

the color green

A 'go' for peace education

by Ruth A. Wilson

"Peace is not the absence of war, but a virtue based on strength of character."
Spinoza

You may have heard the saying, "Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar is as valuable to the child as it is to the caterpillar" (quote attributed to Bradley Miller). Some educators use this quote in an environmental education context, suggesting that teaching children to care for living things benefits both children and the Earth. The same quote could be used quite appropriately for peace education.

Peace education is designed to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to achieve and sustain a culture



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of peace — that is a culture based on respect and empathy (Levin, 2003). While we usually think of a culture of peace as abiding within a group of people — which may be a family, a classroom, a country, or the entire global community — we can also apply the concept to the relationship between people and the rest of the natural world.

A basic premise of this article is that by helping young children develop a sense of caring, respect, and empathy for plants and animals, we will be promoting the overall goals of both environmental education and peace education. We will also be contributing to the spiritual development of the child (Duckworth, 2006; Montessori, 1972; Wilson, 1996, 2003).

Caring: Integral to peace education

Peace is an abstract term — one, while often used, is not always clearly defined. At times, peace is described as the absence of war, violence, or hostility. But peace can also be defined in terms of what is present — especially in relation to what one feels or experiences, such as harmony, serenity, and social justice (Levin, 2003) and the spirit in which one relates to other people and the natural world.

Peace education can be approached from either perspective (i.e. from what is absent [such as violence and hostility] or from what is present [such as harmony, a sense of caring, an appreciation of diversity, and an understanding of inter-connectedness and interdependence]). Most peace educators, however, would agree that peace should be defined as something that is more than an absence (Levin, 2008; Swick & Freeman, 2004), and that peace education should include the making of a peaceful person — that is, one who is caring and has the knowledge, attitude, and skills to effectively express caring in their relationship with others. Peace education, in this broad perspective, is based on a philosophy of nonviolence, love, compassion, trust, fairness, cooperation, and reverence for the human family and all life on Planet Earth.

Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar encompasses both perspectives — that is, the absence of violence and the presence of caring. While it is important to teach children to be nonviolent, fostering a sense of caring is where peace education should begin. Teaching children to care for something outside of themselves contributes to their development as peaceful persons and is best accomplished if begun during the early childhood years, as "the early years of life are the most responsive

times in which to nurture a caring and loving approach to life" (Swick & Freeman, 2004, p. 2).

'Going green' with peace education

'Going Green' is a term often used in reference to environmentally-responsible practices applied to many different contexts, such as transportation, building construction, and water conservation. 'Going Green' can also be used in the context of peace education, as there are strong relationships between education for peace and education for environmental sustainability (Harris & Mische, 2008).

The 'Green Approach' to peace education focuses on helping children care about the natural world in their own community. There are reasons to believe that once children learn to respect and care for plants and animals with which they are familiar they are more likely to develop a sense of caring and respect for other people as well (Wilson, 2008).

There are numerous benefits to the 'Green Approach' to peace education, including benefits to the environment and to children:

- Involving children in the care and nurturing of plants and animals helps them become more aware of and interested in the natural world and sows the seeds of a life-long commitment to caring for the environment.
- Caring for other living things also helps children develop a sense of pride, positive self-efficacy, and a feeling of being connected to something outside of oneself.
- Additionally, connecting children with nature supports all areas of development (Wilson, 1995, 2008), helps them have more positive feelings about each other (Moore & Wong, 1997), and reduces bullying (Malone & Tranter, 2003).

The 'Green Approach' to peace education also recognizes and capitalizes on children's innate affinity for the world of nature (Wilson, 1992; Wilson, 1995). This affinity is sometimes referred to as 'biophilia' and is described as an "innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes" (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p. 31). Fostering young children's love of nature helps them become peaceful people and enhances the 'soul-making' dimensions of their development. 'Soul-making' in this context includes a child's emerging sensitivity to life and his or her awareness of a larger context which nurtures and sustains us (Wilson, 1996). E. O. Wilson (1992) refers to the Earth as "the birthplace of our spirit" (p. 344) and suggests that the "more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility" (p. 348).

'Soul-making' experiences leave little room for the growth and festering of a constant state of anger and frustration experienced by many children in today's society who do not have frequent positive interactions with the natural world (Louv, 2006).

Pairing environmental and peace education: From theory to practice

Pairing environmental education and peace education is a concept strongly supported by the professional literature (Harris & Mische, 2008; Mische, 1991; Mische & Harris, 2008). Overlaps between the two fields occur in several major areas including overall goals, theory, research, and best practices. Additionally, "peace and environmental education both fall within the tradition of education for social responsibility where teachers help students learn about pressing problems and search for solutions" (Harris & Mische, 2008). Both peace and environmental education promote the development of

"humans as nurturers cooperating to preserve the natural world and human communities" (Mische & Harris, 2008).

We know that children don't learn to care by talking about what it means to care or listening to others talking about care. To learn to care, children need to experience being cared for, see others engaged in the act of caring, and participate in meaningful activities where they nurture and care for something outside of themselves (Swick & Freeman, 2004).

Caring includes the ability to be empathetic — that is, to understand the feelings and emotions of others. While there are some indications that infants sense when others are stressed and react to the situation with concern, the ability to actually understand the feelings and emotions of others is acquired at a later stage in a child's development (Roffey, 2006). Several strategies that can be used to help children learn to be empathetic include modeling and validating. These strategies can also be used effectively to foster other aspects of caring (such as nurturing and helping) as well.

Modeling occurs when children are shown or exposed to examples of what is expected from them. For example, a teacher may model caring when comforting a child who is upset or gently moving a ladybug from the classroom floor to a safe place outdoors. Modeling helps children form images of how caring can be expressed and what they can do to be caring persons. When teachers model caring on a regular basis, children develop images of caring as the norm (Swick & Freeman, 2004).

Children's literature can also be used to provide models of caring for young children and promote the combined goals of environmental education and peace education. These goals include:

- fostering an understanding and appreciation of how to live in

harmony with other people and the rest of the natural world,

- developing an attitude of empathy and caring, and
- promoting an understanding of how to express caring in relating to other people and the world of nature.

Examples of children's literature addressing these goals include *Home in the Sky* by Jeannie Baker and *If You Were My Baby* by Fran Hodgkins and Laura Bryant. In *Home in the Sky*, a homing pigeon is released by a boy who would like to keep it, but realizes its home is somewhere else. In *If You Were My Baby*, children learn about different ways mothers express love and caring for their baby offspring — a bat is held in its mother's protective embrace and a baby mountain goat is guided up high cliffs. Other children's books addressing the theme of caring are presented in the sidebar.

Validating occurs when adults recognize and affirm desired behaviors of children:

- Many teachers validate desired behaviors by calling attention to what children are doing. For example, a teacher might comment on how gentle a child is when handling a classroom pet, how careful a child is when riding a bike near other children, and how well children are working together to dig up a root in the garden.
- Teachers can also validate children's caring behaviors by taking and displaying pictures of a child or group of children engaged in gardening, feeding a classroom pet, or helping each other accomplish a task.

Validation helps children view themselves as good people who are able to

Examples of Children's Books on Caring

Children of the Earth . . . Remember by S. Schimmel
The Desert is Theirs by B. Baylor
George and Martha One Fine Day by James Marshall
Hawk, I'm Your Brother by B. Baylor
Hey Little Ant by P. Hoose, H. Hoose, and D. Tilley
House of Leaves by K. Soya
Little Bear by E. Minarik
The Mountain that Loved a Bird by A. McLerran
Peter's Chair by E. Keats
The Rag Coat by L. Mills
Ruff by J. Hissey
Secret Place by E. Bunting

care about other people and the world around them (Swick & Freeman, 2004).

Summary

The 'Green Approach' to early childhood education is good for the environment.

It is also good for young children and society, as 'going green' gives children many opportunities to experience and practice peace in a way that matches their level of development.

Caring for simple things in nature — like caterpillars, flowers, and ladybugs — helps children develop a sense of themselves as nurturers and as people who care. This sense of self contributes to a peaceful way of living — with self, with others, and with the natural world.

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The Story Behind the Root Diggers

A number of children were engaged in this stump project for about six weeks. The intent was to get the stump out so that a new tree could be planted in the spring. The project started soon after the school year began. Several boys used most of their time outdoors working on this project. Everyday, they'd make a beeline to the shed, grab their tools, and go to work. Comments from the children as they worked reflected a great deal of enthusiasm: "We need to keep digging to get this baby out!" and "Maybe we could invite people to check it out."



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