

# Teaching Peace One Student at a Time

by Katherine Morgan

When I asked my students, “Do you think there is a connection between peace in your life and world peace?” answers ran the gamut. On one end were answers like: “No, I don’t think a single individual has much power with peace. Evilness (sic) and destruction and hatred can be started by one person, but peace doesn’t seem to work that easy.” At the other end of the spectrum, a student wrote: “I would have to say yes, because I think that everyone’s self peace adds up to world peace. If we want to achieve world peace then we have to do it one person at a time. World peace isn’t just most people, it means everyone. So I think everyone contributes to it.” Many students were skeptical that peace in their own lives had any effect on world peace. We probably could have spent the rest of our semester-long peace course discussing the range of views expressed on this subject alone.

To further explore the concept that peace begins in our own lives, we read *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh, from which we learned many ways to be peaceful and spread peace to others. My favorite quote from that book is one I used frequently with students as we moved through the first few weeks of class: “Let peace begin with me. Let me begin with peace.”

This year, we had a graphic illustration of how that works in real life. A student brought in an article about the UN International Day of Peace, which was a few days away on September 21st. The class wanted to mark that day in some way. We made a huge banner proclaiming the day and hung it in the cafeteria. We arranged for the school community to observe a moment of silence at noon to think about peace. The moment we hung the banner in the cafeteria, other classes and individual students began to get involved. Social studies classes made paper patchwork quilts with a peace theme which were hung in the hallway; another teacher hung a peace flag in the hall and wrote up a handout for

students focusing on conflict resolution. Other students made banners in French and Spanish proclaiming the International Day of Peace, hung them in the hallway, and invited students to write their thoughts about peace on the banners. Two students asked if they could pass out white ribbons for armbands on September 21st and nearly every student and faculty wore their white ribbons that day. For my students, the concept that “peace begins with me” took on new meaning.

At the end of the class, one student wrote: “I used to think that the only way peace would be possible would be to rally behind our government to change. Now, I have realized that while this is important, it is not the only thing that we should be doing. We all need to step out from behind our government and make individual efforts to make connections with other individuals from the global community. Once we take the creation of peace back into our own hands, peace will finally become a possibility.” I like to think that each of my students leaves the class with the idea that they can take the creation of peace back into their own hands, and that gradually, one student at a time, we can create a more peaceful world.

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## Discussion Questions

1. To what extent can your classroom be a model of peaceful interaction? What should it look like?
2. Do you think there is a connection between peace in your life and world peace?
3. Why do some people respond to violence with love and compassion while others respond with violence?