The Quest For Peace and Justice: Examining the Nexus between Peace Education and Adult Education

Hleziphi Naomie Nyanungo
Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance, Africa University

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The Quest For Peace and Justice: Examining the Nexus between Peace Education and Adult Education

Hleziphi Naomie Nyanungo
Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance, Africa University, Zimbabwe

Abstract: The author critically analyzes assumptions embedded in the two fields of practice: peace education and adult education for social change and social action. Preliminary findings from a review of literature from the two fields of practice are presented.

Background

The mission of Mobile Assistance Organization (MAO), a non-governmental organization in Zimbabwe, is to assist internally displaced and mobile vulnerable populations. The organization provides humanitarian assistance to individuals and families who are displaced from their homes due to events such as natural disasters and conflict situations. In the turbulent period immediately following Zimbabwe’s 2008 elections, MAO focused its efforts on assisting individuals and families who had been displaced as a consequence of post-election violence. They helped villagers who found themselves destitute after their houses were burnt down by neighbors who supported a different political party. MAO also provided shelter to individuals who fled their homes because of threats to their lives on the basis of their support for the “wrong” political party. To these individuals and families who suddenly found themselves without a home, MAO offered assistance in the form of temporary shelter, food, blankets and clothes. MAO also facilitated the process for individuals and families who were displaced to either return to their communities of origin, or helped them establish homes in new communities. In their efforts to reintegrate the displaced into their original communities, or integrate them into new communities, MAO had to contend with the challenge of conflict in communities. For individuals and families returning to their original communities, it meant confronting neighbors who may have been the perpetrators of violence. In the case of persons relocating to new (host) communities, there was conflict as new residents were viewed with suspicion and hostility given the political climate prevailing at the time. In particularly poor communities MAO found that other residents were hostile to the returning or new residents because of the support they were receiving from MAO. Ideally, MAO provides assistance until the point where the family has successfully resettled. The conflicts were therefore significantly hindering MAO’s operations. The organization positions itself as a non-partisan humanitarian agency that only provides material humanitarian assistance. However, the situation in Zimbabwe at that time made it difficult for MAO to avoid directly addressing conflict.

I was introduced to MAO at a time when the organization was formulating a strategy in response to the conflict. The strategy they chose was to conduct peace education workshops in the communities in which they worked. The goal of the workshops was to enhance the capacity of communities to manage and/or resolve conflict. In integrating peace education as a strategy in community practice, MAO was following a growing trend I have observed among community practitioners and educators in Zimbabwe and other countries in Africa. Peace education seems to have become the tool of choice for managing and/or resolving conflict. There is an assumption

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6 A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the organization.
that people engage in conflict, particularly violent conflict, because they do not know how to be peaceful or at least how to resolve conflicts peacefully. I find this assumption rather unsettling because it does not seem to address the roots of the conflict. If anything, it suggests that the causes of the conflict are the actors involved. However, as an adult educator I find myself grappling with how my field of practice might help address this situation better. And here I find myself echoing questions asked by fellow adult educator Michael Newman (1994) when he writes, “where are the practical proposals for helping people learn how to curb real or potential violence, and resist unsolicited impositions on people’s space and freedom by others” (Newman, 1994, p. 7). These observations and questions generated my interest in exploring the assumptions about peace and conflict embedded in peace education and adult education for community change. Moreover, I was motivated to learn about how the goals and processes of peace education are similar and/or different from adult education for social action and social change in community settings? Guided by these questions, I conducted a critical review of literature from two fields of study and practice: peace education and adult education for social action and social change. The overarching purpose of the literature review was to identify assumptions about peace and conflict underlying theories and practice in adult education and peace education. I present preliminary findings of this literature review in this paper.

**Peace and Justice: The Aims of Peace Education and Adult Education**

Salomon (2004) describes the general aim of peace education as “changed attitudes, increased tolerance, reduced prejudices, weakened stereotypes, and changed conceptions of self and other” (p. 2). Peace educators teach their students about what is peace, how to achieve it and the challenges to its achievement (Harris, 2004). However, as is the case in adult education (Spencer, 1998), there are varying strands of peace education. At least four categories of peace education are identified: (1) peace education that focuses on changing the mindsets of individuals (2) peace education geared at providing skills for resolving and managing conflict; (3) peace education that seeks to promote human rights; and (4) peace education that emphasizes increasing awareness on issues such as environmentalism, disarmament, and promoting a culture of peace (Danesh, 2006; Harris, 2004).

When the field of adult education is categorized by its different purposes and aims, social change and social action is identified as one of several categories (Newman, 1994; Spencer, 1998). Constructed as such, adult education is perceived as a tool that can be used by people, particularly those who are oppressed, to analyze, challenge and transform oppressive social structures and bring about social justice (Baptiste, 1999; Cunningham, 1996; Foley, 1999; Freire, 1974, 2000; Horton & Freire, 1990; Newman, 1994; Nyerere, 1978). A branch of peace education that is closely aligned to adult education for social change and social action is what Harris (2004) refers to as “development education” (Harris, 2004, p. 12). My discussion on peace education will therefore focus on this branch of peace education.

Development [peace] education seeks to address issues of structural violence. Johan Galtung is credited with starting this branch of peace education in the 1960s when he proposed that structural violence distinguished negative peace from positive peace (Harris, 2004). Negative peace refers to the absence of direct or overt violence while positive peace is the removal of structural violence beyond the absence of direct violence, i.e. “the presence of an identifiable actor who causes physical harm” (Jeong, 2000, p. 23). In this way, peace is defined as not merely the lack of overt, physical violence. Causes of structural violence include cultural violence, human rights violation, and imperialism (Galtung, 2002; Harris, 2004; Jeong, 2000). It
would therefore appear that development [peace] education and adult education for social change have in common the concern with oppressive social structures.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the structural violence which is referenced in peace education is synonymous to oppressive social structures. This is evident in the following excerpt from “Pedagogy of the Oppressed:”

Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already [emphasis in original] begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed... Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized (Freire, 2000, p. 55).

Based on this, I surmise that the aims or goals of development [peace] education and adult education for social change are the same – to change social structures that oppress people, and to remove the causes of structural violence to any group of people.

An underlying assumption shared by the two fields is that structural violence and oppression are a result of unequal power and resource distribution. I tentatively conclude that adult education for social action and development education share the aim of ending structural violence. However, there appears to be a divergence in embedded assumptions related to what happens when these oppressive social structures that cause structural violence are transformed or removed. Adult education assumes that the result will be a more just and equal society, while peace education envisions a peaceful society. In defining positive peace as the absence of structural violence that causes conflict, peace education equates social justice to peace. In other words, social justice is peace. I find no evidence to suggest that adult education share this assumption. To the contrary, it appears that adult education assumes social justice is necessary for peace to prevail. Put differently, adult education assumes social justice leads to peace. Although subtle, this difference is significant and has far reaching implications. My preliminary analysis suggests that adult education and peace education share similar goals but different (albeit related) objectives.

**Means and Ways**

Let us now consider the assumptions embedded in strategies advocated by peace educators and adult educators for achieving the shared aforementioned goal of ending structural violence. A key principle of the adult education approach to social change and social action is that those that are oppressed should play a central role in ending their oppression. The role of adult education is therefore to help people participate as subjects in the struggle for their own liberation from oppression (Cunningham, 1996; Freire, 2000; Horton & Freire, 1990). Central to this approach is the concept of critical consciousness where “the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (Freire, 2000, p. 54). A similar strategy is employed in development [peace] education as explained by Harris (2004) in the excerpt below:

Peace educators use development studies to provide their students with insights into the various aspects of structural violence, focusing on social institutions with their hierarchies and propensities for dominance and oppression. Students in peace education classes learn about the plight of the poor and construct developmental strategies to address problems of
structural violence…This form of peace education teaches peace building strategies that use non-violence to improve human communities (Harris, 2004, p. 10)

Peace educators emphasize non-violent strategies for bringing about change. It is, however, not clear whether “violence” as used in the context of advocated “non-violent strategies” refers to just direct and overt physical violence, or if it also includes structural violence. In the adult education discourse, the notions of non-violence and neutrality as strategies for bringing about change have been problematized (Baptiste 2000, 2001; Newman, 1994). These adult educators recognize that violence exists in different forms and levels beyond the physical and while they do not advocate for violence, they push for educators to consider strategies that are appropriate for specific situations. For example, Baptiste (2001) argues that there are instances where coercive strategies are necessary to transform oppressive structures. Newman writes:

To bring about social rather than individual change, it is crucial for disempowered groups to consider adopting proactive strategies: strategies that will impinge on their enemies as on themselves…Our learners may not use the strategy of open conflict but we must remember that their enemies may not be nice people. They may be duplicitous and violent and our learners are lost if we and they have not prepared for this…We and our learners must always keep in mind that it is the enemy [emphasis in original] – the polluters, the despoilers, the corrupt and the corruptors, the bigots and the racists – who should change (Newman, 1994, pp. 130 - 133)

Given the difference in objectives noted in the preceding section, it is not surprising that my research has not yielded peace scholars making similar statements about strategies for dismantling oppressive structures.

It is common place for peace education activities to bring together people from groups engaged in conflict, for example, Palestinians and Israelis (Salomon, 2004). The aim is to change perceptions, attitudes and feelings that will hopefully lead to different understanding and relating between groups of people. Salomon (2004) notes five challenges to peace education meeting this aim:

1) Collective narratives and historical memories of groups
2) Collectively held beliefs about “us” and “them”
3) Built-in inequalities that imply different groups pursue different, and often opposing agendas
4) Excessive emotionality such as anger, bereavement, fear and uncertainty
5) Context of animosity, fear and belligerence as peace education is often viewed as subversive activity

The literature in adult education gives minimal consideration to interactions where the distinction between “oppressor” and “oppressed” is not so clear cut, or where members of conflicting groups come together to examine their different realities in the same activity. Even where different groups come together, such as the situation of African-American and European-Americans coming together at Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk school, activities were conducted towards a common enemy – racial discrimination (Horton & Freire, 1990).

Implications and Recommendations for Adult Education

My review literature thus far has yielded subtle and yet significant differences in approaches to social change from the perspectives of adult education and peace education. Based on my preliminary analysis, I have concluded that development [peace] education and adult
education for social change and social action may be viewed as different approaches to attacking a common enemy: oppressive social structures that inflict structural violence on the oppressed. However, the two fields of practice differ in their reasons for attacking their common enemy. From the perspective of peace education, this enemy (oppressive social structures) is what stands in the way of positive peace. Thus the removal of this enemy is assumed to automatically result in a society characterized by positive peace. Adult education, on the other hand, views oppressive social structures as the hindrance to social justice and equality. However, adult education does not assume that the achievement of social justice and equality marks the attainment of peace. My preliminary findings on this topic suggest great potential for further research in this area. One potential area for future research is on the content or curriculum for peace education (particularly development education) and adult education for social change.

Let us return to the peace education workshops that were being organized by MAO to address conflict in community settings in my introduction to this paper. I conclude this paper by listing a few recommendations that I, as an adult educator, would make to MAO as the organization attempts to address conflicts in the communities in which they operate. In making these recommendations, I draw upon the strengths of both development [peace] education and adult education for social change identified in the paper.

1) Engage the residents of the community in examining issues facing their communities rather than provide instruction on conflict resolution. Conflict is usually a symptom of deeper, structural issues.
2) From examining the structural issues, assist residents in identifying and implementing possible solutions for identified issues. Conflict resolution workshops can be integrated as part of a broader capacity-building project to implement solutions.
3) Involve community residents, as well as those that are displaced, in making decisions about resettlements and providing support for the resettled.
4) Reconsider strategies that create conditions of inequality by privileging one group over another, e.g. if blankets are being distributed, they should be distributed to all who need blankets rather than just the resettled.
5) Be prepared to work with the communities for the long term on these issues and beyond the provision of humanitarian assistance. One strategy might be to develop collaborative relationships with other organizations working in those communities and to strengthen the capacity of local groups and associations.

The implementation of these recommendations would shift MAO’s operations from merely providing humanitarian assistance to playing a role in transforming oppressive social structures.

Works Cited