A Critical Peacebuilding Guide for Educators and Leaders

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Abstract

In this article we elaborate on an existing critical peacebuilding approach to provide educators, leaders, and practitioners with a practical guide for examining and changing socio-cultural practices, institutional policies, and/or structural realities that promote violence. We begin with an overview of what peace education is and then describe a critical peacebuilding approach that can be used in different contexts such as schools, universities, communities, and businesses. We explain the five stages of our approach, which are fluid and adaptive, with guiding questions that: help identify structures and systems of violence; envision peaceful alternatives; foster empowerment; encourage action; and invite individuals and groups to reflect and reengage in change processes. Finally, we provide concrete examples of the critical peacebuilding approach and offer reflections on the future.

Keywords: Leadership and change, critical peacebuilding, peace education, transformative change processes for educators/leaders

Introduction

Understanding the various forms of violence in our schools, communities, and business contexts is the first step in creating better spaces and places for all to live and prosper. How do we empower ourselves to make a change? How do we develop interventions that hold promise and make an impact for creating more

peace and justice in our contexts? And how do we know that our peace education efforts make a difference, short and/or long term? This article will help answer these questions. This "User's Guide" for educators/educational leaders, community, and business leaders offers a method for peacebuilding in your context. The purpose of this article is to clarify the steps, through example, of a critical peacebuilding approach (Brantmeier, 2013). What is offered here is not a one-size fits all approach, it is an approach that is flexible and responsive to the unique, situated and layered forms of violence present in your nested local and global contexts.

Giving interactive lectures for a few decades now on *what peace education is*, I (Ed) see the need for a more in-depth focus on *how to do critical peacebuilding* in diverse, situated contexts–schools and yet also community and business contexts. As a graduate student and preservice teacher, I (Grace) overwhelmingly appreciate the convenience and accessibility of an explicit tool that can be implemented in my classroom and school to eliminate various forms of violence and work towards peaceful alternatives. This approach is much greater than a behavior management strategy; it is a process to be adapted for a cultural and structural change when faced with the potential that conflicts offer. This article is motivated by our perceived need for practical applications that contrast the sometimes-abstract concepts and ideas in peace education.

What is Peace Education?

In short, peace education is about eliminating various forms of direct and indirect violence through intentional learning processes (Harris and Morrison, 2012), and yet it actively involves generating "new knowledge paradigms, connective relationships, institutional processes, and social structures (Brantmeier & Lin, 2008). Strategies for doing peace include the following: peacekeeping–the threat of violence to deter violence; peacemaking–embracing conflict between two or more people/parties and working through it; and peacebuilding–creating the attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions for positive peace. Simply put, peacekeeping might be police presence or using security cameras for surveillance in a school or near a business or community center. Peacemaking might be conflict mediation between two individuals or groups of people to settle disputes. Peer mediation programs, conflict resolution education, or restorative justice circles are examples of peacemaking tools for schools. Peacebuilding[1] in action might look like education programs to increase implicit bias awareness, to prevent suicide, and/or programs that foster interpersonal conflict resolution skills or teambuilding/collaboration education in a given work context. Creating inclusive environments by examining

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[1] Importantly, we use the term "peacebuilding" interchangeably with "peace education" throughout the remainder of this article.

and transforming curriculum or business promotional marketing materials is one way of ensuring diverse representation matters, and in turn, invites diverse people to feel a sense of belonging and ownership in those spaces; this often increases engagement, participation, and innovation. There are several ways to "do" peace in schools, communities, and businesses and a combination of several strategies and approaches is usually the chosen path by leaders.

Many years ago, Harris (2002) defined peace education as "teacher encounters" and advocated for drawing out "desires for peace," providing nonviolent tools for managing conflicts, and also critical thinking skills that interrogate structural arrangements that reproduce direct, indirect, and cultural violence (Harris, 2002). We like this definition over others because it focuses on drawing out already existing desires (attitudes) and tools (behaviors, and critical thinking). Critical thinking is vital to examine root causes and conditions of the various forms of violence that are pervasive in schools, communities, and business contexts. In the examination of these violences, critical thinking skills also allow us to form our attitudes in relation to desires for peace. Peace learning exercises need to focus on the interpersonal and the structural by inviting critique of the causes and conditions that legitimate and perpetuate violence in all its forms and on multiple levels. Harris' (2002) definition above packs a lot into a few words. Yet, it does not mention the heart enough.

The head, the hand, and the heart need be engaged in critical peacebuilding work. Engaging embodied emotions through affective practices is essential for deep peace education work that engages the emotions present when exploring difficult histories riddled with direct, cultural, and structural violence (Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021; Cremin, 2016). *This is where peace education and peacebuilding become critical, when they focus on cultural, structural, and systemic violence and when they engage the heart and focus change efforts on larger systemic and structural realities.*

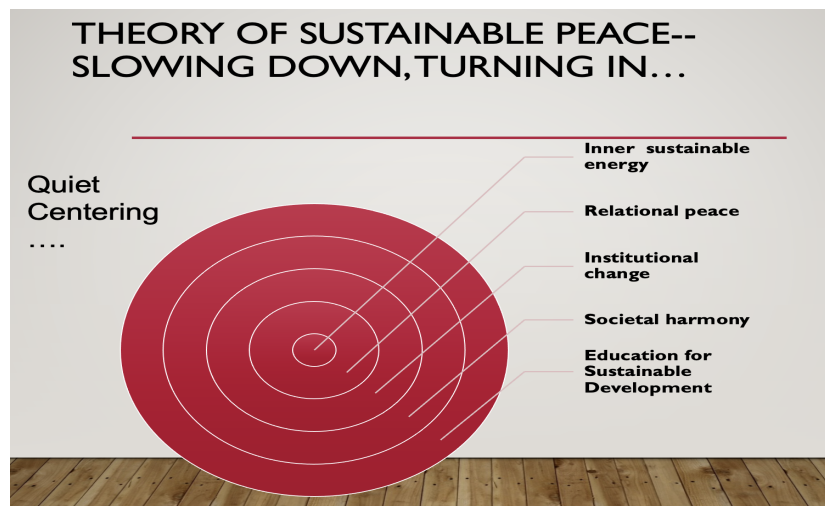**Critical Peacebuilding as A Response to Various Forms of Violence**
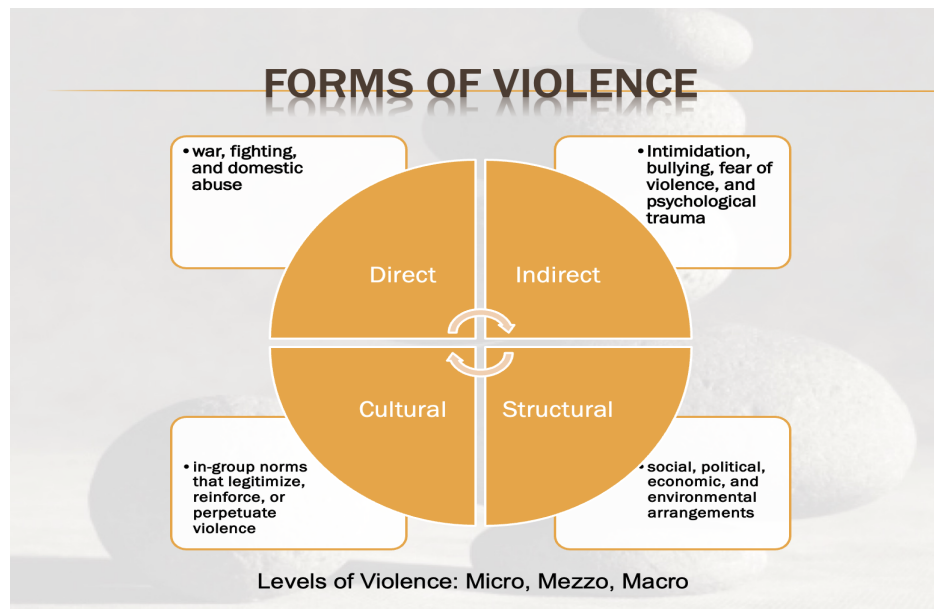
Violence has many forms and characters. For example, direct violence is when a bomb is dropped on a town during the Russian war in Ukraine. An example of indirect violence is when a bully threatens to harm a child unless she gives over her lunch money. Structural violence is exemplified by the fact that the Global North generates the most pollution, yet the Global South is primarily hit with the most climate change crises. An example of cultural violence is when someone threatens a person in the United States for not speaking English in public. The late peace theory giant Johan Galtung added crucial theoretical tools that hold exploratory and explanatory power for peace educators, namely the concepts of cultural and structural violence.

Galtung (1969), an early innovator in peace education theory, offers clarity on structural violence here: "The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances ... Above all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed" (pp 167-191). We need to pay attention to *the power to decide* and also to the legitimation of cultural norms and practices that render violence "acceptable" when doing critical peacebuilding work.   Galtung (1969) elaborates on cultural violence here, "By 'cultural violence' we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence ... that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence"

(p. 291). Galtung explains, "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right--or at least not wrong" (p. 291). Monitoring the "acceptable" languages spoken in schools by dominant group members is a real-world example of cultural violence via cultural assimilationist practices toward newcomer students whose first language is not English. It reinforces the cultural and institutional power of dominant groups in schools and can reinforce or justify further marginalization, inequity, and inequality of resource distribution (Brantmeier, 2007). When discussing concepts of cultural and structural violence in interactive lectures we recommend that readers invite the sharing of specific, lived examples from participants to make the concepts relevant to their everyday world and critique of that world–for the purpose of awareness toward emancipatory change.

Additionally, peace education/ critical peacebuilding takes place at multiple levels, from the micro-inner, to the mezzo-institutional, and is often aimed at the macro-structural level. Inner peace is paramount and connected to other levels of peace. In my (Ed's) leadership courses, we normally begin with Quiet Centering, a basic mindfulness practice of centering the mind in the experience of breathing, just breathing. As a starting point, we cultivate self-awareness of the mind, body, and emotional landscapes we are experiencing. Through a theory of sustainable peace (Brantmeier, 2018), we explore how the layers of the inner, interpersonal, institutional, societal, and macro-structural are all interconnected and question where our power for change resides.

THEORY OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE--
SLOWING DOWN, TURNING IN…

Quiet Centering ….

Inner sustainable energy

Relational peace

Institutional change

Societal harmony

Education for Sustainable Development

We start with the tangible and immediate, our inner sustainability energy, something that we have some control over. We explore that when we cultivate inner positivity and wellness, there can be a ripple effect in our personal and

professional relationships, in our roles as institutional change makers. We also discuss how the violence of larger economic, political, socio-cultural, and environmental realities can have a significant impact on our own wellbeing, social connectedness, and mental health. Though simple in nature, these learning exercises often have profound impact on students as reported by some in classroom evaluations as well as personal conversations, decades later.

A grounding assumption is that peace education/peacebuilding is not done in the absence of conflict. Conflict is inevitable, omnipresent, and dynamic. In everyday life in schools, communities, and business contexts we encounter a variety of conflicts. So many conflicts or potential conflicts are resolved or transformed nonviolently, that we may not even notice. For example, a middle school teacher noticed that the same student was often sleeping in her class; she assumed this was the result of a lack of sleep at night. She spoke with the student after class and discovered that for the past couple of weeks, the student was unable to afford breakfast in the school cafeteria. The teacher was able to bring in some small snacks to ensure this student's physiological needs were being met, and the student was then able to function well in class. It is a small, direct step toward change. This individual action for change does not address issues of food insecurity and scarcity in the community or region; that would have to be addressed via local, state, and federal programs aimed at food access and affordability. Some school districts already provide free breakfast and/or lunch to address hunger in a more systemic way. Some communities offer food pantries with healthy food options for those who live with food scarcity. Some governments ensure that all people (not just citizens) who live within their borders have the basic human rights of food, clean water, shelter, medicine, and a quality education; these are not radical ideas. They illustrate basic human decency.

While this example about food insecurity can be an everyday conflict for educators, it may not resonate with business or project leaders. Let's provide a more relevant example. In an office setting, an everyday conflict might be centered around a lack of initiative. The marketing team at a small company has been instructed to create three ads to be posted at various bus stops. One member of the team has not been contributing ideas but has been quick to update their supervisor on the group's progress. The project leader pulls his team member aside and explains to them that he feels they are taking advantage of their other group members. He offers to support this person in feeling confident as a contributing member of the group with explicit questions directed at them. During the next meeting, they respond to a question with a well-thought-out idea for the next advertisement. Conflict, as an everyday part of life, holds great opportunity. How we engage in conflict is important for the process itself and the outcomes that emerge. If the team manager from the marketing scenario were to have accused the team member of slacking off, they likely would have responded in a defensive

manner rather than with an open and willing attitude. Openly addressing the behavior, inviting the person in for collaboration, and supporting the effort can work to foster more initiative. Conflict can be destructive and divisive, and it can be growth oriented and transformational (Berdan et al., 2011). On an interpersonal level, we have habituated ways of reacting to conflict when we encounter it in everyday life.   And of course we have inner conflicts. Cheryl Richardson wrote, "If you avoid conflict to keep the peace, you start a war inside yourself."

Situated Power Analysis + Engaged Change = Vibrant, Sustainable Peace

Theory and defining concepts are important components of intentional practice, though they are abstractions. How do we do critical peacebuilding in our everyday contexts and world? Here we hope to draw on and elaborate more on earlier work (Brantmeier, 2013).

  The shorter version of a critical peace education approach (that we are now calling critical peacebuilding approach) can be understood with a simple math-like equation: Situated power analysis + engaged change = vibrant, sustainable peace.

At the most basic level, a critical peacebuilding approach needs to involve situated power analysis. This involves not only considering 'who is in charge' or who decides on what in a given context, yet also how power is wielded, shared, coopted, appropriated, distributed, reified, and protected. Are there authoritarian norms or tendencies where domination of some over others takes place, or where one person (dictator) over the entire group takes place? Domination and imposition of the will of the power elite are too common in a world filled with greed, anger, and ignorance–the three poisons in Buddhist teachings (Tricycle, 2025). Greed, anger, ignorance, and an overinflated sense of self and "us" vs. "them" prove problematic indeed when advocating for partnership models of leadership over dominator models of leadership (Eisler, 2015).

Situated Power Analysis

Situated power analysis needs to involve systems analysis in a given context. Eisler (2015) sheds light on situated power analysis when she contrasts a domination system with a partnership system. Domination systems are top down with power at the top being wielded or dictated over those in the middle or the bottom of a hierarchy. Often referred to as authoritarian, this form of power explicitly demands and/or implies female subordination, and as Eisler (2015) suggests, a devaluing of the "soft" elements of caring and nonviolence. Linked with patriarchy, capitalism, corporate competition and profit, a domination system reifies norms of individual power over others and can reinforce division and multiply inequality through various means: power over others, not power with others. Eisler (2015) contrasts a domination system with a partnership system and describes it as democratic, caring, and one where nonviolence is valued in both men and women. Etymologically speaking, partnership comes from Latin *partitionem* (nominative *partitio*)-- "a sharing, partition, division, distribution" (Harper, n.d.). In short, partnership is a sharing of parts and a distribution of authority. Relatedly, ecofeminism offers a critique that advocates for the deconstruction of patriarchy characterized by male authority and power and a remembrance of humanity's ecological connections to the natural world (MacGregor, 2006).

How is power wielded and how does it flow in your organization? This question is vital to begin critical power analysis that interrogates the situational factors that contribute to violence. In *Women and Power: Fighting Patriarchies and Poverty*, Townsend et al (1999) deconstructed patriarchal domination through situated power analysis and inspire us to think about the nature of relationships in a variety of contexts. Are our relationships *power up, power down, power over, power to, power with, power within, or power through?* Whose voice is heard, whose voice is lost, how are decisions made? Are the process and outcomes fair, just, and equitable? Examining how power is wielded and flows in a given context and what alternatives might exist to create more inclusive spaces is an important step in a critical peace education approach that aims for transformative change toward just peace. For example, instead of teachers being the authority of knowledge in classrooms, authority can rely on the co-learning process itself where "lived curriculum" and mutual vulnerability for students and teachers are honored and encouraged (McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020).

Engaged Change

When we understand at a deeper level how power operates within a given context, we can more clearly see how things might be different. To put it another way, when

we see our stories played out on a day-to-day basis and we become aware of how domination and power up and power over relationships can be damaging and dehumanizing to all involved, both the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1974). Awareness is crucial and can be the impetus for change; we can choose to create, enact, and to tell a different story–one of partnership.

I (Ed) often use an example of humanity's relationship to the natural world, rooted in the tensions of Christian ideology and the famous words of Native American Chief Seattle. Should humans embrace the approach of "Man has dominion over the earth" or the approach of "Earth has dominion over man?" Examples of man having dominion over the earth may include the construction of oil and gas pipelines over pristine wilderness areas in the United States or constructing pipelines over rivers that provide life and sustenance to communities downstream. In this example, there is an assumption that humans can construct and destroy whatever they need to fulfill their fossil fuel energy needs. Raising awareness of these realities and engaging in change matters.

For example, how the Water Protectors Movement disrupted business as usual with the Dakota Access Pipeline is a prime example of challenging power dynamics and engaging in change toward an alternative vision, from the past to inform the future. This movement was indigenous-led and effectively delayed the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline which was a direct violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty (*Treaties still matter*, 2018). This mass mobilization of Indigenous people served as a reminder of the power of collective action which, through nonviolent resistance in solidarity, can create change. As Rachelle Figueroa states, "[l]ove, compassion, forgiveness, all those things work," as opposed to meeting the structural violence with more violence (Zembelich & Alexandra, 2016). The indigenous (and non-indigenous) activists who defended the water in the region of Standing Rock engaged in collective action to peacefully create change.

Vibrant, Sustainable Peace

Vibrant, Sustainable Peace is a lofty, utopic ideal that invites layers of critical philosophical discernment. Is sustainable peace even possible or is the reality of human experience more of an oscillation among violence and peace? We won't solve that here. Nonetheless, a vision for an alternative future, fostered through radical hope and informed action, pulls us forward in efforts to co-create the world we want to live in. Elise Boulding offered "Imaging" exercises that invite creating alternative futures and then developing action steps in order to make them happen (1991). She claims we must have in-depth knowledge of human history and the cultures and aspirations of people now before we can imagine a better future. With this knowledge, fantasies and dreams of the future are expanded and deepened,

allowing the opportunity to work towards a sustainably peaceful world. More on this later in the next sections of this paper.

The acknowledgement and analysis of present violences and systems of oppression is a common and necessary theme in envisioning alternative futures, represented in many different forms. Robin Kelley fosters awareness, hope, and action to challenge structural racism in the book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, (2003):

> Freedom Dreaming is an opportunity to visualize the future that we want to live in and harness the necessary tools and resources to actively move that dream toward a reality. It begins with addressing inequalities within ours and others lives to build awareness and then taking steps to enact change" (Available at https://freedomdreaming.commons.gc.cuny.edu/).

We will elaborate more on visions for alternative futures in the next sections where we explore the critical peace education approach step by step.

A Five Step Critical Peacebuilding Approach

The textbox below illustrates the bare bones essentials of a critical peacebuilding approach for those who need a handy and quick user friendly, quick guide.

Step	Guiding Question
1. Consciousness Raising Through Dialogue	1.What forms of violence (direct, indirect, structural, cultural, ecological/environmental) are present in your school, community, or organization?
2. Imagining non-violent alternatives	2.What does vibrant, sustainable peace look like and feel like in our classrooms, buildings, communities, workplace, policy, systems, and structures?
3. Providing specific modes of empowerment	3. What tools, skills, behaviors, changes do we need to actualize vibrant sustainable peace? How do we acquire those tools and skills?

4. Transformative action (praxis)	4. What concrete actions can we take to promote peace, social, and environmental justice in our sphere of influence? Implement the action steps.
5. Reflection and Re-engagement	5. What have we learned from our peacebuilding efforts so far? How do we move forward with lessons learned?

In a 2011 editorial for a special edition of the *Journal of Peace Education* focused on critical peace education, Bajaj and Brantmeier wrote, "Critical approaches offer peace educators and researchers the **contextual and conceptual resources to understand the structural impediments** to advancing peace education in diverse locales across the globe" (Bajaj and Brantmeier, 2011). The important points made in this opening sentence are that contextual, conceptual, and structural understanding are needed to be relevant and effective in critical peace education change efforts. In a 2013 article "Toward a critical peace education for sustainability" in a special edition of the *Journal of Peace Education* about the future of the field**,** (Brantmeier, 2013) offered a visual diagram and examples about how to do critical peace education in situated contexts in a five-stage process. These stages are nonlinear, are interactive, and are simply a process tool that can be used to guide responsive approaches.

As stated in the original article, the approach was inspired by Gandhi, Boulding, Freire, and Reardon, though we are not exactly sure what parts were inspired by whom anymore. Those five stages will be elaborated on more here with specific guiding questions so that educators in schools and leaders in community and business contexts might use the approach. These steps are best explored with groups of people collaboratively, where there is time and space to foster deep dialogue, explore disagreements, and reach consensus. The generative process used by a group of people should be rooted in culturally congruent and culturally responsive approaches for the context in which it is used. What follows is a much more elaborate version of the five-stage approach that can be used by individuals and groups to move through a critical peacebuilding process.

Critical Peacebuilding Approach Step One: Consciousness Raising Through Dialogue

Guiding Question: What forms of violence (direct, structural, cultural, ecological) are present in your school, community, or organization?

In the first stage of this critical peacebuilding approach, consciousness-raising through dialogue is particularly important. Ascertaining the context and forms of violence present in a situated, historical, context with nuances is an essential foundation for moving on to other stages. Looking at the "situational factors" that impact learning, growth, and hope in a context is vitally necessary to promote deep transformation growth and learning (Fink, 2013). Slowing down for this stage might be necessary to deeply explore. Paulo Freire is well known for his elaboration of the term "conscientization"-- often referred to as awareness cultivated through reflection and action. Freire (1974) writes of the potential for change and growth through becoming more conscious and aware of social, political, economic

realities, "Humankind *emerges* from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality as it is unveiled." (p 90). The unveiling of reality requires time, group learning and unlearning processes, guidance and a commitment to process. Freire (1974) offered the following, 'To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through trans- forming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity' (47). Exploring causes and conditions of violence and envisioning more ideal futures in pursuit of a "fuller humanity" where "right relationships" (Brayboy, 2021) among people and with natural ecosystems and the earth are treasured guides the critical peacebuilding approach offered here.

In this first consciousness raising stage of a critical peacebuilding approach to change, we encourage exploration of primary questions:

- ○ What forms of violence (direct, structural, cultural, ecological) are present in your school, community, or organization?
- ○ What forms of violence are present in everyday interactions/practice? In the policy, rules, or laws that govern/guide institutions?
- ○ What are the causes and conditions of these various forms of violence?
- ○ How does power operate here—who holds it, how is it used, and who is excluded?
- ○ In what ways do our policies, practices, and contexts unintentionally perpetuate harm or inequality?
- ○ How, in our daily work and relationships, do historical, systemic, and social injustices show up?

The very purpose of this "Consciousness Raising through Dialogue" critical peacebuilding stage is to illuminate, through reflection and dialogue, the various forms of violence in a situated context. A simple way to do this is to explore everyday understandings of peace and violence and how they are connected to institutional policy and broader systemic realities.

- ● Identify peaceful attitudes and behaviors that you observe in everyday situations in schools, communities, or business contexts.
- ● Identify non-peaceful attitudes and behaviors that you observe in everyday situations in schools, communities or business contexts.
- ● What patterns do you see in the observed attitudes and behaviors?
- ● How are these peaceful or non-peaceful attitudes and behaviors connected to and or influenced by institutional policies and practices?

- How are these peaceful attitudes and behaviors connected to broader social, political, economic, and environmental influences and realities?

In order to move beyond the personal and interpersonal toward the institutional and structural in this stage, we encourage critical reflection to examine structural and cultural violence in your critical peacebuilding efforts:

- How do institutional policies and practices create or reinforce inequities, inequality, and exclusion?
- What cultural narratives of "the other" normalize marginalization, harm, and polarization?
- Is power shared or controlled by a few? Is there power up and power down dynamics? How does the flow of power feel and what does it look like in spaces and processes?
- Is power shared with (power with) and encouraged within (power within)?
- Who benefits, who is silenced, and/or who suffers from how power operates in your context?

As a reminder, violence can be direct, indirect, structural, and/or cultural and various forms of violence are often interlinked. Violence can be explicit and can be implicit–in the air we breathe or water we drink. In other words, it may be so normalized, implicit, and omnipresent and status quo, not part of everyday awareness, that we don't recognize it as harmful and divisive. Cultural violence, in particular, often becomes "common sense" and often goes undetectable in everyday awareness and interactions among dominant groups members. Those living on the margins of these forms of violence surely are aware of its impact.

Perhaps creatively drawing or mapping various forms of violence would be helpful for visual learnings in the group.   Similar to what Mahatma Gandhi did with his grandson Arun and others on his ashram, you may wish to draw a tree of violence (Gandhi, 2003). The process of drawing various forms of violence one knowingly, and unknowingly enacts daily is a way of unveiling our own complicities in violence. Becoming aware of how we participate in structural and cultural violence can be revealing, humbling, and illuminating. For example, our everyday consumption of food, goods, and material things can be connected to child labor, economic exploitation, and the growing conditions of climate crisis and change.   In the next stage of the critical peacebuilding approach, the call of the future pulls us forward into capacity building and then action in the next stages.

Critical Peacebuilding Approach Step Two: Imagining Non-violent Alternatives

Guiding Question: What does vibrant, sustainable peace look like and feel like in our classrooms, buildings, communities, workplace, policy, systems, and structures?

As we critique, disrupt the status quo, and advance change, what are we aiming toward? In the book, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences,* Fink (2013) suggests creating aspirational learning goals is essential for fostering deep, authentic learning and change. We use Fink's work as a guide in these next stages. What creative possibilities and hopeful ideals of the future pull us forward? When creating Elise Boulding (2002) offers a unique futuristic "Imaging a Nonviolent World" learning exercise where individuals and group members imagine a futuristic world that embodies relatively more peaceful human interactions, social, political, economic, and environmental conditions and specific processes and milestones to move toward these nonviolent futures. Detailed futuristic visions of how institutions function, what values guide them, how people solve conflict are part of the visioning process. Group members share their individual reflections and together, talk about similarities and differences, and provide more detail and nuance to these idealistic portraits. Creativity and hope guide collective imagining. Questions for you and your group that guide this critical peacebuilding stage could include:

Imaginative Visioning

- What does your nonviolent, ideal context/community/organization look like 15 years into the future?
- What core values drive decision-making, institutional strategic plans, daily effort?
- What systems or policies contribute to nonviolence, peace, and inclusion and to transform access, opportunities, and shared decision-making?
- How do economic, political, environmental, and socio-cultural systems interact to support and sustain human and earth flourishing?
- What new opportunities exist for educational, economic, or legal structures focused on nonviolence, peace, dignity, and flourishing for all?
- What new cultural stories need to replace the old ones?
- How can we foster psychological safety, inner peace, and social harmony in our spaces?

- What do group defined cultural norms, such belonging, empathy, and collaboration, look and feel like?
- What does just peace look and feel like in this context?
- What role does environmental justice play in our vision of peace?
- What are the core learning outcomes and/or change outcomes for engaged action?
- What milestones and landmarks along the way would suggest you are moving in the direction of that ideal future?

Regenerative envisioning aligned with healing intentions can guide this creative stage in the critical peacebuilding approach. Concepts and approaches such as eco-peace, (Ehrenzeller & Patel, 2024), moving from separateness toward inter-being, (Knox Steiner, 2024) and regenerative peace pedagogies to address the climate crisis (Brantmeier, 2024) could be explored to influence and elaborate on the details of the ideal future. This is a dreaming stage, so dream unapologetically.

Critical Peacebuilding Approach Step Three: Providing Specific Modes of Empowerment

Guiding question for this stage: What tools, skills, behaviors, changes do we need to actualize vibrant sustainable peace? How do we acquire those tools and skills?

Now that you have a vision of the future worth working toward, collaboratively identify what existing strengths and growth areas are needed in order to achieve that vision.[2] Perhaps a group of educators and educational leaders realize they need restorative justice training that embraces a critical and participatory approach. They seek out the help of experts from local universities or national organizations to learn new ways of being and addressing conflict in their school. Maybe they form a reading group and explore *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education* to see what they can implement in their school. In this stage, participants and organizations need to decide skills and capacities needed in order to achieve the vision. They also need to acquire the skills and capacities through a variety of growth-oriented experiences. Some questions in this stage of the critical peacebuilding approach include:

- What strengths and assets exist in individuals and the group?

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[2] In Fink's (2013) model of "creating significant learning experiences," this is where teaching and learning activities and exercises take place so participants can acquire knowledge, skills, information, and new behaviors to enact positive change.

- Where are your growth areas?
- Identify what ways individuals and the group need to be empowered in order to actualize that vision. For example, some skills from the following list may be needed, yet each group process will be unique:
  - conflict resolution skills
  - nonviolent communication skills
  - Restorative justice practices
  - Conflict transformation models
  - facilitation and mediation skill
  - emotional intelligence and resilience skills
  - leadership models exploration, such at transformative, distributive, or regenerative approaches
  - exploration of partnership/collaborative models of relationship to replace dominator/individualistic models.
  - community organizing skills
  - systems thinking and strategic planning skills
  - political advocacy, mobilization, and participation skills
  - partnership and coalition building
  - education and training regarding cultural competency, diverse and/or global perspectives
  - digital platform training to help with community building, storytelling, participatory action
  - financial literacy education and investment strategies
  - Regenerative approaches and adaptive intelligence (author, 2024)
- What global perspectives or partnerships could enrich our local peacebuilding efforts?
- How can we integrate mindfulness or meditative practices to support inner peace and resilience to avoid burnout?

There are multiple ways to acquire these skills and tools, including professional development opportunities, peer learning communities or communities of practice, community education, coaching, mentorship, university, community-based, or on-line courses, and/or inquiry projects focused on exploring skills and tools. This stage is not necessarily a "one and done" process given awareness of needs for continued growth, capacity building, and learning happens throughout all stages in the critical peacebuilding approach.

Critical Peacebuilding Approach Step Four: Transformative Action (praxis)

Guiding questions for this stage: What concrete actions can we take to promote peace, social, and environmental justice in our sphere of influence? How do we implement these action steps?

This transformative action stage in the critical peacebuilding approach is self-explanatory; it is a planning and doing stage in the critical peacebuilding approach process. From the positive vision of the future, what action steps need to be taken to create the ideal future, co-created in the visioning stage? Perhaps the best way to approach this is to build a short- and long-term timeline into the future. Create a timeline of action steps for 1 year, 5 years, 10, and 20 years. Remind yourself of the visionary goals and break them down into manageable action chunks. Start with small steps and build toward the holistic vision. Using a visual diagram[3] that includes the future vision, goals, action steps, etc..

Time Horizon	Future Vision	Goals	Action Steps	Implementation
1 Year	Immediate impact in your sphere of influence	Identify 2–3 concrete goals	Specific actions	Assign roles, set check-ins, secure resources
5 Years	Create systemic change	Build partnerships, advocate for policy changes	Annual milestones	Accountability structures, measure impact annually
10 Years	Establish sustainable systems	Institutionalize and create resilience networks	Major phases (curriculum development, funding strategies)	Formalize agreements, embed practices in organizations
20 Years	Achieve transformative impact and legacy	Regional coordinate efforts and initiatives	Strategic actions (policy advocacy, intergenerational leadership programs)	Governance models, long-term funding, mentorship

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[3] This table was developed with assistance by artificial intelligence, MicroSoft Co-Pilot in specific.

Consider regenerative approaches that hold the long view of human and more-than-human life on the planet as core to action steps (Author, 2024). If you really want to take a regenerative healing approach, think of the seventh generation of children one hundred and fifty years into the future. How do your actions now and in the coming years impact their ability to survive and thrive on planet earth? For more insight on an indigenous Anishinaabe seven generations approach, read *The Seven Generations and the Seven Grandfather Teachings* (Kaagegaabaw, 2023).

Strategic actions steps can be guided by considering some of the following questions.

- In what ways can we reimagine our roles—as educators, leaders, or community members—to actively disrupt cycles of violence and foster inclusive peacebuilding?
- How can we transform our school culture, community norms, and organizational practices to reflect peace, ecological, and justice-oriented values?
- What policies or systems need to be challenged or reimagined?
- How can we embed peace education, eco-peace, and multicultural competence into our daily work?
- How do we create spaces for dialogue that honor diverse voices, especially those historically marginalized or oppressed?
- How do we give ecosystems and the planet a voice and moral agency in our action plans?

"Freedom Dreaming" requires new visions and radical imagination (Kelley, 2003). The questions above are meant to encourage awareness and agency. Critical peacebuilders then engage in strategic action with courage and requisite humility to learn, in an ongoing way, about how to be more effective, respond to resistance, and then with flexibility and creativity, adjust and modify approaches and effort as needed.

Critical Peacebuilding Approach Step Five: Reflection and Re-engagement

Guiding questions for this stage: What have we learned from our peacebuilding efforts so far? How do we continue to move forward?

This stage is about reflecting on effectiveness and adapting to the moment and the future[4]. It may also involve adjusting the vision and strategic action steps to achieve the vision. Looking back, what did we learn from the process and outcomes and what do we need to modify and adapt for the future? How do we use what we learned for ongoing action and for re-engaging in the work moving forward? We need to examine impact, use evidence and data, and continue action steps toward the vision of vibrant, just peace. Helpful questions to consider follow:

- Revisit the identified core learning and/or change outcomes identified in stage two, imagining nonviolent alternatives, part of this process. How have you met, exceeded, or fallen short of achieving the core learning and/or change outcomes for engaged action?
- What milestones and landmarks along the way would suggest you are moving in the direction of your ideal future?
- What areas of focus need the most work in order to actualize the ideals?
- How has your vision changed from engaging in action? Does the vision need to be adjusted because of continuous feedback and data gathered during action?
- Examine successes and failure stories in the process. How can you build on your strengths?
- What challenges or troubling spots have emerged, and how can we address them?
- What new questions or directions are emerging for our continued engagement?
- How do we integrate the learning gained from action into our present and future work?
- How do we stay grounded and motivated in the face of setbacks or resistance?

This stage should not only be a time for reflection for your team, but also a time to look towards the future. With your newly discovered insight of violent power structures, ideal visions of the future, modes of empowerment, and results from acting, you and your team are able to assess and evaluate your successes and remaining areas for improvement with a more narrowed critical lens of your specific context and needs. Given the iterative nature of this approach, this stage naturally leads back to the beginning of the approach for you to start again with more nuanced understandings of violence and contextualized goals for change.

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[4] In Fink's (2013) model of significant learning, this is the feedback and assessment phase. We add future action for you to consider.

Examples of a Critical Peacebuilding Approach

In this section, we offer examples of how this five-stage critical peacebuilding approach can be used in a variety of contexts. We offer some details that might be helpful to concretize and demonstrate the approach.

Ethnocentrism and Global Diversity in Primary and Secondary Schools

When a principal is pressured by the school board to remove international flags from public view due to political beliefs deeming them "un-American," she faces a moral dilemma. Recognizing the flags as symbols of her students' diverse identities, she relocates them to a less-visible area to protect her community while still preserving student belonging. This forced censorship prompts her to critically examine the power dynamics at play, specifically, the imposition of Amerocentrism and the erasure of cultural representation. In response, she engages her administrative team in the five stages of our critical peace education approach to create a peaceful atmosphere in the school. Through dialogue, they raise consciousness about structural and cultural violence, such as discouraging non-English languages and policies which undermine non-white perspectives and begin imagining sustainable and peaceful alternatives. Together, they envision a school where diversity is celebrated, not suppressed, and brainstorm actions like petitions, cultural events, and advocacy to reclaim space for student identity. They identify the necessary skills to act—leadership, courage, and openness—and implement their plans to foster sustainable peace. After engaging in transformative action, they reflect on their progress, reassess their strategies, and recommit to the cycle of progress which is our approach. This example illustrates how educators can resist oppressive systems and cultivate environments where all students feel seen, valued, and empowered, thus making critical peacebuilding a vital tool for equity and justice.

Misogyny, Patriarchy, and Feminist Spaces in Higher Education

In a small economics seminar, a professor observes recurring misogynistic behavior from male students toward their female peers; they often talk over them, dismiss their ideas, and mock their contributions. Recognizing the harmful impact of these patriarchal violences, the professor pauses regular instruction to initiate our critical peacebuilding process. Without condemning specific individuals, he addresses the presence of misogyny and invites the class to reflect on gender discrimination in other environments which they have encountered. Through guided dialogue, students imagine spaces such as fraternities, restaurants, and workplaces which promote misogyny and gender violence on various levels. With this collective awareness, they proceed to imagine these spaces transformed into inclusive, respectful communities which subvert patriarchal power dynamics. They explore

what it would take to dismantle misogynistic norms and replace them with values that honor women's humanity. The class identifies key actions like educating themselves about patriarchy, amplifying marginalized voices, and practicing active listening. They commit to change by using appreciative language and fostering mutual respect in discussions. Over time, the classroom evolves into a more welcoming space, and students reflect on their progress and areas for continued growth. This example illustrates how educators can confront internalized violence, guide students through transformative dialogue, and cultivate peaceful learning environments rooted in equity, empathy, and accountability.

Poverty and Homelessness in the Community
Our third example is situated within an urban community, where a city planner and their support group analyze the violence within their community against impoverished and homeless people. The central focus aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically the goals to end all forms of poverty and to establish sustainable communities (Available at https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/). To achieve these goals, equitable distribution of resources lends itself as a potential solution. Here, we look at how the use of our critical peacebuilding approach can serve the community with the goal of redistributing resources to take care of impoverished groups.

In a city dominated by luxury housing and corporate offices, a city planner recognizes the deep inequities caused by limited access to basic resources and exclusionary public spaces that prioritize those deemed worthy and wealthy. To address this, they initiate the five stages of our critical peacebuilding approach. First, they raise consciousness through dialogue by organizing a public meeting where citizens discuss poverty, resource scarcity, and restrictive policies that criminalize sharing in public spaces. Personal experiences and diverse voices are encouraged. In stage 2, the group imagines peaceful alternatives; they envision a community park that offers clean water, food, restrooms, shade, and a free-access garden, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 for inclusive, resilient cities (Department of Economic and Social Affairs). After progressing into stage 3, they develop specific tools and modes of empowerment; they identify the need for policy reform, community commitment, and funding to sustain the park and its welcoming atmosphere. With these goals and modes of empowerment in mind, the group initiates stage 4 by taking action. The group petitions city officials, mobilizes volunteers, and launches a fundraising campaign to bring the park to life. Finally, they move into stage 5 to reflect and reassess their successes and shortcomings, then revise their strategy to continue building peace through equitable urban design. This example shows how community-led planning, rooted in empathy and justice, can transform exclusionary systems and foster sustainable peace for all residents.

Just Peace Leadership in Schools and Communities

Colleagues in an educational leadership program for primary and secondary teachers studying to be principals co-developed a Just Peace Leadership program aimed at supporting leadership development by peace education and social justice education literacy, equity, and inclusion integration in their approaches (Hagan et al, 2025). They first explored various observed forms of violence (cultural, structural, direct, indirect, symbolic) in their everyday contexts and realized there were commonalities and differences between diverse United States contexts and Northern Ireland schools. They explore and discuss peace education, social justice education, and equity and inclusive approaches to leadership. Through a process of dialogue and storytelling, they begin to understand commonalities and differences in their respective cultural, community, and classroom contexts. They envision alternative futures where nonviolence, peace, and justice emerge. They develop action just peace plans, including goals, activities, and methods of assessing impact of these efforts. Some focus on their classroom. Others focus on whole school improvement plans and engaging policymakers in broader conversations about structural change in schools. They enact those plans, reflect on progress and roadblocks along the way. Several months later, they gather on Zoom with their international colleagues to discuss success stories and challenges encountered along the way. They swap stories and strategy. In this way, they feel both accountable and supported by a group of international colleagues who struggle to alleviate violence in their classrooms and communities. They form a professional network through a social media platform to communicate and share lessons and strategies.

With the Future in Mind

In this article we have provided basic definitions of critical peace education and a critical peacebuilding approach with guiding questions and a framework in each stage that can be used by practitioners to identify violence, create peaceful visions, empower themselves, act toward peace, and reflect on impact and future action. We have given examples of using the critical peacebuilding approach to address various forms of violence in different contexts–primary and secondary schools, universities, community contexts, and business. We provided educators and leaders with practical tools to address various forms of violence and to co-create ideal futures guided by courage and radical hope. Our aim here was to clarify a critical peacebuilding approach and offer it as a tool for others to use.

Our historical era is marked by political polarization, economic instability, climate crisis, war, global poverty, global health pandemics, authoritarian rule and the need for collective healing; in the midst of all this we must build bridges across language, culture, region, and ideology. We are not pollyanna in our idealism

though, given the many, many obstacles our world is facing at present. Our optimism is not naïve; yet we hang our hats on engaged action with radical hope. A critical peacebuilding approach is a tool, one among many, to foster mutual learning, self-growth, and communal empowerment to address our shared human struggles. We can do better; we can be better as a human species in our role as co-stewards of planet earth. Future generations of children, our more than human relatives, and the future health of the planet itself—the beautiful blue and green ball we ride--depends on our creative visioning and our mindfully courageous work now–so others too can survive, live, and prosper. Critical peacebuilding is a tool that might prove helpful in these efforts; it may help create a little more peace and justice in too often violent world. Please let us know how your efforts go.

"The pull of the future is stronger than the push of the past"
Euler, Physicist

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