Improvising with Gur-Ze’Ev: An autoethnography of Peace Education

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Introduction

Despite the critical importance of peace, and therefore peace education, and therefore research into peace education[1], the field currently faces substantial crises of legitimacy and representation[2]. These are shared with social science more generally, but are of particular reference to our field. There are questions about what we mean by peace, about structural and cultural violence in educational institutions, and about the colonizing and hegemonic narratives that lurk beneath our research and practice[3]. There are questions about whom we speak for, and where we get our mandate[4].

The current paper is inspired by the work of Ilam Gur Ze’ev. In 2011 he called for a systematic reflection on the conceptions and aims of peace education and peace education research[5]. This was in response to philosophical challenges presented by post-structuralist philosophers. He was critical of attempts to achieve ethnocentric cohesion, urging instead a more fundamental review of what peace education might mean in these postmodern times.

This paper is written as an autoethnography. It is written in this way because I want to rise to the challenge presented by Gur-Ze’ev. I also want to do justice to the complexity of my thoughts, emotions and motivations as a peace educator and peace education researcher over 24 years[6]. It contains a section that reflects on an evaluation of a particular peace education project, but this is not its main purpose. Its main purpose is to exemplify the ways in which our professional and academic lives are messy, complicated, and beautiful. We do not often admit this. In fact, with notable exceptions we are often at great pains to obscure the paradoxes, delight, compromises and serendipity that characterise much of our work[7].

In autoethnography, the researcher is the nexus upon which the research process turns. The self-reflexive critique of the autoethnographer’s position both adds voracity to academic writing, and

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[6] A fuller version of this paper will be submitted to an education journal shortly
inspires readers to similarly reflect critically on their own life experience. Autoethnography relates the research process to both the social world and the world of the self, drawing on personal stories and narratives to point to connections between ethnography and autobiography. It does not make false distinctions between academic, professional and personal spheres of life, integrating them instead to provide an honest and direct account of the matter under investigation.

The remainder of this paper is written in an autoethnographic style, with each of the following sections containing descriptions (memories) of events that span 24 years. The paper ends with a poem that is a vignette of the paper as a whole. This poem has been published in the journal Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives.

Southern Peace Education Project, 1990

I am sitting in a cold and sunny room in a shabby office in a forgotten post-industrial Southern town, and am seized by happiness. I had a computer, a few books, some files, but little else. This was my first day in my new job, and I was alone.

Thank God I got it. I had handed in my notice in my teaching job even before I was shortlisted. I just knew that this was for me – I knew this more than almost anything else I had ever known. Someone, somewhere was paying me to be fully me. I could not quite get over my good fortune. As a Quaker working for Quakers it was my job to connect with that of God in myself, and that of God in other people.

Back then I had a destiny. I had a personal God, and he had plans for me.

I imagined all of the children and their teachers in local schools, sitting in classrooms right now, and felt a sense of connection with all of them. It was all before me.

I had come from a tough urban school, and knew how devastating and ecstatic and heart-breaking the job of teaching is. I could sense the humanity and good heart of every child, their sorrows and their joys.

There and then I vowed to make a difference.

Valley Primary School 1991,

I am sitting in a circle on a classroom floor with a group of 30 ten year olds and their teacher, Ann.

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11 Names of projects, people and schools have been changed throughout.
The children lived on a deprived estate that had tiny houses with flat roofs, post-war buildings, hastily erected, quickly forgotten. Packed together inside a triangle of land between two big roads and a railway line, there was no space to play. The children were quite a handful at times.

Very unusually there was silence. We had stacked the tables, pushed back the chairs. In the middle of the circle there was a talking object.

The previous week Ann and I were in despair. She was very experienced, but neither of us knew what to do. We had been working on ‘cussing’ name-calling, disrespecting people’s family. It was everywhere.

We had shared with them the language of compliments. We had set them a challenge of turning negative comments into positive ones; we had talked about the effects of name-calling. None of it had worked.

“Maybe, we should not be sensitising them to verbal violence? Maybe it is like a coping mechanism for them to dish it out to each other? We don’t know what it is like to be the least powerful in a disenfranchised community”.

And yet

And yet, maybe it was worth one more go? Surely they deserve a place, any place - this place - where they can be safe. We had their writing, heartfelt descriptions of what it feels like to be called a name. Perhaps we could do something with that.

And so, into the silence, we start to read.

“When someone calls me a name I feel like my heart is breaking into a thousand pieces”.

“When someone calls me a name, I cry. Not in front of anyone. I cry when I get home. My mum has to force me to come back to school. Boys are not supposed to cry”

Some more, then silence again.

Big silence, bigger than Quakers, bigger than drawn breath.

Just as I am turning back to despair, Jack reaches for the talking object.

Jack is quite a naughty boy. Jack calls people lots of names. When we were finding things that we like about each other, the most that anyone could think to say about Jack was, “he doesn’t hit us as much as he used to.”

Jack is about to speak.
“I am sorry,” said Jack.

Silence

And then

Then the apologies from the class start to fall like raindrops, slow at first and then faster. Jack apologises 12 times, sometimes for the same thing, hands clasped tight on the talking object.

Then come the questions, requests for support, the promises…..

I copy them down, capturing as much as I can, struggling for composure.

Finally I dare to catch Ann’s eye. The mask is temporarily lifted. She has been crying.

She told me later that this was a transformational moment. The classroom was forever changed. It was never perfect, but the children obtained a kind of peace.

In Valley School, one little boy on his first day of school had started running. Not running away, just running. Running because he had not known that he could. No one had ever given him the space.

In Valley School, I too grew wings.

**Chinese Restaurant, Valentines Day 2001**

I am sitting at a table in a Chinese restaurant with my then-husband, Jim.

I put my mobile phone back in my bag, and beam, “I got the job!”

For the first time since I had applied for the job, Jim flinches. He had put in a big effort to be supportive, but was not expecting this.

“I will miss you,” he says.

This took me aback. “What do you mean?” I say. “I am not going anywhere.

No more hulking my carcass around hundreds of schools, delivering the same teacher training day. No more working in an office without central heating. No more getting lost on the ring road. No more explaining to elderly Quakers that I am actually entitled to maternity leave. No more going back to schools after several months to find that what you did has been undone. No more servicing the photocopier. No more disrespect from kids who take it out on you if you are kind to them.”
“No more brilliant evaluations? No more cards and gifts of appreciation? No more heart-stopping moments in circles? No more shared laughter and shared tears? No more insights that people seem to need so desperately?” Jim was challenging me.

“But I became almost a caricature of myself. I was this larger-than-life being who somehow embodied all that is peace, understanding and love. It was exhausting, and, more importantly, it was not enough.

I need a pension. I need sick leave. I need to know why it is that schools are so resistant to the kinds of changes that everyone seems to want. As a university lecturer I will have space to reflect and do research. I have been a peace worker now for 10 years [not always for the Quakers]. It is time for someone else to do it. It takes it out of you. I am exhausted!”

Jim takes another prawn cracker.

“I will miss you,” he repeats.

This time I cannot hold his gaze.

University of Cambridge, 2012

I am sitting at my desk in Cambridge. In front of me is a call to evaluate the current Southern Peace Education Project Peacemakers programme.

I am so busy, I have so many students; do I have time for this?

The girl in the shabby office smiles at me across the years.

“Forget it, I say to her. These days I don’t have a destiny”.

The programme contains a lot of promise, though. It involves an experienced peace worker going into three schools over a period of two years to help them develop a whole school approach. This is something that was lacking in my day. Would it be possible to bring about sustainable and meaningful change in schools if you had the luxury of longer-term involvement?

The aims of the project are to:

- Create a safer school with better conditions for learning.
- To develop skills for life in the area of conflict resolution.
- Encourage every member of the school community to be better equipped to make, maintain and repair relationships.
- Explore ways to help schools build and maintain peaceful relationships at all levels.
Brave and important work indeed.

I pick up the phone. Maybe I could get some of my students and colleagues to do it with me.

**Oxford, November 2013**

I am sitting at a table in a café in Oxford (a half-way place) with the coordinator and the chair of SPEP. We are confused. The interim report somehow was not as expected. We are half-way in many senses of the word.

The interim report summarised findings from the first (of two) phases of SPEP’s peacemakers WSA (whole school approach) programme evaluation. There were four state primary schools (4-11 age group), all serving mixed urban populations. The interim report was based on the first set of data collection, which provided a baseline for the two schools that had only just begun, and a mid-point snapshot of the two schools that were already underway. Schools could not be compared with themselves at this stage (pre-post test design) but we thought it might be possible to look at differences across the schools, given that some had been involved in the WSA peacemakers programme for longer than others.

Some of the data were quantitative, and involved self-report questionnaires\(^{12}\), and some of it were qualitative and involved visits to the schools and interviews with key people. The expectation was that there should also be an improvement in the quality of relationships in the schools as a result of the WSA programme\(^{13}\).

In the café in Oxford we poured over the data. We were particularly interested in the data from the two schools that had been engaged with the programme for a while. We saw, however, that the differences in outcomes between the four schools were not as marked as we would have expected, given the intensive intervention that was already underway in two of the schools. In fact, there was very little difference. The project had also not worked out as planned in one of the schools.

I was starting to realise that my experience of lack of change in schools during my time with SPEP was being replicated with this more intense programme. Over our third cup of coffee we discussed why this might be.

We began to think that we need new ways of understanding change in schools - certainly in the field of peace education, but probably more generally too. It was true that many meaningful moments had occurred as part of the peacemakers project, and that people had used what they had learnt to

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\(^{12}\) We used the Life in Schools Checklist with pupils Arora, T. (1994): Measuring Bullying with the “Life in School” Checklist, *Pastoral Care in Education: An International Journal of Personal, Social and Emotional Development*, 12:3, 11-15. This presents 40 statements about 20 positive experiences (e.g. ‘someone lent me something’), and 20 negative (e.g. ‘someone teased me because I am different’) that pupils tick if they had had the experience in the previous week. The adult questionnaire included statements such as, ‘my voice is listened to in school,’ and respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed against a five-point scale.

\(^{13}\) There was a team of four of us involved in the evaluation. Dr Noriko Sakade, Dr Carolynne Mason, Terence Bevington and myself.
improve their practice. The outcomes would have been different without the project workers’ involvement. But it was also true that the ‘whole school approach’ is a flawed concept.

When I got home, I could not rest until I had created a new way of thinking about peace education and change in schools. I wanted to introduce the idea of eco-systemic sustainability, which I had been reading about at the time\textsuperscript{14}. This is what I came up with:

**Table Comparing the Whole School Approach with the Sustainable Approach to Peace Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whole School Approach</th>
<th>Sustainable Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions</strong></td>
<td>The school is a machine whose parts can be re-engineered to make a better whole.</td>
<td>The school is an eco-system with complex internal and external connections and dynamics. It evolves over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metaphors</strong></td>
<td>Taken from physics and engineering.</td>
<td>Taken from biology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Terms</strong></td>
<td>Drivers, levers, leadership, impact, improvement, saturation, benchmarking, integration</td>
<td>Eco-systems, adaptation, fitness for purpose, evolution, connectedness, influence, support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>View of Time</strong></td>
<td>Change occurs during the intervention, after which the school is permanently improved in predictable ways.</td>
<td>Schools are continually changing, before and after the intervention. Change is unpredictable, complex and reversible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>View of Place</strong></td>
<td>The school (and perhaps its immediate community) is a unit that can be improved in isolation of other factors. There is a need to adapt the intervention to take account of local culture, but the intervention should remain largely the same.</td>
<td>The school has porous walls and is influenced by micro and macro-systems. These can be at local, national or global levels, and influence each other as well as the individuals within the school community in complex ways. The intervention evolves along with the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Methods</strong></td>
<td>Presentations, statistics, training, workshops, cascading, leadership, audit, accountability, working group</td>
<td>Circles, encounter, theatre, art, facilitation, groups, collaboration, criticality, visioning, sharing, support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intended Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>The school is improved in ways that reflect the aims and purposes of the intervention. This school can be ‘badged’ as a school that is an exemplar of the intervention.</td>
<td>The intervention takes on a unique characteristic in each school. Outcomes vary according to the nature of the intervention and other factors that also influence change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At one point in the meeting, the coordinator of SPEP had asked me whether I thought they were doing anything of value. I was surprised by the question, and it took me a moment to understand what was being asked. A feeling that the value of the programme was beyond question suffused me.

I was reminded of the Quaker adage: “Walk cheerfully over the world, responding to that of God in everyone\textsuperscript{15}.” It seemed to me as if this was precisely what the project worker had been doing. She

was not a coloniser of hearts and minds, but a humble traveller, drawing on the very best of herself to respond to the very best of the teachers and children as fellow travellers. She had created opportunities for golden moments. Moments are not as grand as permanent change, but they are perfect, divine. When they begin to proliferate, they can light up the sky like stars. This was more than enough for me, and I hoped that it was for them.

**University of Cambridge, May 2014**

I am sitting at my desk in Cambridge, again pouring over the SPEP data.

I have recently been inspired by the work of Ilam Gur-Ze’ev. Unusually, given the amount of reading that I do for my job, it took me days to read his chapter, ‘Improvisation, Violence and Peace Education’ in Trifonas and Wright’s book *Critical Issues in Peace and Education* (2011). There was something in it that resonated, something that spoke to me, even though there were bits that I didn’t fully understand.

For Ilam Gur-Ze’ev, peace can become the opposite of itself when people strive towards it. He draws on the French philosopher Levinas, who argues that there is already violence in ‘Greek wisdom’ about peace. Gur-Ze’ev is damning of the totalising concept of peace, which brings about, “the effective de-humanisation of humans and their formation into collectives” (2011: 111). It produces security, ideals, values, horizons and homogeneity. It also creates the Other as an object of education, destruction, redemption and emancipation.

Gur-Ze’ev (2011: 113) calls for a different kind of peace, which is supremely creative:

> The absence of tranquillity and of homogeneity is here of special importance and it gives honour to space, voice, sound, movement, visibility, smell and contact. The absence of ‘peace’ and the overcoming of the illusion of peace are the birth moment of an alternative togetherness as offered by responsible improvisation with actualised co-poieisis. "The heart of improvisation is this movement within co-poieisis….. as a togetherness offered by Love of Life" (Gur-Ze’ev, 2011: 114).

I decide to write a poem encapsulating everything that I have learnt about peace education.

The peace educator in this poem is me, the SPEP worker, my students, and others. It expresses in a few words, and lots of blank space, what I could not express in many many more words, certainly not in an evaluation report or an academic paper. It carries the spirit of the SPEP programme, and it speaks of my journey over the past 24 years, since the time that I first sat in the shabby Quaker office.

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15 Quaker advices and Queries [http://www.quaker.org.uk/advices](http://www.quaker.org.uk/advices)
16 John Paul Sartre talks about Golden Moments in his book La Nausee, published in 1938 by Gallimard
18 Gur-Ze’ev was also inspired by the Jewish philosophers Franz Rozenzweig and Martin Buber
I imagine standing in a circle with all of the people who are in this written piece, including different versions of myself over time. It seems to me that I have shed so much over the past 24 years, just as the poem has shed all but the most vital words over the past few weeks. There is something vibrant that has taken the place of doubt and darkness. It can best be described as an aspiration towards peace, an inclination, a yearning. It is always there; always ready to be completed by a golden moment. It does not matter how brief these moments are amongst all the other moments that make up a life. Despite all of the messiness, the direct and indirect violence that pervades our shared spaces and schools, I will never be without this aspiration.

Next to me in the circle is the girl in the shabby office. I squeeze her hand, “See, I tell her, I told you it would be OK”.

Peace Educator

I come to you Not
As teacher.
Not
To appraise, allocate, grade.
Unless invited,
And only then
In the spirit of the game.

I come to you
As gardener.
Digging and clearing,
We might be surprised
By beauty, delighted
By fruitfulness.
Seeds and fruits

Do Not belong
To me.
The garden is Not
Of me.
I am custodian
For a while.

Tending, weeding,
Balancing
Nature’s fall.
Seeds may spread,
But not of my making.
With you, I sew.
In fellowship.

I come to you Not
As activist.
I am free to enter
Or leave
Your world, as I desire.
So I cannot reach
understanding.

Your suffering
Is different
To my suffering.
I am Not here
To give you voice.
I do Not require
Your emancipation.

You did Not create
The conditions of your wanting.
Our daily acts
Of selfishness,
Pride and greed
Bind us all
In a web.

I come to you as songster,
Quietly singing
Truth
To power.

Songs fall into my lap
Like giggling babies.
To be cherished,
Adored, and dressed.
Songs fill me,
Sing me.
Gifts from ancestors,
Improvised with you.

I come to you Not
As hero.
My neglect and ignorance
Are Not heroic.
The day may never come
When I am tested
To give my life
For another.
Until then,
I do not know
If I am a hero.

I come to you Not
As colonizer
With dreams
To sell.
I do Not bring
Suffocating,
Homogenizing
Packaged
Peace.

I come to you
As visitor-host,
Hearing
Your stories,
Re-telling them,
Adding my own.
With you
I search.

My-your space
Gives warmth,
Hospitality,
Nourishment.
In brotherhood,
I walk beside you.
In sisterhood,
We connect.

I come to you as migrant.
Pilgrim,
Witness,
Weaver,
Dreamer.
Educator for peace.