Educating for Peace and Justice in America's Nuclear Age

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Abstract

The emergence of peace education as embodied in the context of peace studies, which emerged during the post-World War II ideological struggle between capitalism and Communism, the nuclear arms race pitting the United States against the former Soviet Union, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement in America, met with considerable criticism. There were many within and outside the academic community who argued that peace studies had very little to offer in terms of "real scholarship" and were primarily politically motivated. Some went so far as to insist that this new area of study lacked focus and discipline given the complexities associated with war and peace. It also became fashionable to attack those teaching and studying peace issues as anarchists, communists, and pacifists. They were ridiculed as subversives for challenging the hegemony of the U.S. military establishment. Over time all that would change as the early years of experimentation resulted in programs more rigorous in academic content and serious in focus. Although there are many who still question the viability of peace education/peace studies among schoolchildren and undergraduates, the historical record of the last fifty years or so provides a far different picture. It presents a progression of peace education/peace studies in our society today from an antidote to the science of war to a comprehensive examination of the causes of violence and related strategies for peace.

The evolution of peace education in the United States since the 1950s is characterized by four developments: (1) disarmament schemes of international law in reaction to the horrors of World War II; (2) the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War; (3) response to President Reagan’s ramping up the arms race in the 1980s; and (4) a holistic form of peace and justice studies marked by efforts on peer mediation, conflict resolution, and environmental awareness. Clearly, in the last fifty years, marked by debate and evolution, peace education—citizen-based and academically sanctioned—has achieved intellectual legitimacy and is worthy of historical analysis.

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