

Creating Peace Culture in the Classroom

BY CHRISTIANA CASTILLO

For the past two and half years I have had the privilege to work at Dickinson East Elementary (DE) in Hamtramck, MI. Hamtramck has a vivid community, and lives up to its welcoming phrase on its identifying sign when you enter the town

"Hamtramck: The World In Two Square Miles." At DE I have

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been a part of their after-school program. Here, I have seen our students love on each other and fight with each other. This year, thanks to the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Wayne State University, we were able to obtain a grant to create a peace education program called "Peace Culture" for our after-school students.

My coworkers and I were tasked with a beautiful challenge. How do you teach youth, ranging from kindergarteners to sixth graders, about peace? It's easier than you would think. Youth truly understand peace, and want to see it in action. From ending bullying, wanting their friends to feel safe, and wanting their town to be clean, they want action in the community.

So how do we do it? Why do it?

The Peace Culture team created "Peace Passports" for the students involved in the program. This was an easy way for all our students to visually track their progress in learning about peace. We covered topics varying from peace with self, peace with others, and peace within the community. We talked about safe spaces, coping skills, empathy, conflict resolution styles, respecting diversity, and service projects.

Step One: Peace with Self

Peace begins with our self. The same is true for youth. For our first section of our Peace Passports, students discovered what a safe space is. They then drew a safe space and recorded

how this space, either physical or created in their own mind, made them feel. We wrote love letters to ourselves, highlighting what we are proud of ourselves for, and what we love about ourselves. Students received lists of over one hundred coping skills, and brainstormed their own.

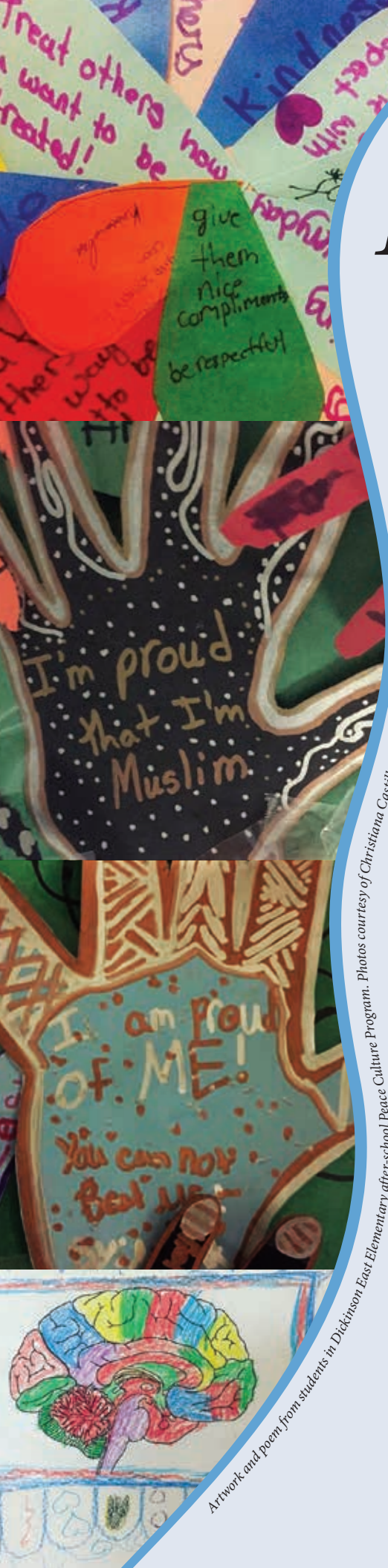
Participants watched the movie *Inside Out* to get a better grasp of emotions and the brain. They then had the opportunity to see and hold two and a half cadaver brains. We made brain mandalas, and learned how both science and the arts can help us reach inner peace.

Step Two: Peace with Others

If we can achieve peace with ourselves, we can extend it to those around us. Students engaged in "Check In Freeze Tag" every session as we explored Peace with Others. Here is how you play Check In Freeze Tag: you tell participants to play freeze tag, but to unfreeze someone you must ask them a simple three worded question: "Are you okay?" From there, the frozen person can say "yes" or "no." If the answer is no, the person unfreezing must do something to make them feel better. It starts with asking, "What can I do to make you feel better?" The frozen person can have the unfreezer dance, bake an imaginary cake, sing a song, the options are endless!

During our exploration of Peace with Others, students learned about conflict resolution styles and practiced role-playing to get a hang of using these skills in action. We talked about violence and ways to absolve violence, teamwork, what it means, how we can utilize teamwork in our daily lives, and what makes a good team.

To tackle violence and how to absolve violence, students created a "tree of violence," where we



Photos courtesy of Christiana Castillo.
Artwork and poem from students in Dickinson East Elementary after-school Peace Culture Program.

wrote down examples of violence, and covered them with “peace flowers” or ways that we can spread kindness in the world, and resist violence.

We talked about empathy, and read multiple children’s books such as *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes. We had our students think about the protagonists and what they were going through, and we made sure that students didn’t focus on the character’s problems and try to solve them, but rather just focusing on feeling for them.

We had students think about diversity on more than one occasion during this section of Peace Culture. Students created cut-outs of their hands and thought about their race, religion, age, gender, and what makes them unique. We then had students cut out another friend’s hand and reflected on them and their diversity and uniqueness.

On a separate occasion students explored diversity and culture through food. Even if we come from different places throughout the world, have different physical attributes, and different beliefs, we all have to eat. We had the unique opportunity of using food as a way to show how much people have in common despite our differences. Food and culture are undeniably linked. We had our students think of what their favorite food linked to their culture and ethnicity is. We then

did research, finding out what ingredients are used in what dish, and then we saw what ingredients are used across cultures. We then utilized our information and planted tomatoes, parsley, garlic, and lettuce in our garden—all ingredients used by the majority of our students when they recorded their favorite foods.

Our next steps are harvesting our produce so we can have a potluck celebrating the different dishes and cultures that make up our program. Cultural gardens not only give you produce, but are also an opportunity for students to get dirty and engaged while learning about others. We asked our students if they think there should be more cultural gardens in Hamtramck and Detroit. They say “absolutely,” and we hope to see you growing in the future.

Step Three: Peace with the Community

We wanted our youth to have the opportunity to share peace with others in the community. We talked to our participants about the communities they are a part of, predominantly Hamtramck and Detroit. We talked about what we love about our communities, what we would like to see changed, and how we could change these things. Participants drew their communities, and reflected on how their communities play a role in their own lives. We discussed the

work of Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs, and meditated on the following quote:

“Love isn’t just something you feel. It’s something you do every day when you go out and pick up the papers and bottles scattered the night before on the corner, when you stop and talk to a neighbor, when you argue passionately for what you believe with whoever will listen, when you call a friend to see how they’re doing, when you write a letter to the newspaper, when you give a speech and give em’ hell, when you never stop believing that we can all be more than we are. In other words, Love isn’t about what we did yesterday; it’s about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after.” —Grace Lee Boggs

One area students were drawn to was homelessness. Students created care packages with backpacks, hand-drawn pictures and notes, food, and hygiene products and gave them to Genesis House in Detroit. When Peace Culture came to an end, students created a poem to reflect on what they had learned through programming.

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A Recipe For Peace

by: The HOPE Community

*Throw flowers in the air, like you just don't care.
Sprinkle some kindness, 'cause it's just fair.
Toss in some love. Add lots of friendship.
Make it sizzle. Make sure to spice it up with
some color.
Slice some diversity, put it on a cutting board.
Drop in three cups of empathy. Make it super sweet.
Add 1/2 cups of working together. Put it in a
safe space pan.
Bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes.
Let cool. Serve with love to your community
and the world.*

