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Child Soldier Narratives and Critical Incident Themes in Peace Education

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Developing Themes for Peace Education Using Child Soldier Narratives and Critical
Incident Questions

Abstract

Children are combatants in nearly three-quarters of the world's conflicts and have posed difficult dilemmas for the professional armies they confront. There are moral and strategic arguments for limiting the use of child soldiers. When conflicts involving children end, experts say the prospects for a lasting peace are hurt by large populations of psychologically scarred, demobilized child soldiers. Parts of Africa, Asia, and South America risk long-term instability as generations of youth are sucked into ongoing wars. There is a need to teach about maintaining peace in post-conflict classrooms. The author proposes a lesson plan to develop themes for peace education using child-soldier narratives and critical incident questions. The teacher will supervise and give continuous and authentic feedback to student projects. The paper contains material on peace education, child-soldier narratives, and critical incident questioning. Students read background information on a selected country, a child-soldier narrative, and other relevant material. They work collaboratively to develop themes on peace education by responding to critical incident questions provided by the teacher. The teacher will analyze these responses and identify peace-education themes that emerged from them. The students complete a final project – a poster. The teacher will use the emerging themes to prepare future lessons on peace education.

Keywords: Child Soldiers, Narratives, Critical Incident Themes, Peace Education.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how pre-service teachers in post-conflict classrooms can develop discussion themes on peace education by using critical incident questions. The topic is timely and significant because of the prevalence of conflict and violence in many parts of the world and the need to resolve them and prevent future occurrences. Students will contribute to possible solutions to conflict and violence, and will derive ownership of the outcomes.

Child Soldiers

Children are combatants in nearly three-quarters of the world's conflicts and have posed difficult dilemmas for the professional armies they confront. Yet moral reasons aside, compelling strategic arguments exist for limiting the use of child soldiers. When conflicts involving children end, experts say the prospects for a lasting peace are hurt by large populations of psychologically scarred, demobilized child soldiers. Parts of Africa, Asia, and South America risk long-term instability as generations of youth are sucked into ongoing wars.

The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) defines child soldiers as "any child—boy or girl—under eighteen years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity." This age limit is relatively new, established in 2002 by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Prior to 2002, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocols set fifteen as the minimum age for participation in armed conflict. Kaplan (2005) stipulated - while some debate exists over varying cultural standards of maturity, nearly 80 percent of conflicts involving child

soldiers include combatants below the age of fifteen, with some as young as seven or eight.¹ It is important to teach about peace in post-conflict classrooms to remind students about the past, raise their consciousness about the evils of war, and sensitize them to a need for maintaining peace (Hinton 2010).²

The term child soldier refers to any boy or girl below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity. It includes children used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking, or has taken, a direct part in hostilities.³ Moynagh (2010) indicated that the issue of child soldiers represents a limit-case in the discussion of human rights.⁴ Zimbardo (2007) suggested that innovative communal actions could take place after reading about the occurrences of evil such abuses suffered by child – soldiers in situations of war.⁵

Peace Education

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 1999) defines peace education as “the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level.” The United Nations Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2007) sought to “develop comprehensive systems of education that embrace the values of human rights, intercultural understanding and tolerance... Education for

peace and non-violence promotes the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that reflect and inspire these values.”

There are three common approaches to teaching peace-education in schools. The first is the knowledge-based subject approach, the second is the requisite skills and attitudes subtly infused in the school curriculum approach, and the third is a combination of the two. The combined approach is relevant to the context of this paper. The theoretical framework hinges on the belief that the world is conflict ridden both in individual and collective contexts. Schools should engage in nurturing attitudes, beliefs, and values, in the young that could influence peaceful dispositions (Petty & Krosnick 1995).⁶

Peace Education Theory

During the 20th century, there was a growth in social concern about horrific forms of violence, like ecocide, genocide, modern warfare, ethnic hatred, racism, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. In addition, there was a corresponding growth in the field of peace education where educators from early child care to adult use their professional skills to warn fellow citizens about imminent dangers and advise them about paths to peace.

Peace education has five main postulates: (1) it explains the roots of violence; (2) it teaches alternatives to violence; (3) it adjusts to cover different forms of violence; (4) peace is a process that varies according to context; and (5) conflict is omnipresent. Peace education theory is derived from religious traditions of love, compassion, charity, and tolerance, and connected to modern theories based on reducing the threats of interpersonal and environmental violence. Peace education theory gives rise to five

general areas of discussion in the 21st century: (1) human rights education, (2) environmental education, (3) international education, (4) conflict resolution education, and (5) development education. The title of this paper indicates that all five general areas are relevant to classroom teaching.⁷

Peace Education Standards

The peace education standards of the National Association of Peace and Anti-Violence Education were adopted for this paper. They are listed in Appendix I.

Method

Critical Incident Debriefing

The critical incident stress management is used debrief victims and survivors in crises caused by war, fire, severe weather, and other disasters. The method could be adapted to formulate critical incident questions used in a classroom. In 1983, Mitchell published a paper describing a six- stage model of critical incident debriefing. In 1984, this model was later changed to include a seventh phase (Mitchell & Everly, 1996).⁸ The phases and a brief description as listed by Mitchell (Everly & Mitchell, 1995b;⁹ Mitchell & Everly, 1996 ;) are:

1. Introduction: Explanation of roles and expectations
2. Fact: A discussion about "What happened?"
3. Thought: A discussion about "What did you think about what occurred?"
4. Reaction: A discussion about each person's identification of the most traumatic aspect of the event
5. Symptom: Each person identifies personal symptoms of distress
6. Teaching: Education about normal reactions.
7. Re-entry.

A literature review of critical incident stress debriefing and crisis groups is provided by Wollman (1993).¹⁰

The teacher will select an excerpt, or excerpts of child soldier narratives from different parts of the world. The students will read these silently, and the teacher will read them aloud to the whole class. The teacher will hand out written critical incident questions (CIQ) pertaining to each excerpt. Each student will respond to each question on a plain sheet of paper. The teacher will identify themes related to peace-education after the discussion. These can be used to teach about peace education in subsequent lessons. See sample child – soldier narrative in Appendix 1. Excerpts from child-soldier narratives offer opportunities to explore discussion themes pertinent to peace. Such themes can be elicited through discussion using critical incident questions (CIQ) Flanagan (1954), Brookfield & Preskill (2005).¹¹

CIQ provides a means of realizing what children are thinking and learning in different topic areas. In addition, it affords teachers the opportunity to involve students in discussions that would facilitate learning. A critical incident need not be a spectacular or dramatic event. Usually it is an incident, which has significance for the participant (Serat 2005).¹² It is often an event that made someone to stop and think, or one that raised questions for someone. It may have made the participant question an aspect of his or her beliefs, values, attitudes or behavior. It is an incident that in some way had a significant impact on a participants' personal and professional learning.

Critical Incident Theory

Flanagan (1954)¹³ defined critical incidents as "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles."

Farrell (2008)¹⁴ states that, “A critical incident is any unplanned event that occurs during class. If trainee teachers formally reflect on these critical incidents, it may be possible for them to uncover new understandings of the teaching and learning process.” (p.3). Brookfield (1990)¹⁵ adds ‘perception’ as a defining factor, seeing a critical incident as any “vividly remembered event which is unplanned and unanticipated” (p. 84), while Richards and Farrell (2005)¹⁶ state that such an event should “trigger insights about teaching and learning” (p. 113). Tripp (1993)¹⁷ takes a more “interpretative” approach, acknowledging that “normal, everyday events” can be made critical, he emphasizes that they are not intrinsically so. “Incidents only become critical because someone sees them as such” (p. 27).

A critical incident (or event) is therefore not only an occurrence that has significant potential for influencing major change, but it is also perceived as such by the observer/participant. Such perceptions are important in language learning, since “learners hold their beliefs to be true and these beliefs then guide how they interpret their experiences and how they behave” (Griffiths, 2008, p. 121).¹⁸ Because of this, critical events cannot be objectively identified, measured, or predicted, but are dependent on the awareness and willingness-to observe of the observer. Critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event.

Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident technique is "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles (Flanagan

(1954).” Hettlage & Steinlin (2006)¹⁹ offer a methodological guide to key steps in the critical incident technique. The teacher could teach about peace by infusing the derived themes in knowledge-based subjects, or use them as discussion openers aimed at developing skills relevant to peace education in a variety of educational contexts.

Preventing Conflict

Every effort to create a more peaceful world is important even if the changes produced are minimal or just “good enough.” There is no one definitive way to prevent conflict. However, it is important for teachers to play a leading role in laying the foundations for a lasting peace through teaching or role modeling.

Peace Education and Comparative Education.

Comparative Education relates to studies or examinations of education including and often emphasizing school systems and structures, and analyzing their similarities and differences. Peace education was originally viewed as a study of the cause and prevention of war. It has grown to a study of violence of all forms, efforts to educate about and counteract them, and to develop a peace system at both the individual and structural levels. Peace education can be studied with regard to individual countries, or more than one country. Comparisons of approaches to peace education can be made from country to country.

Summary

Children are combatants in nearly three-quarters of the world's conflicts and have posed difficult dilemmas for the professional armies they confront. They can be very proficient killers. However, adults who encounter them in the battlefield may hesitate to kill them. Cessation of hostilities does not guarantee permanent peace. In addition, large

populations in post - conflict countries suffer from post- traumatic illnesses for which they do not receive treatment. It is important to teach about peace in post-conflict classrooms to remind students about the past, raise their consciousness about the evils of war, and sensitize them to maintaining peace. One way to do this is to use critical incident questions to discuss child-soldier narratives from selected countries. Critical incidents cannot be objectively identified, measured, or predicted, but are dependent on the awareness and willingness-to observe of the observer. Critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. This presentation includes a sample lesson plan.

Appendix I. Lesson Plan

Lesson Title: Child Soldier Narratives and Critical Incident Themes in Peace Education

Goals and Objectives: The student will be able to:

Analyze Child - Soldier narratives excerpt.

Effectively use the internet to research country background and causes of the war.

Suggest ways to stop the war, and prevent future wars in the country.

Produce a poster consisting of peace themes.

Curriculum Standards Addressed:

The standards, (National Association for Peace/Anti-Violence Education, 2006) are as follows:

- Standard I: Preparing teachers, candidates, educators, and other professionals to work in K-12 schools and demonstrate the Peace Education content, pedagogical and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to help K-12 students learn positive thinking and behavioral skills. (General Questions for individual and group discussions – Nepal)
- Standard II: All educational institutions must have an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on the student/teacher/educator performance and ability to serve as Peace Education modes for students as well as for the academic community. (Students will research, collect, and analyze information about Nepal. Teacher will structure and supervise student activities.)
- Standard III: Educational institutions will provide training for the leadership administration and personnel to collaborate in an effort to present a united front to demonstrate Peace Education concepts in their behaviors, communication, and interactions throughout the school/community. (Not available.)

Time required/class periods needed: 4 class periods (60-minute blocks) to prepare, research, discuss, and present.

Excerpt of Child Soldier Narrative

Respond to the following questions on a plain sheet of paper: There is no one correct answer. The teacher will read the excerpt aloud, and you will read it silently.

Nepal

"They (the army) took us to the barracks. They beat us both with their guns and boots. After 15 days, my friend died from the beatings. They beat me repeatedly. Once I was beaten unconscious and taken to the hospital. When I regained consciousness, I was taken back to the barracks and beaten again. I nearly died. I don't know why they beat me." Ram, recruited in 2004 by the Maoists when he was 14 years old describes his capture by the Royal Nepal Army one year later (Human Rights Watch 2007).²⁰

Critical Incident Questions

- a) What did you read about?
- b) How did you feel after reading it?
- c) What four words or phrases would you suggest for a better future for this child?
- d) What will you do if asked to stop what happened to this child?
- e) What would you do if asked to prevent this situation from happening again?
- f) Complete the following , in a sentence:

Peace is...

The responses to these questions are unpredictable. There is no correct answer. Teachers are expected to analyze student responses and identify themes that emerged.

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Procedure

1. Introduction. Purpose and Process

2. Divide students into two groups. Appoint leader for each group, and assign two of the following projects to each group.

*Map of Nepal. (To be complemented by internet information on Nepal.)

*Handout on Maoists in Nepal. (To be complemented by internet information on Maoists in Nepal.)

*Child Soldier Narrative.

3. Assign groups to the computer lab to do preliminary research (two 60 - minute periods) under teacher supervision.

Students will work on the above topics. Students will prepare and analyze group data and information.

4. Groups will meet to discuss issues, organize research materials, and prepare visual presentations (Poster and, or Power Point.)

5. Groups will respond to critical incident question prepared by the teacher.
6. Students will use one 60-minute session for **poster, and or power point** presentations led by group leaders.
7. Teacher will identify and list peace education themes from the final projects and use them to prepare future peace education lessons.

Assessment and Evaluation – Use one 60-minute period to have a general class discussion on specific peace themes that evolved during the lesson. Write those down to be used in a different lesson on peace education. Group presentations will be assessed as “satisfactory” or, “unsatisfactory” based on group effectiveness.

Appendix II.

The standards, (National Association for Peace/Anti-Violence Education, 2006).

The conceptual framework based on the work of Berlowitz (1994)²¹ is that all educational curricula in teacher preparation and K-12 schools establish a framework focused on Peace Education. Moreover, it should emphasize a dialectical interpretation of the relationship between peace and social justice asserting that one cannot be achieved without the other.

Standard I: Preparing teachers, candidates, educators, and other professionals to work in K-12 schools and demonstrate the Peace Education content, pedagogical and professional knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to help K-12 students learn positive thinking and behavioral skills.

Standard II: All educational institutions must have an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on the student/teacher/educator performance and ability to serve as Peace Education modes for students as well as for the academic community.

Standard III: Educational institutions will provide [training](#) for the leadership administration and personnel to collaborate in an effort to present a united front to demonstrate Peace Education concepts in their behaviors, communication, and interactions throughout the school/community.

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End Notes

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