiences and understandings of violence and peace, and commitments and actions to address violence and work for enduring peace.

It is important to note that the meaning of peace, as pedagogical practice, was intentionally left open to subjective interpretation and while in some cases teachers construed peace as inflected within content or curriculum, others spoke of routines and structures that ensured peaceful co-existence or described classroom encounters in which peace was used as resolution or remedy.

From a pool of voluntary respondents, participants were selected based on their unabashed commitment to teaching peace and peaceful approaches in their classrooms. For example, during preliminary communication, one teacher expressed, “Peace is a culture of respect and it includes humans and non-humans. That is my goal and I never specifically say it to [the students], but I know that is what I am teaching.” Another teacher remarked, “I have done all sorts of peace and anti-violent stuff. One even won an award from the Teacher’s Network. I did a peace and anti-violence quilt and I had the kids create poetry around the theme of peace. We sewed them and ironed them into a quilt.” As mentioned, none of the selected teachers matriculated from a peace education program, but at the time of the study, each volunteered their classrooms with a strong belief that their work was oriented toward peaceful modes of address. Furthermore, every teacher stated during interviews that they believed peaceful approaches should be taught in schools, although they disagreed to the extent with which students could be taught peaceful ways of living.

Alongside a commitment to peace teaching, we selected classrooms that represented diverse geographical locations in the metropolitan area: the Upper West Side, the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and East Harlem. From interviews, it was found that each teacher described their school community as one that struggled with issues of violence, racism, and poverty and because of this, each defended the social, emotional, and ethical wellbeing of the child as part of their teaching responsibility. In a review of 2011-2012 New York City Department of Education Progress Reports, the four school sites from the communities respectively listed above received an overall grade of B, C, C, and C. These scores are based on the total of four separate measures described as: change in student scores on state exams; current student performance on state exams; school environment; and gains made in certain populations including English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students with the lowest proficiency citywide. Interestingly, the two schools with the lowest student performance scores of a D ranked the highest in school environment, which includes survey data on academic expectations, safety and respect, communication, and engagement.

Over the course of two months, we selected teacher and student participants, obtained IRB consent, and conducted extensive classroom observations.

individual semi-structured interviews, and a series of focus groups with each of twenty young students in hopes of hearing from children what violence meant, where it is rooted, how it should be dealt, who is responsible, and the role of schools in addressing violent issues. Student participants were selected by participating teachers and were representative of the ethnic and racial diversity mirrored throughout the school and nearby community. Hispanic, Latina/o, and African-American students comprised the largest populations at respectively 83%, 57%, 96%, and 94% of total enrollment and were assigned to general education environments with either one or two head teachers. Total student populations ranged from 825, 637, 469, and 293 with the percentage of English Language Learners approximating 18% at all four sites. Four of the teachers were White, one African-American, and one Latina. The larger data set included a total of sixteen one-hour focus groups with 4-6 students each, sixteen 30-40 minute individual interviews with selected students, four semi-structured interviews with teachers, and approximately five participant observations of each classrooms.

Although this study began with a keen interest in children’s conceptions, the worldview of the teacher became a clear indicator of how the children were articulating peace and violence as a relational and referential state of being. Therefore, this paper emerges from an empirical turn from the children to their teacher and presents data that demonstrate how formative the educator is in cultivating classroom cultures through which students describe their concepts of peace and violence. The teacher interviews, which occurred towards the end of the data collection phase, included questions such as: What does peace mean to you? How does peace appear in your teaching? What do you think your students are learning about peace? Although these lines of inquiry were consistent across the protocols, the interviews unfolded in very divergent ways, thus leading us to consider analytical and representational forms that honored how meanings, beliefs, and judgments were unique and situationally positioned.

Dr. Quinn and I worked every step of analysis collaboratively which occurred mostly during audiotaped and transcribed debrief sessions immediately following each site visit. From these meetings, we developed general impressions of each classroom, relying less on cross-case comparisons and more on the inter-rater reliability between our individual findings, as well as triangulation with data from classroom observations and extant literature. At the same time, Butler’s concept of subjectification became a critical framework through which the data was analyzed and understood. Although differences across the classrooms were immediately apparent, theories on subjecthood and conditions of possibility helped to delineate certain terms of operation and how they work on and in the psychic life of the subject. From here, I worked individually to carefully construct descriptions of classroom teaching, what Matthew Miles18 calls content specific vignettes, and read these multiple times against transcriptions, revising for accuracy and richness, and returning them to Dr. Quinn for reasons of validity.

Peace Teaching

In what follows, I present teachers as they share their views on peace, violence, and the role of such in matters of teaching. Findings demonstrate striking differences in what teachers believe peace to mean and how they strive to impart these values to their students through curricular and pedagogical design. By examining classrooms as conditions of possibility that encourage various subjectivities of peace, we can begin to understand co-existence as deeper than skill-based strategies and behavior-oriented methods for management. The first three vignettes represent frames of teaching that attend to a child’s relationship to peace as something outside of oneself, respectively peace as occurring through a relation with others, with the rule of law, and with the workings of society. The fourth vignette, however, considers the manifestation of peace as rooted within one’s relationship to oneself, as an inward turn against that which is deemed violent, a denouncement of violence that calls upon the child to identify with oneself as a maker of peace.

Conflict Resolution and Community Building: In Relation With Others

“Okay brothers and sisters, make sure that you give everyone the space they need on the rug,” announces Anita before she begins her read aloud on butterflies. The first grade children have piled themselves upon each other in hurried excitement and violations of territory, such as a careless foot in someone’s backside or a student in an unassigned seat, has ignited a series of bickering negotiations. Anita must quickly extinguish these in order to begin her lesson on time. With school administration viscerally concerned over the scores of standardized exams, Anita and Maurice must co-teach with organizational precision lest they fall behind in the coverage of material required by grade-level content standards. At capacity with thirty students and a disproportionately high number of boys over girls, Anita and Maurice have developed an impressive

system of management that does not impinge upon their concerns for teaching peace, but rather serves as a necessary structure through which peace practices can emerge.

Based upon strategies for conflict resolution, Anita and Maurice conceive of peace as located between and among human individuals who use particular forms of communication to stave off antagonism. When moments of discord arise in the room, Anita and Maurice counsel disputants toward an agreed upon solution which in turn is believed to contribute to a well-functioning classroom community. With an ultimate goal of autonomy and self-direction, they use their position as teachers to encourage and inscribe ways of being that they believe will establish peaceful relationships now and in the future. About this Maurice states,

We have a lot of conversations around peace, what our expectations are of how they are to treat each other and what this classroom will stand for and what it won’t stand for. How people interact with one another, listen to and understand one another, and respect themselves and others are skills and parts of a personality that need to be cultivated. Structures in the room kind of help us with management but also help to encourage our philosophy on how the children should treat each other and the expectations of teamwork and team building.\(^{19}\)

As with many models for conflict resolution, the use of communication is essential and paramount. In related literature, basic strategies have been well-documented to include impulse control, emotional awareness, empathy development, assertiveness, and problem solving skills. Such habits of being have been examined to result in increased cooperation and a decrease in aggression.\(^{20}\)

In an interview, Maurice gives the following example:

We encourage the kids to practice conflict resolution, where they need to listen to one another and come up with a resolution that benefits everyone. One day, Jonathan, Erick, and Ariel were playing in the block center during choice time. Jonathan and Erick were building something together and Ariel came over to us crying saying ‘They’re being mean to me.’ Ariel said that they were not letting him play with them. I sat with the three of them, and said, ‘Ariel is upset, so let’s solve the problem. Ariel is going to tell you why he’s upset, and then when he is done, you can tell him your side of the story.’ Ariel explained how when they got to the blocks center, he wanted help building the Empire State Building, but Erick and Jonathan were ignoring him and building something without him. Jonathan explained that him and Erick wanted to build the Metro North Train Station and didn’t want to build the Empire State Building. I asked the group, ‘How can we come up with a solution where everyone will be happy in the blocks center today?’ Erick said, ‘Ariel do you want to build the train station with us?’ Ariel said, ‘But I want to build the Empire State Building.’ Jonathan came up with the idea of the train leading to the Empire State Building, and the boys finished building both ideas together.\(^{21}\)

In the scenario above, Maurice forces Ariel’s needs to be heard during a time when he was presumed to be lacking visibility and acknowledgement from his peers. When Maurice mediates, she explicitly frames the issue as one of being ignored, states the objective as a listening skill, prompts a strategy of mindfulness, then resolves the situation with an agreed upon compromise that all members seem to regard as acceptable.

In Nel Noddings’s theory of care,\(^{22}\) each member must be active in their gift and receipt of care: the ‘carer’ is attentive to the needs of the ‘cared-for’ and in turn the ‘cared-for’ demonstrates acceptance and recognition of the loving gesture. The individual is not an isolated moral agent, but instead, arises through a dyadic relationship that requires a fundamental dependency between the ‘carer’ and ‘cared-for,’ in this case, the teacher as the giver of knowledge and the student as the receiver. For Noddings, the caring relationship is established when one attempts to provide care for another, but more importantly, when the cared-for’s sense of the world is reliable and trustworthy enough to receive it. It is not only the teachers’ care that is worthy; Ariel must first established himself as a worthy subject and second, accepted the terms of resolution. Mediation approaches of this kind typically employ a third party who identifies a need for intervention and encourages a reaction that makes it possible for peaceful encounters to occur.

In this case, the students are positioned as negotiators-in-the-making who must learn the communication skills offered to them. Anita and Maurice could have instructed Ariel to stop crying, grow up, and resolve the issue on his own. They

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could have advised him to play with someone else, to play by himself, or to wait until the blocks became free. They could have scolded him for being weak, for shedding tears, for disrupting them in the middle of instructional time. Instead, they put into operation a condition of possibility that acts upon the child-subject and produces a subject of reconciliation that through the power of subjectification, Ariel takes up and masters. Ariel could have shunned his teachers, stomped off in frustration, or handled the conflict with violence or retribution. Instead, the process involves a double directionality in that the subject is acted on and the subject acts, not in separate movements, but with submission to the condition as an act of willful agency that in turn constitutes a subject. In this case, Ariel accepts the terms of resolution and returns to satisfactorily build towers of New York skyscrapers with his classmates; in following, Anita and Maurice return to the others and complete the remainder of their lesson.

The Rule of Order: In Relation to the Law

As much as possible, I try to keep it real with them. If you steal, you go to jail. I have been very blunt about the bigger picture. Someone throws a pencil they aren’t going to jail, but I try to instill in the kids that there are consequences for our actions.

Audrey, a second grader in a Lower East Side elementary school, is a repeat offender of the established order in her classroom. She is frequently charged with disorderly conduct and aggravated assault by her teacher, Leticia, and her jury of peers. In this classroom, the rules are clearly posted on the front wall. Clinging from a chart shaped and colored like a traffic light are clothespins labeled with each student’s name. All students begin their day pinned at green and with disorderly act of the established order in her classroom. She is frequently charged with disorderly conduct and aggravated assault by her teacher, Leticia, and her jury of peers. In this classroom, the rules are clearly posted on the front wall. Clinging from a chart shaped and colored like a traffic light are clothespins labeled with each student’s name. All students begin their day pinned at green and with disorderly

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Leticia and her students inhabit a particular frame for co-existence that effectively uses systems of behavior regulation and management to maintain classroom order. In contrast to the communication strategies taught in the previous classroom, here, the rules of the institution form a normative model against which students are placed as either in or out. In this system of governance, students are constantly at risk of being recognized as inappropriate or unacceptable because they are held to a set of disciplinary practices that publically commands certain ways of knowing, being, and modes of intelligibility. Leticia explains,

There is one kid in particular who has a lot of social issues with the other students. She has a hard time respecting personal and this year I did something different than I did before. I usually force all my students to be friends. In the beginning of the year I say we are like a family. You don’t get to choose who your family members are, and you have to love and respect them anyway. We have one student who is in your group. It’s Audrey. She will go out of the way to hit people. She’s kicked people. She has spit on people. She’s kicked people and physically abused people. Then I started to stop for a second. What message am I teaching these kids. I am teaching these kids that you can have somebody who physically abuses you, and then I am forcing them to be friends with them. I stopped and I said that I really need to rethink what I am doing because I am teaching them bad messages, especially the little girls. Then I decided, and we tried this for the first time, we de-friended her. We told her that. We had a class meeting. We discussed was going on. We discussed being physically and verbally abused. We decided as a class that we will all respect her, but we don’t have to choose to be her friend if people are being verbally or physically abused by her. So we decided as a class that if she changes her actions, we will welcome her in. I had them make sure there were strict guidelines that nobody would be abusive to her, because then it’s easy to get on the bandwagon and go after her.


Categories of “bad,” “disobedient” and “guilty” are cultural frames that Leticia has intentionally modeled from those found in contemporary American society. In this classroom, the categories of exclusion -- which require vulnerability to
recognizable definition of normalized acceptability -- are already present even before the process of subjectification begins. These definitions precede Audrey and her classmates; they are systems of ordering in which people are set up against specific models of law and order. The most penalizing aspect of this peacekeeping system is the soiled reputation of Audrey who has become reified as a subject of guilt, inscribed as criminally offensive despite contradictory evidence, and framed as a miscreant transgressor and a threat to the social order of the institution. Quite frequently, students charge Audrey with false allegations. In these cases, Leticia takes on the role of the final arbiter, deciding once and for all whether or not the children can be trusted. If their reliability is affirmed, she distributes the necessary punishments, some of which have been listed above. These public events demonstrate to all children that the rules of the order are immutable and that the authority of the teacher cannot be compromised. In this case, the legitimacy of the law is consistently inscribed and upheld.

As mentioned, Audrey’s peers have learned to become habitual dependents on a peace-keeping system that centralizes her as the identified agent of conflict. If and when any disorder or conflict ensues, the students in Audrey’s class regulate the aberrance by immediately notifying the authorities. When a scuffle occurs in the cafeteria during lunchtime, there is hurried enthusiasm to be the first one to tell the teacher that Audrey did it. As smiles of satisfaction spread across their faces, the children seem to find joy in this learned exercise of tattle-telling and as a result, one can see that Audrey has become numb and accustomed to her place in the order of things; although sometimes she does cry.

Interestingly, models of classroom management that are bent on rules and consequences share several aspects with theories of civil peace found in juridical system around the world including the United States.27 Both are systems of logic that require an authoritative figure to manage the subjects of the order and both are founded upon systems of rules and consequences that not only expect subjects to obey the rules, but also to participate in its management. Here we lay witness to the ways in which tactics of governmentality, such as laws and their regulatory structures, work to prevent aggressive action, punish outliers, and sustain a manageable condition that must also be upheld by the collective and complicit cooperation of the people.

In addition, many standard practices in elementary schools provoke a kind of subjecthood that is uniquely tethered to norms of acceptability. “I really like how Francisco is getting to work,” announces the teacher to the class. This is rule by example. Francisco is the example against which other students must abide. “I like how table number one is getting ready to learn.” This is rule by collective competition. In order to earn acceptability, the members of table one must be accountable for the behavior of other members at the table. Or “Now who is going to earn a green for today, let me see.” This is rule by absolute rule. It requires the teacher to decide the precariousness of each child, dictating who will be deemed of greater worth and intelligence, at times carving out their reputation, and encouraging them to master the practices of the publically-named model student. This very capacity to judge, writes Butler, presupposes a prior relation between those who judge and those who are judged, a condition of possibility that enforces a relation of power even before the student enters and engages the classroom.

Although this example illustrates the influence teachers wield in governing the child-subject, Audrey is also an example of how a subject subverts power and disavows dependency on the condition that impresses upon her. When I asked Audrey during an interview where she thought was the most peaceful place in the school, she surprisingly replied, “The detention room. It’s quiet and I can be free in there.” Typically reserved as a place of punishment, the detention room symbolizes in an extraordinary way a form of emancipation for Audrey. Audrey knows that the purpose of the room is to shame students into reform, to steal away their time in hopes that behaviors will be corrected. But Audrey, in this process of subjectification, willfully takes up the defining character of the detention room in order to eclipse the original conditions of possibility and, for the moment, subverts the constituting forces that expect her to show remorse and guilt. As a subject within a newly conceived condition, she exercises her radical agency and accomplishes a sense of autonomy and “freedom” from the power of the dominant and in doing so, is granted a particular kind of recognizable subjecthood.

**Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice: In Relation to Society**

During the day, a walk through the South Bronx is alit with street life. Along the outer edges of the crowded sidewalks are vendors with carts of coconut-flavored ice creams and tables overflowing with pashmina scarves and knock-off handbags. On every block, there is Chinese fast food, discounted American outlets, and bodega windows covered in pictures of pastrami sandwiches.

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Untamed flora grow in small vacant lots between the heavy brick buildings and just outside their steel fence, a group of local residents have set up lawn chairs and a CD player decorated with Puerto Rican flag stickers. During the night, the streets outside this fourth grade classroom are alit with a different sort of street life, one that has spurred the development of an entire curriculum based on the question: Why is My Neighborhood So Violent?

Travis and Lauren are teachers who are deeply concerned about the weight of dehumanization in the lives of their students. Inspired by the philosophy of Paulo Freire and committed to the work of critical pedagogy, Travis and Lauren see their teaching as a means to counter oppressive conditions and cultivate social justice and peace through human agency. Despite scholars who critique simplistic approaches to empowerment and those who interrogate deep-seated self-interests in the name of social justice, both Travis and Lauren are drawn to working within communities that they believe can reclaim power and develop the solidarity to organize and disrupt the suffering that make certain historically marginalized groups increasingly vulnerable.

In classrooms, such aims manifest as a particular kind of care that hopes to foster self-affirmation and peaceful co-existence through an activist orientation to societal change. Steeped within this work is the belief that human dignity emerges from a sustained and deep consideration for the workings of oppression as well as the nurturing of kind respectful relationships in schools. Believing that “studies alone do not halt direct violence, dismantle violence, nor do they build structural or cultural peace,” Travis and Lauren teach their students to analyze the roots of violence in order to counteract the marginalizing forces that continue to debilitate their community. Peace teaching, they describe, emerges from this kind of concerted investigation into one’s relationship with violence and it is through an elevated consciousness that one may participate in political actions and fight for egalitarian change and peace in the world.

For one-hour every afternoon the students in Travis and Lauren’s class engage in an ‘inquiry’ segment of the day. The curriculum follows that students examine pertinent issues in their lives, develop questions for investigation, explore media such as drama, art, internet research and in the end, develop a plan for corrective action. Travis describes this process through three key terms: Recognize, Understand, and Act.

I think the biggest thing that I want [students] to understand is that it is in their hands—whatever is out there, however their life is at the moment, is that they need to learn that it’s ‘you’ ultimately... that it is always within ‘you’. When you see an injustice or something that just doesn’t seem right, don’t just analyze it and look at it, but actually do something. You kind of have an obligation to act and not just sort of sit around.

In Freireian pedagogy, the starting point for organizing curricula that both read the ‘word’ and reads the ‘world’ begins with the present and concrete situations that reflect the aspirations of the people. In doing so, teachers should not only respect local student knowledges, but to go beyond it insofar as fostering the analytical skills to rigorously examine the complex relationship among sustained hegemony, normative ways of being, and advanced capitalism. With both emphasis on transformative action, teaching then becomes a concerted exercise called praxis which draws from a dual purpose: 1) to teach students how to examine relationships among and consequences of White supremacy, patriarchy and advanced capitalism, and 2) to transform critique into political engagement and the cultivation of change agents.

Sprawled out over various sections of the classroom, students are turning pages of recently published newspapers and searching for articles that relate to their inquiry-based question on community violence. While a few students have come across a report of a recent rape case, others are hovering around Travis discussing gender violence and the vulnerabilities of women in American society. Charts and other literacy-infused graphic organizers hang loosely from the wall in the far back. They drip with key words and ideas such as gender, race, power, class, unfairness. The phrase “rights violated” stands out prominently. Lauren recalls past conversations with students and shares their insight into the human desire for power and the struggles that ensue when the basic needs of people are left unmet. There is a clear sense from the students, she says, that economic depravity is intimately, and perhaps even inevitably, tied to the neighborhood’s deprivation.
high rate of episodic violence. It is hoped that through an analysis of these realities, students will be able to act peacefully when faced with injustice and to advocate for greater equity in the world.

Through their investigations, teachers and students also decided that direct contact and past experiences were determining factors for the high frequency of violence in their community. In an interview, Travis states,

I do think a lot of it does have to do with the children’s personal experiences as well, so whatever the children come in with, that’s what is there. You are not going to pretend that things don’t exist. If a kindergartner comes in telling stories about what happened yesterday, you just can’t like ignore it. Actually, the idea of paying it forward is very educational. It kind of makes sense...a lot of the students that we worked with, the younger ones in particular, said that you learn goodness or you learn violence by experiences that were given to you, so there is this idea with the children that it has to happen to you for you to see it.\footnote{Travis, interview with author, May 2011.}

On one observation day, it has become an urgent situation that Aaron, a 10 year-old boy whose almost maniacal sexual obsession has struck fear in Jennifer, a timid and mature classmate who refuses to continue focus group research and requests to be interviewed individually and away from Aaron. Since the beginning of the school year, Jennifer has written a series of letters to Travis and Lauren requesting that Aaron be removed from class. His aggressive and frequent sexual remarks make her body recoil and she moves with wide-eyed caution to the other side of the room. She turns her back to him and braces her shoulders in protection. Aaron, whose father has been recently incarcerated for sexual assault, speaks about rape and sex incessantly. He is undeterred by institutionally designed consequences, including expulsion or suspension. At times, he flails around, climbs over shelves, and yells deafeningly as if no other human being was present. When asked about peace, Aaron makes clear that he not only identifies with violence, but that it is violence that gives him power, strength, and protection.

In her work, Butler\footnote{Butler, \textit{Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.}} interrogates how differentials of power distinguish some lives as more precarious than others. This brings to bear questions over human dignity and the situations that produce one as more worthy than the other. What is it that selectively produces and enforces what counts as reality and in effect, discerns which lives become included or shut out from this reality. The ability to respond to this, however, depends on a realization that there is a worthy life, that we exist in a state of vulnerability and that it is this vulnerability that binds us. While some students, such as Aaron, are wielding misogyny against the women he deems culpable for the disintegration of his family structure, others, such as Jennifer, are concretizing defenses against the men who threaten her sense of safety and livelihood. Butler has compelled us to focus attention on the conditions from which the human subject becomes formed and to begin thinking about the other as one with whom we share an inherent precariousness.

Therefore, the conditions of possibility set forth in this classroom are not explicitly contained or defined by its architecture. Aaron is not a mere surface laid open to the pedagogical demand, nor is he a simple body awaiting direction and counsel. Instead, the process of subjectification recognizes the subject as acting within a certain field of intelligibility that animates a response to the exterior world, whether that world be from inside or outside the classroom walls. Travis and Lauren may present specific kinds of subjecthoods toward which they exert an external force, but the child-student subject utilizes its own power in deciding the course of its being.

Such movements are not spontaneous. They are not enacted without thought; nor are they simple acts of willing submission. Despite the effort of his teachers, Aaron finds identification with the structures of direct violence that plagues his childhood. Yet, this does not mean that the subjecthoods of peace attended to by his teachers have not offered an alternative meaning system for Aaron to consider. In this classroom, Aaron has reflexively examined the condition of possibility set forth insofar as he must first recognizes it as a condition against which he decides to resist. The peaceful possibility introduced by his teachers has already opened him up to a way of being, a process through which he is enfolds and unfolding, being done and undone, even as he decides in this moment to master the rules of the outside and not of his teachers.

Singular approaches to social justice education may be incapable of addressing the personal vulnerabilities that are accrued when young children see violence as a microlevel function of relationships between individuals. However, even as the action component to their violence work has yet to be determined, Travis and Lauren share that when Japan was struck by a series of earthquakes that led to a devastating tsunami just a few months prior to this study, Jennifer, unsettled by the disaster, wrote letters to parents, teachers, and students soliciting donations for a bake sale. With over $600 in raised funds, she, alongside some of her other classmates, researched various organizations and through a process
of deliberation, collaboratively decided upon how to best send the money to those in need. It is through this primary emphasis on social action that Travis and Lauren connect their teaching with the possible emergence of peace in the world, a hope that is actualized by concerted observation, study, and civic duty. “Jennifer’s bake sale was amazing—an example of the kids actually stepping up and doing something. The way they felt [during this project] was probably the best that they felt all year,” exclaimed Lauren.

**Finding Inner Peace: In Relation With Oneself**

A girl from across the hall walks into Sara and Wayne’s first grade classroom and with tear-stained eyes sits herself in the peace corner. Amid the photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, she stays in quiet solitude staring downward and wringing her hands. Sometimes throughout the elementary school day, there are moments of angst and frustration. Misunderstandings occur amongst peers. Violations of personal space erupt into heated dispute. Sometimes teachers are disappointed and reprimand. The peace corner in which the girl sits is known across the school as a place in which students can take voluntary respite during angry moments. Why this young girl decides to bring herself into the peace corner is left unknown and unasked. The other children in the room go about their activities as if the interruption was never made. They roll about on the library rug, study vocabulary cards, and convene at their independent desks for story writing.

Sara and Wayne, the co-teachers in this East Harlem classroom, are not naïve about the ways in which the American culture of power, competition, and aggression seep into the lives of the young children they teach. Sara says,

> Something has to happen in schools so that children can create a sense of calm. People are getting all these different messages all the time. This is a hot desert place with only one fresh water source. That cool down has to happen in individuals. It’s not going to happen in the government. It’s not going to happen on any large scale. There has to be a way to educate how to be content, to find ways to be peaceful in their own lives so they don’t have all this anger at the external forces they cannot control.  

The water source of which Sara speaks is the reservoir of inner peace that she believes exists within everyone. With a belief that people are prone to “fall back on learned behavior” with “no time to practice peacemaking,” Sara, alongside Wayne, deliberately carve out classroom spaces in which students explore possibilities for peace without the intrusion of institutional mandates and external evaluation.

Although peace is not taught as a rule in their classroom, Sara and Wayne have built the peace corner through a curriculum based on historical figures that embody peace as a responsive possibility. Developed and designed by the teachers themselves, this curriculum focuses on Martin Luther King Jr. as a man who used his words in the face of adversity; Chief Seattle, who defends environmentalism through his interconnectedness with nature; the Dalai Lama who teaches compassion and forgiveness in the vein of Buddhist philosophy; and Thich Nhat Hanh who models peace through the practices of meditation. The students are not taught to follow these figures as prescriptions for behavior, but rather to think of them as possibilities to ponder when entering the peace corner. In this peace corner, education is not instructive; nor it is subject to hierarchies of knowledge or theories of transmission. It does not rely on the immediate reciprocity or evaluation of others, nor is it a result of rigorous analysis or unquestioned compliance. Instead, this classroom signifies a condition of possibility in which the self-crafting subject can be freed, albeit temporarily, from the demands of schooling to engage peace at will and if they so desire.

Refusing to have any expertise on matters of peace making, Sara and Wayne demonstrate a careful attempt at enabling students to grapple and explore the meanings of peace as they arrive on their own terms. When tensions erupt, they ask students to exercise their own sense of responsibility, to willfully remove themselves from the situation, and retreat to the peace corner to find inner strength, meditation, and solitude. One never really knows what the students are doing in this corner. There are no regulations or rules or adult interferences. Instead, Sara and Wayne trust in the capacity of their students to seek for themselves an identification with nonviolence and peace.

‘Freed’ in this case does not imply a lack of structure, but rather freed from what Jacques Ranciere calls the explicative order of schooling in which the teacher feels the gnawing compulsion to explain the world in precise detail and appropriate pacing to a student that is believed to be incapable of learning on its own. Seeking a kind of pedagogy that overturns this order, Ranciere states, “to explain something to someone is first of all to show him that he cannot understand it by himself.” In his mind, teaching cannot operate on the premise

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38. Ibid., 6.
of a teacher’s intelligence and a student’s ignorance. The role of the teacher is not to explain what it is or how to think about it, but rather to command a scene of instruction, to present a force such that the student assumes responsibility for his or her own intelligence.

While outer peace inscribes an inherent dependency on the other to reciprocate peacefully, inner peace concerns a way of thinking about and being oneself which in turn transmits outwardly unto others. In this vein, inner peace and outer peace are not diametrically opposed but rather inherently bound and necessary for the other to exist. “The possibility of nonviolence is dependent upon whether one can sustain the tensionality within the self as one reaches out for the other with compassion,” states Hongyu Wang. By drawing upon the Taoist and Buddhist notion of zero, she argues cultivating inner peace to reach outer peace as an essential educational project, such that it is through this kind of nonviolence, through responsible, creative, courageous individuality, that violence, as an accumulative effect of corporal, emotional, cultural, and political devaluation, can be addressed.

Here, nonviolence is described as a condition toward which we are all committed to fight. This fight, however, located within oneself, is not a reactionary one, but an existential struggle to detach from all that is violent outside of us. Wang describes her insistence on nonviolence as a principle of living, a commitment to a zero space of all-inclusive, life-affirming energy that flows from the forces of conflict towards a detachment and distance from one’s own boundary. In this conception, nonviolence does not denounce a person, but rather denounces violence itself. In the same way that violence is conceived of as overt action and deliberate choice, Sara sees nonviolence as similarly active and affirming in that its power widens to include, rather than works to dissolve the human’s capacity to love. The cultivation of this nonviolent consciousness includes “using our righteous indignation in a way that can actually create positive change” says Sara. This must be willfully practiced with intentionality and through time.

“I’m a peace-making man,” proclaims Reggie with a broad smile spread across his 7-year old face. Then, stricken by embarrassment, he shyly turns away and whispers to me, “I don’t know why everyone calls me that.” Reggie, once considered the class bully, has taken up the practice of peace-making through the mastery of a condition that makes this a possibility. This demonstrates, not only that he understands the norms by which he is obliged, but that he accepts his recognizability in the face of others who ascribe onto him the identity of peace-making subject. As a peace-making subject, Reggie has submitted himself to the terms that give him his existence within the condition of possibility laid forward. This does not mean that he is sovereign, or more freed to appropriate this subjecthood. Rather, the recognition from others places a constraint, even risk, to becoming something that challenges the criterion of this recognizability; Reggie could have said, “Peace is stupid,” and walked away. He could have continued to bully his classmates with no regard for his teacher’s wishes an desires. He could have performed to the curriculum, yet enacted violence outside the adult gaze, in hidden corners, behind bathroom stalls.

While the peacemaking curriculum in this first grade class also includes an analysis of racism, war, and genocide, it establishes a condition of possibility that places emphasis on peace as a means to escape the vicious cycle of reveng and accusation. In contrast to ‘negative’ peace which centralizes the eradication of violence – either through communication strategies, allegiance to the law, social justice, analysis, and action -- positive peace, as in the approach describe above, is conceptually removed from the discourse of violence, leaving peace no as oppositional but as a renewed heritage of values that requires peace without exception.

Conclusions

Findings show that teachers cultivate certain conditions of possibility when teaching students how to engage in a classroom aimed at fostering relations of peace. These frames emerge as specific rationalities that demonstrate the multiple ways in which teachers consider the subject formation of the child. In elementar education, intellectual, social, and emotional development is typically taught through the promulgation of certain classroom strategies, routines, and practices. This study shows how an examination into frames of teaching, whether it pertains to the teaching of peace or the management of young bodies, can be used as an analytical tool for pre-service and in-service teachers as they develop their subjective notions of the profession. The conditions of possibility the emerge as the negotiated terms of subjectification are rooted in cultural notion of what teaching means and the various positions that are taken for granted in their conception.

Each of these four classrooms struggled distinctly with the question of how to frame peace in ways that protect children from the kinds of violence an

40. Ibid.
conflict present in the world. In one classroom, children were taught that peace arises from carefully scripted encounters with others. Here problem-solving strategies suggest that the proper use of language can move individuals beyond tension, an efficacy amenable to a high stakes climate that places the teacher as a central mediator. In another classroom, children were bound to a pre-determined regulatory structure for behavior management. In this case, the teacher was required to enforce a rule of law that prevented conflict. Publicly assigned punishments not only inscribed certain students as more vulnerable than others, but created a kind of social order in which subjects became complicit in their own regulation.

Critical pedagogues and social activists tie the student subject to a national or global project through an analysis of power, capital, and political participation. The student subject, one that is galvanized in the spirit of human solidarity and justice, is one that must take on the responsibility as a change agent and engage in civic responsibility through a critical understanding of oppressive structures and systems. This is in stark contrast to more contemplative approaches whereby students are moved to disconnect from situations that oppress them, to forego their outward duties and turn inward to cultivate peace from within. In contrast to a logic of dependency that requires the student to be analytically trained, this frame does not take up peace as instrumental or achievable, but rather as a state of being available to all who wish to engage it.

In this work, I take up the concern expressed by Davies42 that there is a de-emphasis in the governing of subjects in educational research and teacher education, as if it was unspeakable, even unethical to talk about how teachers set up conditions of possibility for their students. Work of this nature is traditionally located in the area of classroom management and community building that effectively aims to establish the appearances of social order. Less understood, however, is how teachers contribute to creating specific kinds of conditions through which different kinds of subjecthood become possible. Centralizing governmentality calls into question perceptions on teaching and its consequences for teacher positionality, student autonomy and will. They allow us to better understand our relations of power and authority and the conditions within which we operate. I am suggesting that one responsibility we have as educators is to examine the complexity of subject formation as part of classroom practice and to continue in our drive to understand the role of teaching in creating conditions that play into the subject formation of our students and their lives.

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42. Davies, "Subjectification: The Relevance of Butler’s Analysis for Education."


