

Report from the Field: Peace Literacy in High School Classrooms

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Oct. 12, 2017

Dear colleagues,

I have been an English teacher in the public school sector for 30 years, as well as an adjunct professor at the University of Indianapolis. Regardless of the academic skill level of the students or the specific class I am teaching, there is one thematic unit that consistently engages their curiosity—my unit on the Vietnam War and veterans.

While I always wanted to help the students learn to empathize with the veterans of the Vietnam war, my desire for my students to become more empathetic for all of humanity has grown. As our society has become increasingly more volatile (politics, subsequent wars, etc), my mission to teach students empathy has evolved to include teaching them how to actively work for peace. What may have started out as an idealistic mission has come to fruition with the incorporation in my teaching of the works of Paul K. Chappell.

What struck me about Chappell's 2017 book *Soldiers of Peace* was his epiphany: "When I realized that I would need to strengthen my empathy, conscience, and sense of purpose..., I realized that the education system had not given me a single hour of training to help me fully develop those qualities. In fact, much of what I learned in school taught me to suppress my empathy and conscience, and to view purpose in the narrow context of accumulating material wealth" (*Soldiers of Peace*, 73-74). I have been teaching Chappell's work to both college and high school students in order to help them get the education we never gave him.

After using his work in my classes, I have observed improvements in my students with respect to:

- understanding explanations of root causes of behavior.
- understanding the root causes of aggression in themselves and in others.
- understanding the importance of listening and communication.
- resolving conflict.
- understanding interpersonal skills.
- introspecting.
- seeing the nuances in situations.
- becoming more empathetic to the unfamiliar.
- dialoguing in an authentic manner with others who do not share their beliefs.

Using his books has also provided an entry point for teaching academic skills. I have observed improvements in students' ability to:

- read nonfiction that properly cites references.
- recognize citations that provide information to primary documents.
- learn the importance of repetition to provide the necessary focus.
- gain understanding of historical references for relevant background information.
- study Greek mythology references for universal metaphors of the human condition.
- study practical pedagogy for useful strategies for creating more peace.
- read anecdotes for understanding and for use as supporting claims.
- recognize relevant examples that fit into the set curriculum.

Chappell's challenge for educators is this: "What if the education system had put as much effort toward cultivating my muscle of empathy as it did toward cultivating my muscle of language? What if I had learned as much about rage, conscience, and conflict resolution as I had about grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure (74)." I couldn't agree more.

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