



Peace Literacy:

A change of paradigm for the promotion of a culture of peace

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(translated from the French by Silvia De Michelis)

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Literacy. A word that has become popular within the field of education in the 21st century. The world changes rapidly, and, as teachers, we are compelled to offer our students skills that will help them navigate the technological era we are currently living in. We teach a mix of different types of subjects: math; visual literacy; finance; ethics; and media; alongside, obviously, the basics, namely reading and writing. But what about "Peace Literacy?" How does this type of literacy fit into our classrooms?

Paul K. Chappell - West Point Military Academy graduate, Iraq War veteran, author, public speaker, and director of the Peace Literacy program at the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation - offers a new peace paradigm that challenges our common understanding of the human condition. Peace Literacy is a movement of educators and concerned citizens who want to empower people with the skills needed to heal the root causes of our problems, rather than merely addressing surface symptoms.

In Chappell's views, the hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow should be over-turned. For human beings, our non-physical needs are not at the bottom of the pyramid.

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Water, food, shelter are not more important than self-realization. Humans are the only species on the planet that can commit suicide even when all their physical needs are met. Every day we read in the media of wealthy and famous people who suffer from depression when their non-physical needs aren't met. For Chappell these non-physical needs are: a sense of purpose and meaning; the establishment of nurturing relationships; explanations; expression; inspiration; belonging; self-worth; challenge; and transcendence.

Our non-physical needs expose us to the damage of trauma. Who has never met a person who failed to meet their expectations, or disappointed them, or hurt them or even worse? Why do these actions create a scar in our hearts, and often affect our future? Even if we can rely on a partner, have children, a job, a house, a fridge full of food, and spend wonderful holidays every year, why do we feel paralyzed when we are reminded of a particular childhood experience? Why are we instantly transported to that exact moment in which our self-worth was profoundly damaged?

In order to understand the reason why we never forget such experiences, we have to understand human nature. Our understanding of peace is only as good as our understanding of the human condition. In my classrooms, I observe an incredible number of “traumatizing” experiences that my pupils face. Somebody cutting in line turns suddenly into an occasion for violence, where self-worth is threatened. Such episodes are common in the adult world too. The fear that we are going to miss something irreplaceable if we don’t beat somebody else in time ... We can’t deny that the violence we adults display while driving is not very different from what these children display!

Let’s imagine that a teacher can explain to pupils, in a terminology familiar to them, why they feel hurt when somebody cuts in the line. Let’s imagine that a pupil manages to control their impulses because they understand that the non-physical needs human beings experience are something natural, and that they, too, can experience such needs, which encourages empathy. Let’s imagine that a five-year old chooses to use words to express their frustration rather than violence. Let’s imagine that violence is not anymore an option embedded in the psyche because all our non-physical needs are satisfied. Let’s imagine that we pursue an understanding of peace as a way of living, that enables a person no matter what their background to understand, communicate or interact, at different levels, in a way that allows them to actively participate in different contexts within society.

In the words of Chappell: “Our work in Peace Literacy doesn’t envision peace merely as a final goal; rather it is a set of practical skills that can allow us to create ‘a realistic and pragmatic peace’ in our own lives, communities,

countries, and the world at large. Peace Literacy helps us develop a capacity to experience profound empathy, conscience, realistic hope and reason because our understanding of peace is only as good as the understanding we have of the human condition.

Peace Literacy is a movement of educators and concerned citizens who want to empower people with the skills needed to heal the root causes of our problems, rather than merely addressing surface symptoms.

Peace Literacy gives us an accessible framework for understanding the human being as a whole, the root causes of violence, the nature of peace, the anatomy of trauma, including trauma related to childhood, racism, and war.” (<https://paulkchappell.com/>)

Peace Literacy Curriculum Coordinator, Sharyn Clough, explains: “We tailor lessons and assessment tools from kindergarten to Grade 12 and in adult and higher education as well. We have to teach peace in the same way we teach how to read and write. We adults have to always keep learning. It is never too late.”

As a teacher, I am aware of the impact my action, as well as my teaching, has on the learning process my pupils experience. Changing my own mode of thinking hasn't been hard; neither was it difficult explaining it to the children. My colleagues are astonished by the authentic welcoming spirit and kindness that are pervasive amongst primary school children. I am amazed by how quick they learn. Would it be possible that all other subjects could be taught more successfully if we integrate Peace Literacy in our curriculum? I am looking forward to a change in this paradigm. Peace Literacy is an indispensable subject for the future and the future starts now.



References:

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