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## Culturally Responsive Peace Education: A Case Study at One Urban K-8 Catholic School<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper presents a case study of a yearlong research-based peace education program at one urban K-8 private Catholic school situated in a community plagued by structural violence in an enclave of a large Midwestern city. To frame the analysis, the author employs concepts central to culturally responsive pedagogy (including cultural competence, funds of knowledge, reshaping the curriculum, and activism) in order to highlight some of the unique challenges involved in implementing a peace education program in a diverse, urban environment.*

Keywords: Peace education, culturally responsive pedagogy, Catholic education

Many significant empirical studies have measured the *impact* of peace education programs in different contexts (Brantmeier, 2007; Casella, 2000; Harber & Sakade, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2001; Kester, 2008; Morrison, Austed, & Cota, 2011; Nevo & Brem, 2002; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Schultz, 2002), but few studies direct sufficient attention onto program *implementation* (Hantzopoulos, 2011; Orpinas, Kelder, Murray, Fourney, et al., 1996). This paper aims to remediate this research gap by focusing more broadly on how teachers implement a comprehensive peace education program at one urban Latino K-8 private Catholic school in a Midwestern community marked by well-documented structural and oppressive violence.

Most research in peace education depicts peace education programs that utilize regular teachers (Harber & Sakade, 2009, is a notable exception) or depict interventions that are very short in length, some only eight hours over a weekend (Morrison, Austed, & Cota, 2011). The peace education program described in this study, however, is quite different. Peace Works<sup>2</sup> is a research-

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1 This research was generously funded by The Center for Peacemaking at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

2 The real name of the program is used with permission from the director of the Marquette University Center for Peacemaking. <http://www.marquette.edu/peacemaking/>

based peace education curriculum developed by faculty at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in partnership with staff and students at the campus's *Center for Peacemaking*. The Peace Works model brings philanthropically funded outside peace teachers from the local community into schools to teach a structured curriculum during regular school hours. The Peace Works program is much longer than most, spanning the entire school year. The peace teachers teach one hour-long session each week to approximately 3 different groups at each participating school for the entire school year — reaching around 300 children a year. There is no monetary cost to the schools for this program. The choice to bring in outside peace teachers from the community is a very unique and compelling aspect of this model, but also one that carries enormous challenges.

Because Peace Works aims to foster a lasting culture of peace at the school, Peace Works requires individual schools to commit to a two-year relationship. In the first year, the model calls for the outside peace teachers to teach the curriculum to students, while also working closely with the regular teachers and other school personnel to prepare them to foster a lasting culture of peace at the school (the students' regular teachers remain in the classroom while the peace education sessions take place, but typically only to observe and not participate). Year two constitutes the implementation phase, where the Peace Works teachers come into the school only once a week to assist with implementation while the regular teachers at the school take over the role of teaching the peace curriculum directly to students. This study examined the first year of the model at St. Dominic (pseudonyms employed throughout the rest of the paper), where grades 4-8 participated.

Peace Works is firmly embedded in the Catholic tradition, in both conception and practice. Three elements of Catholic social thought, in particular, underwrite the program: A mission to advance social justice (Massaro, 2016); a mission to promote nonviolence (McCarthy, 2012); and a mission to enact forgiveness (Hornsby-Smith, 2006) and peacebuilding (Schreiter, Appleby, & Powers, 2010) in the wake of conflict. Peace Works explicitly targets Catholic school settings because it grounds peacemaking in Catholic biblical and theological tradition and thus uses explicitly religious themes, texts and symbols to discuss various dimensions of peacemaking. The 32-modular peacebuilding and conflict resolution curriculum strives to foster positive youth development and the reduction of youth violence by introducing students to types and cycles of violence, with special attention on structural violence and social injustices both presently and historically.

At the center of this study are the two outside peace teachers, both young Latino males born and raised in the community where the school is located. Though neither of the men have formal teacher training, as part of their responsibilities they were tasked with not only teaching the peace curriculum to 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade Latino students, but were also tasked with preparing and training the regular teachers at the school (most of whom are white females with extensive formal university-level teacher training) how to operate the peace education program during the second and all subsequent years. The interactions I observed among the teachers and between the teachers and the students raise a host of important questions about the most effective means to implement a culturally responsive comprehensive peace education in a Catholic school setting.

To frame the analysis of these interactions, I employ concepts central to culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). The first section of the paper accordingly rehearses the theoretical frameworks used to inform the study. The second section reviews the research methodology along with the data collection and analysis procedures employed. Section 3 presents the findings, which I have separated into two parts. First I describe how the two Latino outside peace teachers demonstrated *cultural competence* and how the regular white teachers interpreted their practices. Next I describe how the white teachers viewed their own ability to interact with the students around the themes and issues in peace education. Additionally, I show how the outside peace teachers were able to draw on students' *funds of knowledge*, how they worked to *reshape the curriculum*, and how they tried to *promote activism* among the students. In the second part of the findings I describe how the participants *reacted* to the various culturally responsive pedagogies that were employed. In this respect, I do not examine whether the pedagogies were "effective" or "successful." Rather, I examine how the study participants (both teachers and students) *interpreted* the pedagogies. Finally, I conclude by underscoring the core problems that emerged during the course of implementation, with the aim of signaling questions for future research and for teachers who aim to incorporate culturally responsive practices into their peace education.

### Theoretical Frameworks

Four components of culturally responsive pedagogy serve to frame the study: a) cultural competence, b) funds of knowledge, c) reshaping the curriculum, and d) activism. To be sure, culturally responsive pedagogy involves much more than the themes identified here, however, these are the themes

that were most prominent during data analysis (the methodology for which is described below). To aid in clarity, the findings section of this paper is also organized around the themes identified in this section.

### **Cultural Competence**

Given a broad range of names, culturally responsive/ relevant/ congruent/ centered pedagogy is a type of teaching, a way of relating to students of diverse backgrounds that promotes academic excellence and achievement. CRP maintains a decided emphasis on meaningful and sincere relationships that emerge between teachers and students; some scholars describe this as the ethic of care (Howard, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999) where teachers are validating and affirming (Howard, 2003; Durden, 2008) as they work to establish “warm and demanding” classroom environments (Howard, 2001).

To develop such relationships with students, teachers must attain a deep understanding of—usually through a sustained interaction with—their students’ home communities and families (Milner, 2011). “Cultural competence” thus specifically refers to a teacher’s capacity to assess and interpret socio-economic, racial, and gendered experiences of culture and power in relation to her students (Abrums and Leppa, 2001; Seeleman, Suurmand, & Stronks, 2009; Milner, 2011). This interpretive capacity provides the requisite dexterity to enact pedagogies that are congruent with students’ specific backgrounds.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Against deficit views, CRP is an asset-based teaching approach that works to build on prior knowledge in order to provide classroom materials that are more consonant with the ways the students’ view and understand the world (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). On this account, the teacher is viewed neither as the sole nor even the primary fount of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McCutcheon, 2002). Above all, the aim of CRP is to sustain (Paris, 2012) and validate students’ background culture by drawing from their native “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amani, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Sleeter, 2001), which includes language, histories and cultural practices (Gay, 2001). Funds of knowledge practices promote a dialogue-centered (de Mello, 2012) classroom where conversation—broadly conceived—is viewed as the chief mode of educational experience (Applebee, 1996). Importantly, for students’ funds of knowledge to be incorporated into the classroom, students must be offered a safe and comfortable space to present their views and experiment with new understandings.

### **Reshaping the Curriculum**

By building on—and taking seriously—students' own cultural knowledge, perspectives and views, culturally responsive pedagogues work to make the curriculum, the classroom, and the school environment cohere with the way their students approach and understand the world. This is the part of CRP that aims to make school “relevant” for students who are otherwise ignored and marginalized by White curricula (Gangi, 2008) or subtractive schooling patterns (Valenzuela, 1999). Such work prominently includes reshaping the curriculum (Gay, 2001) and working to impact more generally the climate and culture of the school.

### **Activism**

Finally there is a smaller, but not unimportant, strand of culturally responsive pedagogy research that places a premium on encouraging a sense of political agency in students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Fullan, 1999). Paralleling the research in social justice education (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, et al., 2009) and critical literacy, this strand of CRP aims to help students recognize the ways in which they are situated in larger structures and systems that serve to disadvantage them or otherwise inhibit them from accessing opportunity open to others. But rather than effect a bland fatalism, this approach aims to promote “critical consciousness” (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998) by helping students identify and critique historical examples of injustice and imagine ways they can initiate social and political change (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Whipp, 2013). In short, CRP empowers students to engage in activism so they can serve as positive and responsible change agents (Fullan, 1999) working to dismantle unjust systems and institutions.

### **Methodology and Data Sources**

To understand how CRP operates in peace education programs I studied one such program at a K-8 urban private Catholic school. My research was guided by two research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How do teachers employ culturally responsive pedagogies during the implementation of the Peace Works program?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What practical or interpretive challenges do teachers identify during the implementation of a culturally responsive peace education program?

A case study model was preferred (Merriam 1998; Stake 1995) in order to investigate valuable complexity and nuance frequently lost in larger samples (Stake 1995). I believe case study methods are especially appropriate for research into comprehensive peace education for two reasons, one practical and the other more theoretical. First, given the relative rarity of comprehensive peace education programs, there simply are no “larger samples” to study, so quantitative research is not as illuminating. Second, case study work is advantageous in that it can help provide a richer understanding of how participants at *this* particular school experience and interpret peace education driven by CRP. To that end, I have tried to privilege and foreground, to the extent possible, the unique voices of the participants (both students and teachers) at the research site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Context

The site of this study is a Catholic private school, St. Dominic, serving nearly exclusively Latino students from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The school itself is located in “San Carlos,” a predominantly Mexican-American community situated in an enclave of a major Midwestern US city. The area around the school and throughout the community is subject to well-documented significant violence, including gang turf wars between different ethno-racial groups from neighboring communities. Every group of students that I interviewed discussed at length the violent encounters they have experienced. Out of the 425 students at the school, 99% are Latino, 83% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 77% are English language learners (ELL).

Though the school serves primarily Latino students, 18 of the 20 teachers were white females; both administrators were white females as well. Grades 4-8, or about 260 students, participated in Peace Works. Students at St. Dominic all wear uniforms; girls wear skirts and the boys wear grey slacks. Prayer over the school intercom signals the start of the school day. Because this particular peace education program is only offered in two schools, my site options were limited. I ultimately chose St. Dominic because the teachers and administrators were extraordinarily accommodating, allowing me ample access to sit in on classes and organize focus groups with students.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study come from the following sources: a) approximately 15 hours of direct observation of classroom sessions and professional development sessions, in which copious field notes were taken (audio from two class-

room sessions was recorded); b) artifacts from the school, including posters and projects completed by the students, as well as copies of the detailed peace education curriculum employed during the program; c) Half-hour to 45-minute semi-structured interviews with 8 of the 9 regular St. Dominic teachers whose classrooms participated in the program (these interviews occurred at different times throughout the year); d) Two hour-long semi-structured interviews (one in the fall and one at the end of the year) with each of the two outside peace teachers who were responsible for teaching the peace education curriculum. (I also had informal conversations with teachers at regular intervals throughout the year; I took notes on these conversations immediately afterward); e) A half-hour interview with the principal of the school; and f) 35-minute focus-group interviews with two groups of 8 students from each of the grades 5-8 (8 groups and 64 students total). Each focus group comprised 4 girls and 4 boys. All of the participants in the focus groups identified as Latino. The participants were selected by the students' regular teachers.

I chose focus group interviews chiefly because of time constraints and my desire to remain as unobtrusive as possible during data collection (it would have been difficult to conduct many single-student interviews). However, I also believe that focus group interviews in this context were the best way to attain responses and reactions that were meaningful and not forced. To advance that end, I framed many of the questions skeptically; for example, "People say that peace is possible in this neighborhood, but is that really the case, what do you think?" Or "This program is called 'Peace Works,' but does peace really work?" Such questioning was designed to relax the atmosphere by addressing the students more informally; I wanted to spark dialogue *between* the students (rather than responses *from* them) to elicit comments that were as honest as possible. I obviously did not want the students to feel threatened and then simply recite what they expected I wanted to hear.

All interviews were transcribed either by myself or a research assistant and then coded using an inductive process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) associated with grounded theory (Yin, 2003) in order to arrive at initial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) from which I was able to derive a preliminary set of hypotheses. At this point two prominent very general themes repeatedly emerged: The role of race and culture and the role of democratized, dialogue-centric pedagogies. Based on this, I surveyed the relevant literature to develop a more narrow set of codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to complement and focus the initial coding. At this point I cross-coded more selectively to identify shared themes (cultural competence, funds of knowledge, reshaping the curriculum,



activism) across the interviews (Yin, 2003), paying attention to the nuances and specificities so that the analysis could center on interactions within the program (especially between teachers) rather than isolated occurrences.

### Findings

In the following section, I present findings related to RQ1: How do teachers employ culturally responsive pedagogies during the implementation of the Peace Works program?

#### Cultural Competence

Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian were hired to implement the Peace Works program at St. Dominic, both of whom were born and raised in the same community where St. Dominic is located, and neither have formal education training. Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian are second-generation Mexican Americans, 25 years old and 24 years old, respectively. Mr. Lucas had been with Peace Works two years, teaching at five different schools. He had long hair, usually wrapped in a ponytail, and sometimes preferred a headband to complement the earth-tone vests and chinos he wore.

Before coming to Peace Works, Mr. Adrian was heavily involved in youth summer camps for youth at risk of being recruited into gangs. While teaching, Mr. Adrian dressed very casually, usually wearing a v-neck t-shirt, jeans, and a knitted beanie. Both Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian described becoming peace activists after someone from their immediate family died as a consequence of gang violence, and both described being recruited into gangs when they were younger. His own recollections prompted Mr. Lucas to say, "We always have a choice to ... We always have to choose who we want to be." This philosophy served to underwrite his teaching style.

The peace teachers described specific efforts to build a connection with their students by offering a space for young persons to speak and for the teacher to listen. This is how Mr. Adrian described his approach:

A lot of it is in the first weeks of the program. I'm having them share, what are the things that are important to them? What's valuable to them? What are the things that define them? How do they see the school, the community? So, it's me understanding their world-view. So once that trust is established, I feel like it will just come naturally when students will trust you with certain things.

Mr. Adrian said that while he put forth a lot of effort to get to know his students, it was not a lot of “work.” It was clear that both Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas were able to draw on their experiences growing up in San Carlos in order to relate to their students. Both teachers regularly mentioned that they “know what it’s like,” and have “been where these kids are.” Additionally, it was evident that their Mexican–American identities served to enhance the apparent ease with which they could almost seamlessly incorporate themselves into the flow of the school.

Each of the regular teachers I interviewed made some mention of how impressed they were with how much the students “respected” Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian. Undoubtedly, the peace teachers carried significant cultural capital, which only heightened their cultural competence. As one teacher, Ms. Kotters, a white 7<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher in her late 20s, said, “You know, it makes a big difference that they [Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian] are from around here. The students definitely relate to them. They especially think Mr. Adrian is cool.” Other teachers reported that Mr. Lucas, even more than Mr. Adrian, commanded a great deal of respect, mainly because his classroom presence was so commanding, as compared with Mr. Adrian, who, being a first-year teacher, was more passive and had more difficulty with classroom-management. I asked each of the students in the focus groups what their favorite part of Peace Works is; at least one student in each group said Mr. Lucas was their favorite part, usually with a big smile on her or his face.

### **Reshaping the Curriculum**

One of Mr. Lucas’s primary goals going into his second year of teaching Peace Works was to work to revise the curriculum in order to make it more relevant to the students in his classes:

I wanted to devise a curriculum that spoke more to the realities of the kids, and the content of the community. The number one thing students say is ‘How can I use this in my life? How can I use non-violence in my life? That doesn’t even make sense.’ So we have to devise ways to make sure that there’s ways that it is applicable, that it is useful.

To advance this goal, Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian overhauled the curriculum, the trajectory of which now aimed in two opposing directions. On the one hand, they wanted to focus on the community, on real actors within the community, and the possibilities of transforming the community, beginning

with the school. On the other hand, they did not want the focus too localized either, chiefly because both teachers believed that a “major problem facing our kids is that they have not been encouraged to think on a more global level.” Mr. Adrian described his assessment this way:

I feel like, growing up in [this city], the division was just embedded in your head. Ya know, you were just told ‘you stay here’ or ‘you stay on this block’ or ‘you stay in this neighborhood’ and you grew up thinking that way and believing it. But the reality of it is that it’s a hurtful idea that has continued on segregation.

In light of these observations, Mr. Adrian believed that it was vital to expose the students “to the larger world out there, so that they can look at their own community in a new light, so that they don’t always take it for granted.” To achieve their revised curricular goals, Peace Works personnel worked hard to help teachers at the school think about how Peace Works could cohere with their own teaching goals. Before the year began a representative from Peace Works interviewed with each participating teacher to review the Peace Works curriculum and to discuss ways that it could be incorporated in what they were already doing in their own classroom. Two workshops with all the teachers were conducted in pursuit of the same aim.

The results of these efforts were mixed. Some of the teachers at St. Dominic described working very hard to ensure that the themes in Peace Works were explicitly tied to their own classroom objectives. Ms. Gallardo’s story is particularly instructive. Ms. Gallardo, a twenty-four year old second-year English teacher of Asian and Latino descent, described herself as an “overtly political” teacher. She explained her approach this way:

I certainly try to tie Peace Works and my own stuff together. So this week, specifically, we are reading *Romeo and Juliet*, which isn’t just about love, but actually centuries old violence for no reason and gang warfare. Later on we will transition that into *Anne Frank* and talk about the history of violence, the history of discrimination, and the importance of memory. The questions we explore are like, How is discrimination a form of violence? How is colonization a form of violent domination? How does memory implicate shared responsibility?

During my observations, it was remarkable to witness such high-level inquiry in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom — and to see the creative ways in which Peace Works could be incorporated into the general curriculum. Most teachers, however, did not describe such extensive collaboration. Ms. Edsel, for example, simply described her efforts to help students recall, usually by brief mention, the material they covered in Peace Works: “In religion, especially, I try to tie it in, and say, remember when Mr. Lucas taught us about that?” “Brief mention” seemed to be the typical approach. As Mrs. Simonelli said: “They gave us a list of the curriculum, but I usually don’t look at it. It’s more like I just remind them of what Mr. Lucas said.” Despite the work of the Peace Works teachers, only a few of the regular teachers made a special effort to incorporate Peace Works curricular content into their own classroom.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Mr. Adrian reported intentionally making a special effort to ensure that his students were comfortable in the class: “I don’t want them to— ever— feel like they can’t say something or share something. Every class session we begin by joining into a circle. And then we go ‘round and share how we are feeling. Even if it’s a one-word answer, it breaks the ice, it gets us going.” I witnessed a few such circles during my observations. Mr. Adrian said that the circle configuration was important because it took the focus off of him. He wanted to send a signal that it was “the students’ classroom, not my own.” This, however, ran him into trouble with some of the other regular teachers, who believed that his teaching style was too relaxed, and that he did not have command of the classroom. Ms. Gallardo said that often she would tell Mr. Adrian after class that he had to do more to focus the discussion; she said she was very frustrated with how the classroom seemed to meander aimlessly and “waste time.”

Mr. Lucas’s practices were much of the same: “These kids have to know that I don’t know everything. I can’t tell them what to do or what to think. They have to think about this stuff on their own. And for them to talk it out, they have to feel like they can say anything.” Two students, a boy and a girl, from one of the sixth grade groups talked about the classroom dynamics. The boy said, “It’s kinda good that we have to start off Monday sharing how we are feeling, how we are doing that day.” And the girl responded, saying, “yeah I really enjoy when we express our feelings and stuff. We really do get to opening up freely.” One 8<sup>th</sup> grade boy in a different group noticed that Peace Works classes are different from how classes “normally are” saying, “Other

classes they're just up there teaching, but in Peace Works Mr. Lucas just lets us talk, he stays quiet." Another girl in the same group said this: "I think [Peace Works] is really exciting because we get to talk about things that we don't get to talk about in other classes. We talk about things that are real. I like that."

And indeed, despite Ms. Gallardo's reservations with how Mr. Adrian conducted the classes, she said she was sometimes impressed with where the students went with things: "I remember one time when the kids shared stories about how violence impacted them. I learned so much about my kids that I did not know before. So I guess that's pretty important." It was apparent that the distinct effort made by the peace teachers to open the classroom up for rich dialogue could sometimes yield quite promising educational events — for both the students and the teachers.

### Activism

Both peace teachers explained that they wanted to help students understand the various ways that violence persists, the ways that inequality prevails, and the ways that racism functions in society; further, and perhaps more importantly, they said they wanted to show students that they have the capacity to resist these malignant features of the world. Accordingly the peace teachers pursued larger world themes to show how people from around the world are working to change the world in a positive way. As Mr. Lucas said, "Part of it was bringing in people who are living examples of active nonviolence, that's why I worked really hard to get Jody Williams, Nobel Laureate to come in— because she is a shining example of what it means to be actively non-violent in the world today. And I wanted to make sure that students saw that. Peace cannot only be taught, it has to be modeled."

Jody Williams, who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for her work helping to ban anti-personnel landmines, was not the only significant peacemaker to visit St. Dominic last year. Students were also able to participate in an intimate talk with Maguerite Barankitse, Opus Prize winner, whose work centers on the role of forgiveness in post-civil war Burundi and Libby Hoffman, President of "Catalyst for Peace," a ground-up program that works to help organize peace circles in post-civil war Sierra Leone. All of the guest speakers maintained informal conversations with the students, focusing prominently on their own biography and the steps they took to achieve their peacemaking goals.

Additionally, students regularly participated in organized skits where they

had to act out the role of different participants in some kind of violent encounter. At least one student from every focus group mentioned that the skits were their favorite part of Peace Works. As one 5th grade boy said, "I really really liked all the plays that we did, they were so funny!" Mr. Lucas places a lot of stock in such skits because he believes it encourages the students to imagine the feelings of others, and the ways they might feel in real situations similar to the ones that they are encouraged to act out. Most importantly, he said skits can help students imagine how they can literally *act* to change a situation.

Usually these skits prompted extensive dialogue afterward, where students shared what they would have done in a specific situation. Many of the skits reflected conflicts that instigate serious ethical quandaries, solutions for which do not always come easy. But unlike an ethics course in college, students did not merely read about hypothetical situations, they had to participate in them and bring them alive. As one 8th grade girl said, "Sometimes the skits really make you think. Like, really, what would I do in that situation? Sometimes I don't know if I could do the right thing. Sometimes I even wonder what the right thing is." It was apparent that these activities had a significant impact on the way the students conceptualized *active* nonviolence.

In the next section, I present findings that address RQ<sub>2</sub>: What practical or interpretive challenges do teachers identify during the implementation of a culturally responsive peace education program?

### **Identities**

While Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas were welcome additions to the weekly flow of the school, their presence also complicated how other teachers viewed their own relationships with their students. It was especially remarkable how keenly aware all the teachers were of their own positionality and racialized identities. And while Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian recognized the advantage of their cultural background in navigating the context of St. Dominic, some of the white teachers viewed their own identity as a distinct *disadvantage*. Mr. Adrian's assessment was particularly poignant:

I walk into all these schools and it's always white people teaching my people. A great majority come from outside of the city, from suburban areas, and identify themselves as white Americans. And I'm totally cool with that. But when it comes to teaching in the *barrio* where people have been systematically discriminated against and are trying to maintain their culture and their identity, you want people in those positions

that are gonna be uplifting, that are gonna be able to say, 'Hey, I was once you. This is how I got through it. I understand your struggle.'

Both Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas talked with an accent that mirrored that of many of the students at the school; their cultural background and personal experiences similarly mirrored the students'. As a consequence, they commanded the kind of cultural capital that the regular teachers simply could not match. Teachers recognized this; and the recognition prompted a host of challenges and doubts about their own capacity to initiate the same kinds relationships. Here is how a white female 6<sup>th</sup> grade history and religion teacher, Ms. Edsel, explained it:

The thing of it is that Mr. Lucas looks like my students, he comes from the same place they come from. They respect that because they know he's not coming in here telling them how to live or what to do. There's a bond there that I really don't think I can achieve in the same way. Don't get me wrong, I have a good relationship with my students, no question about it. But I just think there's really something special going on here that just... I don't know... it's different.

Another teacher, Mrs. Lorian, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade literature teacher, was so impressed with how Mr. Lucas carried himself that it prompted her to reflect on her own potential as a peace teacher for next year:

The modules are good, but to be really good we would need much more training and background to be effective with [the peace education]. So much of what Mr. Lucas does is from his own personal experience and knowledge and that's stuff that I don't necessarily have. Think about it — me — a white teacher from the suburbs. I mean, we [the other teachers] like the model a lot, but we don't have what Mr. Lucas has. The point is, especially with stuff like this, I don't think the students hear it the same out of my mouth as out of Mr. Lucas's mouth. Who am I to tell them? For them to see that there is someone from the neighborhood that cares and puts value in them, that makes a real difference.

These reflections were emblematic of the challenges teachers regularly articulated: How could they be expected to activate the same peace education

and approach the same topics when they are not confident in their potential to forge the same kinds of relationships? For these teachers, their own identities made culturally responsive pedagogy appear significantly more difficult and, in their view, potentially unachievable. It was notable that for many of the teachers at St. Dominic, the very presence of Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas prompted a heightened awareness of their own whiteness and its implications for their practice. Some clearly wondered whether their background, experiences, and identities foreclosed altogether the kinds of relationships Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian forged with their students.

### **Distance**

There is no question that the students were markedly receptive to the messages of the guest speakers. Especially resonant was the documentary Libby Hoffman produced titled, “Fambul Tok,” which depicts actual peace circles in post-civil war Sierra Leone. Of the eight focus groups I conducted, not one group failed to mention the documentary, even three months later. But despite the impact it made, the students remained adamant that while peace circles might be possible in post-civil war Sierra Leone, they could not be possible in their home community: “because of race” a 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy said, and because “gang violence is different from civil war—civil wars end.”

Though the broader global examples of active nonviolence certainly gave the students deep and meaningful ideas to discuss, many students nevertheless believed that there is something qualitatively different happening in, say, Sierra Leone than in San Carlos. One of the girls thought race was the prime factor. Because the persons in Sierra Leone “are all black,” she suggested it makes it easier for them to forgive one another, whereas in San Carlos racial tensions inhibit the possibility of forgiveness and peace circles. Other students, however, simply believed that “they” can have peace circles “over there,” but that it’s not possible “here.”

The “here”/“there” binary figured prominently in their language. For example, students excitedly rehearsed what they had learned about Ghandi, but their impressions of the man signaled a far-away, obscure figure that really is inconceivable today in their own context. A discussion amongst one group of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students provided insight into a possible reason for the apparent disconnect: “I really like the speakers that came in. And we learned a lot. The stuff they talked about was really cool. But how come we don’t have nobody



come in from 'round here? How come ain't nobody comin' in from San Carlos to tell us what they been doin'? Probably because they ain't doin' nothin' like that here."

"Yeah," another girl said, "The problem is, we never really brought in anyone that was from the United States or [from here]. Everyone we heard from was from another country, somewhere else. We can't feel their pain, but we can feel the pain of people here." Another boy responded, "Yeah, because we know what's goin' on here, we know what they're goin' through." No matter how the students framed it, there was the persistent sense that students could not adequately activate the imagination to draw parallels between "there" and "here." As the teachers worked to foster a more global consciousness, the students had trouble identifying the relevance to their own situation.

### **Disagreement**

To be sure, the skits, along with the warm and inviting classroom environment, made many of the students think a lot. They were invited to question regularly and often. And they did. Mr. Lucas said that this was by design: "When we engage in the class... We'll have moments of debates. We have circle time where it is kinda, like... 'Okay. Ask Mr. Lucas anything you'd like to ask him. Speak your mind directly to Mr. Lucas, he won't take it personally.'" Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian said it was extremely important that the students share exactly what they are truly thinking, truly feeling. Mr. Adrian framed it this way: "So my hope is that the students have an opportunity to have a healthy skepticism about these things. The first rule in my class is 'don't believe everything I tell you in this class.' Your job as a student is to find out what's true for you."

The consequence of this approach, however, is that the "healthy skepticism" often morphed into virulent disagreement, especially in the later grades. As is evident in the dialogue above with the 7<sup>th</sup> graders, students sometimes had a hard time envisioning that nonviolence was possible, or even advantageous. But the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were even more adamant than the 7<sup>th</sup> graders. As one girl finally said, "Look, I can't explain it, but it's not possible to have peace. It's not possible to have what MLK had. Gangs are separated by the whole street. It's always going to be like that. I don't think you can ever get gangs together. Because I think gangs are always going to stay mad at each other. They're always going to have that anger. Because you killed my people, oh so now I got to kill yours. I can't even imagine a world where everyone is just calm, never."

This student's remarks are representative of similar statements that other students shared. The questions they were asking are extraordinarily difficult questions for *anybody*; and they are especially difficult given the context in which these children function. The fact that they are even questioning these matters is promising in its own right. I reported to Mr. Lucas the basic ideas that the students expressed and asked if he had encountered similar dialogue during his classroom sessions. He immediately starting laughing, and said of course he hears it all the time:

'But Mr. Lucas, non-violence will never work.' And so that's the thing for me... I developed a very deep passion and respect for the profession of teaching. I love the craft. I can honestly say that I love it. But I think for me what's most hard is when you're an instructor and you're a facilitator and you're teaching the class and you feel like the material is not being accepted. And that's frustrating.

So I asked him what he did when students said those kinds of things. Mr. Lucas remained conspicuously silent at first. "What can I say?" he said. "I try to tell them about instances in Europe where groups nonviolently resisted the Nazis and it worked. I try to point to other examples. But it doesn't always resonate. It's tough. But teaching is tough, you know?" Mr. Lucas's effort to prompt critical and sincere reflection in his classroom was sometimes at odds with his educational objectives.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings above highlight key elements of CRP that were present in the peace education program. The peace teachers demonstrated pronounced cultural competence, owing chiefly to their own cultural background and their intimate understanding of their students' particular socioeconomic, historical and sociocultural situation. Because the peace teachers came from San Carlos, they were able to connect with their students in ways other teachers were not. They leveraged their cultural competence in their work with other teachers in order to reshape the curriculum so as to impact curricular foci across the school. Additionally, the peace teachers deliberately tried to draw from their students' funds of knowledge and build off of the students' own perspectives. Finally, the peace teachers, via the peace curriculum, aimed to engender a sense of agency in students in order to promote activism; students were regularly invited to think of themselves as change agents in the world.

And guest speaker global activists were brought in to reinforce that view.

Importantly, however, the presence of these elements, while promising, also prompted a host of unanticipated challenges, which complicated how the teachers viewed their successes. The challenges identified above point to a myriad of tensions that might likely emerge whenever CRP is activated. Below I discuss some of these tensions and raise questions relevant to both educators and future researchers, especially those teaching and researching in Catholic school settings.

### **Who should teach peace?**

Culturally responsive teachers are noted for being seamlessly immersed in the culture in which they function (Valenzuela, 1999). They have a deep understanding of where their students are coming from and they can therefore relate to them in deeply meaningful ways. It was striking to see Mrs. Lorian question her own ability to pursue the Peace Works curriculum next year because she does not believe she carries the same cachet with the students as Mr. Lucas. “I am worried about how well this is going to progress next year. It could be a real challenge, how that transition is going to happen,” she said. Similar sentiments were articulated by other teachers as well. Regularly words like “rapport” “credibility” and “authenticity” were used to describe Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian and the relationships they were able to foster with their students (Howard, 2001). And, above all, what was most striking is just how open and forthright the teachers were about the ways that they perceive their own racialized identities and the role of culture in the school.

To be sure, there is something about peace education that makes it, as one teacher said, “real.” The topics discussed during the program at St. Dominic invited students to share things that many school spaces typically either ignore or even disallow. From the data, it is evident that one of things that made the program so successful is that Mr. Lucas and Mr. Adrian were both able to forge trusting relationships with the students, chiefly because of their cultural competence (Milner, 2011). A teacher’s cultural responsiveness is a decisive aspect of any educational encounter, and this is especially true in peace education.

But what happens next year? How will the white teachers be able to cultivate a similar classroom environment? How will they be able to get students to talk about things that are “real?” This question, of course, is not exactly new. As Berlowitz (1994) writes, “the crisis of cultural discontinuity between the White, middle-class suburban teacher and her or his minority student

...must also be addressed adequately” (p. 89) in order to create sustaining cultures of peace in schools. What is new, however, is that I am not alone in making these assessments. Many of the regular teachers at St. Dominic openly acknowledged how their own Whiteness affected their teaching and questioned their own efficacy in maintaining a culture of peace at the school. The question for peace pedagogues, then, is how to get regular teachers in similar contexts to feel more confident opening the classroom to the “real.”

### **Global or local?**

Though Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas worked hard to craft a curriculum (Gay, 2001) that could literally broaden the students’ horizons, it is possible that too much emphasis was placed on international and historical issues of violence and peacemaking rather than on more local events and issues. Students repeatedly demonstrated an inability to imagine significant peace building in their home community. This could simply be a question of moral development. On the other hand, the pressures and peculiarities of their own context might make such parallels unrealistic anyway. At the same time, it is possible that the teachers did not adequately scaffold the curriculum in order to help the students make the relevant connections. But there is no doubt that the guest speakers were not “local,” and much of the curriculum centered on issues that were much broader than what is specifically going on in San Carlos.

It should be emphasized, however, that the curriculum to which the students at St. Dominic were exposed was extremely rich. The peace teachers in collaboration with some of the regular teachers deliberately worked to cohere the peace education curriculum into the general curriculum (Gay, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). And to a significant extent this was successful. There is no doubt that many of the themes and topics the students encountered are typically reserved for high school or even college classrooms. But unlike older students in those contexts, the students at St. Dominic were not always capable of making the requisite connections in order to bring things back to their home context. Thus, the effort to pursue an expanded curriculum capable of raising students’ critical consciousness potentially came at the expense of the curriculum’s relevance. To attain the twin goals of cultural relevance (Howard, 2003) and critical consciousness-raising (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998) (both central features of culturally responsive teaching) requires an immensely delicate balancing act. And finding that balance remained for the most part elusive at St. Dominic. The question for peace education, then, is how to

ensure that the broader global issues that can serve to raise students' critical consciousness are finally related back to the students' day-to-day realities.

### **How can we promote activism?**

Promoting a sense of agency in students is a common theme in both culturally responsive pedagogy and CRP and both models aim to help students imagine that they can change their current circumstances (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). But because the relevance of curriculum suffered to some extent at St. Dominic, some of the students' formulations led to them to conclude that what is possible in, for example, Sierra Leone is not possible in San Carlos; that, as bad as things were in Sierra Leone, they are worse in San Carlos. Such impressions led them further to doubt the potential efficacy of active nonviolence altogether. Obviously, the expressed doubt raises significant questions about how much their attitudes and behaviors can be expected to change in light of the program. While my data does not speak to measured impact or program efficacy, it is clear that without a curriculum that focuses more locally and scaffolds practical real-world experiences, student activism may be left wanting.

Importantly, though, the picture is not at all bleak. The oldest students at St. Dominic are only 15 years old. This past year they received an education that many students — regardless of the context — are not usually afforded. Throughout the interviews, students wrestled with concepts and ideas that will undoubtedly furnish meaningful schemata through which they can interpret the world as they progress. The background knowledge with which they have been equipped will serve them well as they move into high school and beyond. Thus, the present doubt is perhaps more likely to prompt further inquiry than incite a fatalistic outlook. The point is clear, though: Young persons will doubt their capacity to be change agents in the world, so how should educators address that doubt? In other words, how can educators transform doubt into activism?

### **Dialogue vs. Doubt?**

The doubt some students exhibited, ironically, was perhaps a direct consequence of the open pedagogical spaces the peace teachers created. Mr. Adrian and Mr. Lucas both deliberately worked to create an inviting classroom atmosphere where the students felt welcome to share exactly how they felt (Applefield, Huber, & Mahnaz, 2000). The challenge, however, is that the

way they felt was sometimes at odds with the teachers' educational objectives.

When the students started to question the viability of peaceful engagement, where dialogue is the preferred mode of interaction, the dialogue in the classroom actually started to shut down. One student indicated that he "stopped participating" because Mr. Lucas was not willing to entertain further dissent. Mr. Lucas himself similarly indicated that he did not know how to respond when students began doubting the viability of active nonviolence.

In the end, rather than using the classroom disagreement as an opportunity to model peaceful dialogic intercourse through which the class could work out their conflict, Mr. Lucas found the dissent somewhat threatening, as if it discounted or undermined what he was there to do. What he did not apparently consider is that the work he did to create the open dialogue in the classroom prompted exactly the kind of engagement pedagogues hope for in their students. On this account, his approach "worked," but he did not carry it through because he did not recognize its success. These events raise a number of questions about constructivist aspects of CRP. What should teachers do when the dialogue diverts from their original objectives? How can dissent be handled in way that does not stifle further dialogue?

### Conclusion

The goal of this article is not to provide any answers to the questions sketched above. Indeed, there are likely no final answers at which we can decisively arrive. What I have tried to do is simply depict the immensely complicated picture of implementation of the Peace Works program at St. Dominic in San Carlos. Instead of conclusions, therefore, I am able only to offer tensions and questions. Catholic K-12 schools provide a unique space to initiate a peace education program like Peace Works. And programs like Peace Works represent a powerful way for Catholic schools to advance core principles in Catholic social thought. I am hopeful that the tensions and questions illuminated in this paper can help culturally responsive peace educators and Catholic school educators in general think more deeply about who should conduct peace education, how it should be done, and the way the context informs those decisions.

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