

Group brings peace studies to schools

Activities demonstrate connection between personal and global problems

When a classroom is touched by violence, either between students or on a global scale, most schools have no constructive way to ensure students learn important lessons about peace.

This fall, a non-profit education group is hoping to change that, both by offering schools an alternative to heavy-handed disciplinary measures and providing a way to help kids make sense of global violence.

"You can't pick up the paper or turn on the TV without seeing how bad things are in the world," said Heather MacTaggart, executive director of the non-profit group Classroom Connections.

"If we want peace in our world, we have to educate for it, it's not just going to happen."

The Cultivating Peace educational materials, developed by Classroom Connections, will be distributed to more than 75 per cent of school boards across Canada in September. The activities and lesson plans fit with curricula already in place, but give another perspective, MacTaggart said.

"(Schools) spend a lot of time teaching kids about war and about history

through the various wars that have taken place," MacTaggart said.

"We don't spend very much time talking about peace: why don't we have it yet and why can't we get it?"

The Cultivating Peace project aims to change that.

While peace studies and conflict resolution are respected fields of study in universities, high schools haven't caught on yet.

But part of the resistance to bringing peace education into classrooms is that it can't be easily categorized, said high-school teacher John Daicopoulos.

"I suspect one of the problems is that it's an interdisciplinary subject," said Daicopoulos, who teaches in Guelph, and is pursuing a degree in peace and conflict studies at the University of Waterloo.

"I don't think people are really confident as to where they'd put it."

The other roadblock to teaching peace in high schools is that, unlike traditional subjects such as math and history and English, there's no formal way for instructors to qualify for the subject, Daicopoulos said.

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HEATHER MacTAGGART
CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

gree is probably only a few decades old and there's definitely nothing in teacher's college," he said.

Toby Kuplens-Ewart, a 17-year-old Toronto high-school student, said he thinks his classmates would be receptive to learning more about peace in school.

"I think all the basic courses we're taught are important but I also think a peace course is important because peace is a blending of other ideas," said Kuplens-Ewart, who said he aspires to be a human-rights lawyer.

Unanswered questions swirled around his multicultural school following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks last year and the subsequent military action in Afghanistan.

A well-organized class about peace and conflict would have been a good starting place for discussion, Kuplens-Ewart said.

While peace studies might seem like a subject too vague to teach, Daicopoulos stressed that it can be broken down into simple steps.

"There is some philosophical bent to it but it really does come down to talking, asking and meeting," he said.

"It's a mechanical tool."

The Cultivating Peace classroom activities are meant to demonstrate the connection between interpersonal relationships and global relationships among countries and civilizations.

"We're showing there's a progression here from teasing and bullying . . . to prejudice," said Barrie Bennett, who works at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and helped design the program.

"It's systemic and if you buy into this system anywhere along the line, you're helping perpetuate the system."

The real-life case studies in the program start by helping students solve problems close to home.

"They'll learn how to say, 'You hurt my feelings,' and walk away, rather than sticking a knife in someone's stomach," Bennett said.

"If you and I can't sit down and discuss an issue we have, what hope is there for Israel and Palestine?"

Until the program is introduced, elementary and high-school students can take an online quiz at www.cultivatingpeace.ca to determine whether their peace-making skills are sharp and, if not, how to hone them.