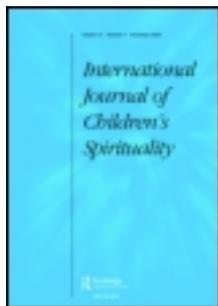


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### Peaceful schools

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## PROJECT REPORT

### Peaceful schools

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This article is based on the presentation Anna Lubelska made at the 12th International Conference on Children's Spirituality. Anna is Director of Spiritual England which is a not for profit organisation set up in 2009. Its aim is to promote the importance of spirituality and to help increase access to opportunities for spiritual development. Its remit covers spirituality in all faiths and no faith. Anna worked for many years in community development and services for children and families. This year she started the Peaceful Schools Movement which encourages schools to become more peaceful. For example, schools are enabled to engage creatively with their pupils to design quiet rooms and gardens, alongside undertaking activities such as the practice of mindfulness and training in conflict resolution, all within the context of a whole-school ethos of dynamic peacefulness.

**Keywords:** peaceful; schools; spiritual

### Introduction

The peaceful schools concept, promoted by Spiritual England and its partner organisations and networks, has evolved from our thinking about the work being done to support children's spiritual development within a range of settings. We organised two successful national conferences on 'Creating Spiritual Spaces with Children and Young People'. The first one was in London in May 2009 and the second one was in Sheffield in 2010. These conferences brought together like-minded people from schools and other settings and stimulated interest in activities that support and nurture children's spiritual development.

In order to mainstream the ideas and the work that were showcased at these conferences, we developed the peaceful schools concept as a way of reaching more schools and people. After all, 'peace', we felt, is the practical outcome of 'being spiritual'. There can be no doubt that the world needs more peace! So on 18 May 2012, we organised a national conference called 'Peaceful Primary Schools' to launch the Peaceful Schools Movement. We did this in partnership with Quaker Life and the University of Winchester. The conference was held at the Friends House, on Euston Road in London. We also set up a Peaceful Schools Strategy Group to drive the Peaceful Schools Movement forward.

The motivation behind the Peaceful Schools Movement comes from the significant concerns many of us have about the negative aspects of our society and how

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they affect the lives of our children and young people. We are concerned about the conflict and violence in our inner-cities, the continuing problem of bullying in schools (despite so many anti-bullying policies and projects) and the unacceptably high levels of domestic violence. This is all happening within the context of a ruthless, consumerist culture and economically hard times. Unsurprisingly, research shows that mental health problems amongst children and young people are increasing. This, coupled with the increasing use of electronic devices, has resulted in young people being less and less in touch with their inner spiritual beings. We feel that they are missing out on sources of nurturing and spiritual development such as the comfort and calm of spending time in quiet gardens. What is more, the unremitting onslaught of media-generated images has put tremendous pressure on children and young people to conform and try to be something they are not. They so often lack the self-confidence to be themselves.

However, the good news is that there are positive signs of the dawning of a more peaceful age. It is argued that there is a global desire for change which is encapsulated by the words of the universally acclaimed spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama:

There is a great and growing desire for change in the world. Change that ushers in a renewed commitment to ethical and spiritual values, that resolves conflicts peaceably, employing dialogue and non-violence, that upholds human rights and human dignity as well as human responsibility.

### **Developing the thinking around the peaceful schools concept**

The Peaceful Schools Strategy Group believes that now is the time to take a radical look at what kind of schools we need for the twenty-first century. The current picture is that of a fraught, over-stressed and over-politicised education system obsessed with targets and performance, with too many unhappy teachers and head teachers, and stressed-out pupils. Does it have to be like this? Could not our schools be places of peace and joy where teachers and pupils are happy to spend time cooperating creatively and learning together?

We are urging head teachers to look afresh at their schools from a new standpoint. We want them to look at how to make education holistic and inclusive of spirituality, as well as practical and person-centred. Let us work together to explore how we can create nurturing and valuing school communities in which each individual is nurtured and valued. Our belief is that schools can and should be places where everyone is happy most of the time.

The Peaceful Schools Strategy Group is developing ideas about what a peaceful school would be like. Christine Easom, one of the members of this group, is an experienced and pioneering Religious Education teacher who is trained in Philosophy for Children. Christine has been conducting conversations with secondary and primary school pupils around questions such as: ‘What is peace like?’, ‘What are peaceful places like?’, ‘Where is my peaceful place?’, ‘What does it feel like to be in my peaceful place?’, ‘Is it always quiet in a peaceful place?’, ‘What would a peaceful school be like?’, ‘What would a peaceful garden be like?’ More information about Christine’s work can be found on the ‘Creative Spaces Education’ website: [www.creativespaceseducation.co.uk](http://www.creativespaceseducation.co.uk).

By listening to what the children are saying, and by learning from pioneering schools and organisations, we have developed the concept of a peaceful school that

is peaceful but not boring, and where peace is a dynamic force. And we are clear that peaceful schools will not always be quiet! What is more, our aim is not just to create peaceful institutions, but to bring about social change. Peaceful schools will not be all about keeping the peace at any price, but about building a positive peace within the school and spreading peace into the local community.

### **Research underpinning**

In arguing the case for making schools peaceful places, we need the research community to help provide more evidence of the benefits. So far, one study stands out. A research study was set up, overseen by Professor Peter Fonagy from University College London and his collaborators in Houston, Texas, when trials of an in-school anti-bullying programme suggested that it may be worthwhile to concentrate efforts on creating a peaceful learning environment rather than entirely on tackling the behaviour of the individual bully. The trial in nine schools in the US mid-west showed that the programme: 'Creating a Peaceful School Learning Environment', was effective in reducing aggression and victimisation.

### **The four levels of a peaceful school**

The aim of the Peaceful Schools Movement is to bring about peace on four levels:

Level one: Peace at the individual level (pupil and teacher);

Level two: Peace at the relational level (pair, group or classroom);

Level three: Peace at a community level (the whole school); and

Level four: Peace at a global level (around and beyond the school).

#### ***Level one: peace at the individual level***

The foundation level for creating a peaceful school is the peacefulness of the individuals within the school which affects everyone else. The aim is to help pupils (and teachers) develop their self-worth, resilience and ability to access and develop inner peace. There are too many stories of teachers being bullied, as well as pupils being bullied, stressed and suffering mental health problems.

It is vital that schools put in measures to help pupils and teachers go from stress to calmness. Schools can address this through the experiences and activities they make available within the school. Some of this is about the day to day experience of being at school. Pupils need to feel that they are being listened to and valued, they need to have quiet times, times of silence, opportunities for contemplation and reflection, as well as being taught mindfulness or meditation and then practising this on a regular basis. Pupils also need opportunities to be involved in music as well as taking part in yoga, dance and sport. They also need to have good quality food and rest. From our sessions talking with secondary students, we know that many of them are tired and hungry during the day, which has a detrimental impact on their well-being and ability to learn.

#### ***Level two: peace at the relational level***

This level is about the interaction between individuals whether in pairs, groups or in classes. We have discovered a rich menu of tried and tested activities that schools

can pick and mix from, to suit their needs and interests. These activities can be undertaken in different places within the curriculum, not just in Personal Social, and Health Education and Religious Education lessons. Examples of peace-building activities and resources:

- *Calming*. Background music to help create calm classrooms. [www.calmer-classrooms.com](http://www.calmer-classrooms.com).
- *Relationship building*. Can be helped by bringing in organisations like ‘Working With Others’ which teaches a practical approach to building positive relationships among the whole class group, developing trust and communication skills in the classroom and also supporting teachers to plan for effective groupwork in the curriculum. [www.workingwithothers.org](http://www.workingwithothers.org).
- *Learning conflict resolution techniques and approaches*. Through an organisation called ‘Transforming Conflict’ which helps people in schools improve the way they communicate, develop a sense of community, manage discussions and disagreements, challenge inappropriate behaviours, resolve conflicts, handle disciplinary issues and respond to complaints and grievances. <http://www.transformingconflict.org/>.
- *Peace education*. Making use of the services of organisations like the Peace Foundation Network which runs workshops in schools teaching peace-making skills. [www.peacefoundationnetwork.org](http://www.peacefoundationnetwork.org).
- *Interfaith relations*. Through the Peace Mala project which is an award-winning project for peace begun in 2001, in response to the racial and religious bullying of pupils in a secondary school that came out of the 9/11 aftermath. A Peace Mala is a symbolic double rainbow bracelet that promotes friendship, respect and peace between people of all cultures, lifestyles, faiths, beliefs and none. It is a vision for the future. Wearing the Peace Mala is a promise to help create a better world. Peace Mala focuses on the Golden Rule. Its intention is to educate and remind everyone that this rule is recognised by many scholars, teachers and philosophers. It is also universal to all compassionate faiths. Simply stated, it is: ‘Treat others as you would wish them to treat you’. <http://www.peacemala.org.uk/>.

### ***Level three: peace at a community level***

The ethos, atmosphere and culture of a school are almost instantly felt when you enter a school and they influence how everyone within the school behaves. The community level of a peaceful school is about the whole school community. A proven approach to creating a peaceful whole school ethos and associated behaviours is the values-education approach pioneered by Dr. Neil Hawkes. <http://www.values-education.com/about.php>.

The physical environment of the school, both indoors and outdoors, is important to how people feel and behave at school. The organisation ‘Learning Through Landscapes’ works with schools to help them create peaceful gardens. <http://www.ltl.org.uk/>.

The Woodheys Primary School in Sale, Cheshire is a pioneering example of a peaceful school with wonderful schools grounds. <http://www.woodheys.trafford.sch.uk>.

Peaceful rooms within schools can be created to supplement the peace of the school library. Such rooms can be used for therapeutic help for children as well as

places where children and the adults working in the school can escape from the noise and bustle of the school day. An organisation that is leading the way in this is 'A Quiet Place Ltd'. <http://www.aquietplace.co.uk/>.

#### ***Level four: peace at a global level***

This level is about the school and its relationship with the community within which it is located, and also the global networks that every school is now part of, thanks to the Internet. All are interconnected. An aspect of this, that schools can consider and work on, is how children behave in their families. So, for example, by enabling children to practise mindfulness and peer massage within the schools this can have 'spill-over' benefits for the family when pupils massage members of their family. Another aspect would be inviting parents and others to come into the school, either individually or in larger numbers, so they can be involved in peaceful spaces, in activities like the creation of a peaceful garden and in special events that build relationships between parents of different backgrounds, cultures and religions.

Finally, the school can enable the pupils to go out into the community as peace workers or peace ambassadors. An example of students acting this way was when secondary school students challenged arms traders at a trade fair in London. This was a Quaker youth work initiative. Another example is the 'Freedom Writers' programme in the States which is an exciting example of student-centred peace work. <http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org>.

#### **What next?**

The Peaceful Schools Strategy group will be organising more peaceful primary schools conferences around England as well as organising a pioneering peaceful secondary schools conference with the active involvement of school students. We are developing the resources and information on the peaceful schools website [www.peacefulschools.org.uk](http://www.peacefulschools.org.uk) and there will be a termly e-newsletter. We hope to collaborate with others to publish a book on the different aspects of Peaceful Schools.

#### **Notes on contributor**

Anna Lubelska is director of Spiritual England a not for profit organisation. She is the joint editor of '*Teen spirit*' (2011) a book for teenagers by Lindsay Ullmann.