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Teacher and administrator perceptions of peace education in Milwaukee (US) Catholic schools

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ABSTRACT

Often intersecting with systemic inequity and injustice, young people's exposure to community violence has been linked to a myriad of developmental impacts. A growing literature demonstrates the potential of peace education programs to promote resilient and prosocial outcomes for these individuals. Still, more work can be done to understand underlying mechanisms and implementation challenges to support these young people and build cultures of peace through education more effectively. In this article, we detail the theoretical foundation, context, and socioecological model for Marquette University Center for Peacemaking's Peace Works program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States, before presenting the results of focus groups with teachers and administrators where it was implemented. The conversations touched on how teachers and administrators perceive of the implementation of this peace education program, what impacts they observe in students and school culture, and obstacles to promoting peace in students, schools, and broader communities through this approach. Overall, we aim to contribute to understandings of peace education in violent urban contexts by offering a model built on a theoretical focus on nonviolent communication and behavior and a socioecological model for transformative change, as well as lessons from the program's implementation.

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Introduction

Young people's exposure to community violence is a risk factor for psychosocial challenges, mental health concerns, and engagement in violent actions (see Buka et al. 2001; Bureau of Justice Statistics 2010; Jain et al. 2012). Compounding this exposure is the co-occurrence of other factors in urban areas with high rates of violence, such as disinvestment in communities, diminished economic opportunities, and high level of transiency (Center for Disease Controls and Prevention

[CDC] n.d.; Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, and Behrens 2005). In some such contexts, peace education has been implemented in schools with a goal of building a culture of peace (see Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011; Diazgranados et al. 2014; Harris 1996; Hettler and Johnston 2009), defined as “values, attitudes, and behaviors that reject violence, endeavor to prevent conflicts by addressing root causes, and aim at solving problems through dialogue and negotiation” (de Rivera 2010, 188). These initiatives have demonstrated improvements in student-centered outcomes across social, emotional, and academic domains. Still, to extend this work and address the challenges of transformative change in more of these contexts, peace education programs require study of and reflection on underlying mechanisms, influencing factors, and processes of implementation (Hantzopoulos 2011; Harris 2002; Harris and Morrison 2013; Nevo and Brem 2002; Cremin 2016; Baesler and Lauricella 2014).

We aim to contribute to the growing body of theoretical development and research about how peace education can effectively contribute to transformative change in urban schools situated within areas with high rates of community violence. Transformative change refers to the establishment of a culture of peace in such challenging contexts where violence is tied to deep historical, structural, and cultural factors (Bajaj 2008; de Rivera 2010). This represents the first step in a broader development and investigation of a peace education program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States (US): Peace Works (PW). The program entails a curriculum that utilizes social-emotional learning strategies to provide middle and high school students with the skills and capabilities to resolve conflicts, demonstrate compassion, and promote peace in their communities. PW’s lessons focus on conflict resolution and mediation through nonviolent communication. While no systematic evaluation of PW’s impact has been undertaken, the program has demonstrated decreases in school suspensions and increases in PW students’ self-reports of being able to handle interpersonal conflict and manage emotions.

In this article, we first detail the theoretical foundation, context, and socio-ecological model for PW before presenting the results of an investigation of teacher and administrator perceptions of the program’s impact in four schools. Focus groups were conducted in each school (with a total of 14 participants), and transcripts were analyzed for patterns across the schools (Braun and Clarke 2006; Tracy 2013). The goal of the investigation was to better understand how teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of this peace education program, what impacts they observe in students and school culture (if any), and the obstacles to promoting peace in students, schools, and broader communities through this approach. Overall, we aim to contribute to understandings of peace education in urban contexts by presenting the theoretical focus on nonviolent communication and behavior, PW’s socioecological model for transformative change, and lessons from the program’s implementation.

Nonviolent behavior and communication

The PW program is predicated on a model linking nonviolent communication and nonviolent behavior. This model is rooted in the work of peace studies and peace education that situates such behavior and communication as integral to broader transformative change. Nonviolent behavior can be understood as a resistance to bear violence (of all kinds) upon another person (May 2015). This behavior requires a personal guiding framework steeped in recognition of others' humanity and dignity (May 2015). Nonviolent behavior can be difficult to foster and equally difficult to maintain. Sustaining a nonviolent personal orientation and activity requires self-control that comes from rigorous practice and is closely tied into social norms, environments, and values (Willis 2017). This challenge, therefore, may be especially great in working with youth who have been exposed to violence as an accepted or socially-valued method for resolving issues (Gordon et al. 2004; Maimon and Browning 2010).

Supporting a shift from this socialization to a new orientation toward others involves providing tools to use in social contexts, including nonviolent communication. Nonviolent communication can be defined as an orientation 'not to judge what others do or say but to pay special attention to what we feel and to express our needs' (Džaferović 2018, 58). More specifically, this entails fostering interactions that emphasize mutual pleasure, empathy and respect for the diversity of all participants in the communication.

Nonviolent communication focuses on aspects of spoken language and, through implementation in social interactions, can underlie nonviolent behavior. In interpersonal and group contexts, communication can break down and conflict set in for a myriad of reasons. In these cases, nonviolent communication centers responses to interpersonal tension in constructive conflict resolution. It presents a baseline that can promote an acceptable, positively sustainable, and noncompetitive compromise (Harris 2004). Nonviolent communication also favors a de-escalation of the conflict by focusing the interaction on establishing positive relations and relationships between conflicted parties, as they communicate their needs and listen to others' (Džaferović 2018). Importantly, nonviolent communication is teachable and can thus be incorporated into peace education (Harris and Morrison 2013).

Peace education and transformative change

Peace education can serve both peacemaking and peacebuilding functions, providing alternatives to violence and fostering cultures of sustainable peace. A primary goal of peace education is to promote positive peace through teaching skills and attitudes related to cooperation, integration, and social justice (Anderson 2004; Harris and Morrison 2013). A transformative model of peace education begins within individuals, who then are oriented toward

thinking and acting in ways that reject violence in all its forms (Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011; de Rivera 2010). This framework for peace education understands skills like managing emotions, resolving conflicts, and interrupting biases as fundamental and teachable (Lantieri and Patti 1996). Teaching nonviolent communication contributes to achieving this objective by providing a foundational skillset to promote and enact nonviolent behavior (Gomes De Matos 2011).

Peace education offers an effective component of a multipronged, cross-system effort to build peace in urban contexts with high rates of community violence. There are often multiple challenges in these settings, including high rates of poverty, structural inequality, racism, low resources, high rates of youth involvement in violent activities, and negative impacts on mental health from these other factors (Bickmore 2011; Gassin, Enright, and Knutson 2005). Peace education alone – and particularly a focus on nonviolent communication – may not be enough for peacemaking that addresses the multifaceted nature of violence.

Still, violence reduction and prevention requires building strong communities in which the stakeholders take an active role and increase their capacity to act nonviolently (Sabol, Coulton, and Korbin 2004). Furthermore, efforts to build peace within spaces in violent contexts also require nonviolent tools and strategies. Peace education that is effective ‘can be a significant antidote to racism, violence and social injustices in schools’ (Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011, 262), but should be comprehensive, theory driven, and focus on building positive relationships among students and staff (Nation et al. 2003). Within schools, such an approach involves helping students develop the tools and strategies to actively engage in nonviolence. Through peace education, both students and staff may become equipped and encouraged to identify concerns, understand the impact of violence on school communities, craft solutions and actions to address violence, implement their plans, and achieve their objectives. Students become inspired to collaborate with peers and actively work to reduce and prevent violence (Bajaj 2008). In summary, as students employ nonviolent communication and behavior, the practices of peacemaking can transform their schools and contribute to stronger, healthier communities as part of broader efforts addressing political, social, and economic systems that feed into violence.

Educators’ role in promoting peace

Schools reflect societal norms, values, and trends; influence developmental trajectories; and serve as micro-polities where young people learn to be citizens and members of their communities (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011; Willis 2017). Schools are prime spaces where young people learn about violence, conflict, related attitudes and behaviors, as well as their own identity in relation

to others within social systems. Teachers and administrators are not simply primary socializing agents for young people, but can also be key actors in transforming the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and relationships of students to promote a culture of peace (Brantmeier 2011; Diazgranados et al. 2014; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2011)

At the same time, there are many reasons why educators may struggle to implement or participate in peace education programming. These challenges include the many pressures on teachers' time, expectations and norms about their roles as teachers, and a lack of information or training about the programming and theory (Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011; Harber and Sakade 2009; Harris 1996). Still, educators are in a unique position to not only teach skills that can promote peace, but also understand the obstacles to implementing peace education. They can offer important insights into implementation, the impact of programming on students and school climate, and if transformative change is occurring (Sabol, Coulton, and Korbin 2004; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2011). Overall, teachers and administrators play a pivotal role in the success of peace education programs, and their perspectives can help promote the efficacy of this work. We have a dual purpose in investigating teacher and administrators' perceptions: first, to better understand the challenges of enacting transformative change through peace education in schools; and second, to study the impact of a specific program in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee: context and local history of peace education

A critical and transformative approach to peace education is rooted in the local realities, contexts, and people (Bajaj 2008). The current study is based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, US, where there is a history of activism and implementation of peace education, as well as high levels of violence in certain communities. Milwaukee, with nearly 600,000 residents, is one of the most segregated cities in the US. According to the US Census Bureau's 2021 statistics, 38.7% of residents identify as Black, 19.0% identify as Hispanic or Latino, and about a quarter have household incomes below the poverty line. While crime rates have been decreasing in the city since 2005, some measures of violence (e.g. homicides, assaults) have been on the rise in the last few years and increasingly are centered in communities of color in the city (Luthern 2019; Schumacher 2021).

As far back as 1990, a peace studies curriculum, distinct from PW, was offered in the Milwaukee Public Schools. This initiative emerged from the work of the Coalition for Nonviolence, a group of community members, parents, educators, and peace organizations (Harris 1996; Jeffries and Harris 1998). The movement had two primary goals: the first to help young people manage and respond to their lived experiences of violence and the second to teach skills to manage conflict (Harris 1996). Use of the curriculum was associated with fewer

suspensions and violent incidents in schools, and these trends were supported by anecdotal evidence. Still, some teachers resisted applying it and others who led the efforts in their schools felt exhausted (Harris 1998; Jeffries and Harris 1998).

Since the time of this first program, there have been other efforts to bring restorative practices to some Milwaukee schools, implement peer mediation and conflict resolution curriculum, and teach about forgiveness (Gassin, Enright, and Knutson 2005). Broader issues of community violence impacting youth have remained. Low-income communities in Milwaukee experience high rates of poverty, academic failure, and violence. The city is one of the most segregated in the country, with historical and structural forces contributing to high rates of violence and crime experienced disproportionately in low resource communities (Luthern 2019). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that young people in these areas of the city are often witnesses, victims, and witnesses of violence. It is important to note that many are also involved in organizations and efforts to combat violence, inequality, and other concerns in their local contexts across the city (e.g. DeLong 2015; Flores 2018; Shelbourne 2019).

The PW program and the socioecological model of change

In these areas of Milwaukee and contexts with similar levels of community violence, it is difficult to create systemic change to transform attitudes and behaviors without intentional collaboration among youth, schools, families and communities (Danesh 2008; Diazgranados et al. 2014; Harris and Morrison 2013). Founded in 1994, the PW program was designed to help promote such change. The neighborhoods where PW is offered not only experience elevated rates of community violence, but they are also densely populated with many residents subject to unpredictable rent increases and irresponsible landlords who fail to provide clean and safe housing (Desmond 2016). These factors, in combination and interwoven with peer and school dynamics, contribute to greater risk for exposure and involvement in violence for young people in these communities (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2010; Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, and Behrens 2005).

Given these contexts and its goal to promote transformative change, PW is based on an adaptation of the CDC's socio-ecological model for violence prevention (CDC n.d.; Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, and Behrens 2005). Overall, violence prevention requires work and thinking at individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels, as well as the inherent interconnections across them. Individual factors include personal histories and biology within the CDC model, and were expanded to skills, orientations, and behaviors for the PW model. The interpersonal level refers to interactions with peers, teachers, and family. These relationships serve as a basis for the final level, which encompasses community factors. For the PW model, this level includes the school climate and culture as relating to experiences and engagement in violence or

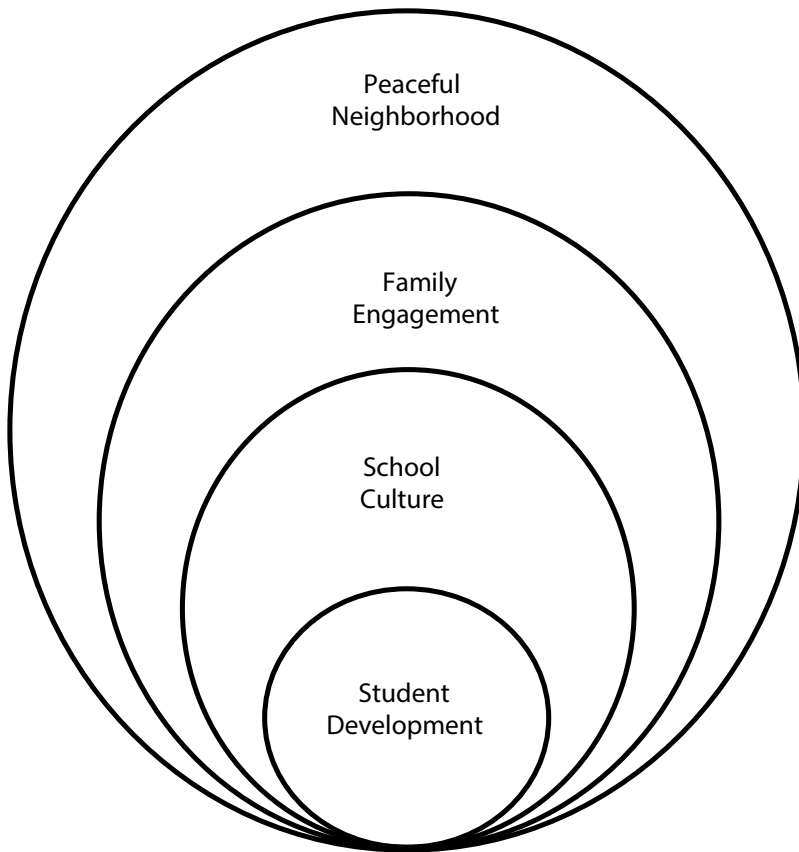


Figure 1. Peace works model of change, adapted from the socio-ecological model: a framework for violence prevention (Center for Disease Controls and Prevention [CDC] n.d.).

peace promotion. PW's model (see [Figure 1](#)) works to build cultures of peace with a focus on promoting student development of nonviolent communication and behavior that can then positively impact school culture, influence family dynamics, and lead to more peaceful neighborhoods.

In operationalizing this model, the PW curriculum draws upon research-based strategies to provide a common language and skillset. The PW staff work directly with administrators, teachers, and students to teach important academic and social skills, including increasing young people's capacity to identify and resolve conflicts nonviolently. The goal of this work is to teach applicable ways to deal with challenging situations by providing a safe and supportive environment where students can practice skills that translate into respectful behavior, positive communication, and a sense of hope and self-worth.

The PW curriculum is comprised of 30 classroom lessons that run between 45 minutes to an hour. Topics include the thought-feeling-behavior triangle, grounding techniques, perspective, values, empathy, and more. At the

beginning of each lesson, students select three things that they are thankful for – demonstrating gratitude – and write those things down in their journal. The intended purpose is to reinforce in students the connection between gratitude and contentment.

PW staff work directly with faculty and students in each school to develop and incorporate PW as a permanent component of the school's curriculum. During the first year when PW is introduced into schools, a PW trainer leads each lesson while the regular classroom teacher shadows in the classroom. Additionally, PW staff is on site at each school one to three days a week to help teach communication skills, active listening skills, critical observation skills, mediation techniques, anger management skills, self-reflection, self-centering and problem-solving skills through games, exercises, group interaction, and individual activities, and providing ways for faculty to teach these skills to young people. In the second year, the PW trainer and the regular classroom teacher will each spend time leading the lessons. In the third year, PW is handed off to the regular classroom teacher. The goal is to create a sustainable peace education program wherein the regular classroom teachers ultimately assume full ownership of the PW curriculum. In that way, the school culture is transformed as students and teachers become more familiar with the skills offered in PW.

Research question

As a peace education program in an urban context, the primary goal of PW is to foster nonviolent language in students and begin to build toward a lasting culture of peace within school communities. Specifically, the goals of the program focus on developing positive attitudes toward nonviolence, as well as the skills to prevent and manage conflict through dialogue. Generally, there are significant challenges to evaluating peace education programs validly and reliably (Baesler and Lauricella 2014). Therefore, a multistep, long-term research program has been undertaken by the Marquette University (MU) Center for Peacemaking, in collaboration with an interdisciplinary faculty research team, to assess the efficacy of PW in achieving the stated goal. A first step was examining the perspectives of educators in schools where the curriculum has been employed. Based in a transformative theoretical model, the process of creating change requires that faculty and staff believe in the efficacy of the program: that is, that the implementation of this curriculum is having a positive influence on students and overall school culture (Brantmeier 2011; Rapoport 2010). This current study involves assessing PW by investigating how teachers and administrators at four Catholic schools perceive the PW program. This paper aims to examine the perception of teachers and administrators regarding the impact PW has on the nonviolent behavior of the students, as well as any changes to the school culture, because of the centrality of teachers and administrators to

both PW and the overall development of students under their care and guidance. Towards that end, this research was guided by the following two-part question: What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators on the influence of PW as it relates to the nonviolent behavior of students, and has there been any impact on the overall school culture?

Methodology

This research question was addressed through focus group discussions during the 2018–2019 academic year in four Milwaukee Catholic schools where PW has been implemented. While the religious nature of these schools is a noteworthy contextual factor, PW itself is a secular program and our research questions focus on broad questions of implementation and impact related to this material. The Center for Peacemaking had partnered with these schools to incorporate PW into the school’s existing curriculum. In three of the sites, which are designated as School 1, School 2, and School 3, PW was offered during the regular school day; in the fourth, designated as School 4, PW was offered as an after-school program. Regardless of timing, the classrooms contained between 20 and 25 students. School 2 was set to begin their third year of PW in Fall 2020. Following the sustainable model created by PW, this school’s faculty took over the full curriculum while PW staff continued to offer support through professional development and by providing any support requested. The other three sites were all in their final year of support before school personnel would take over. All four schools serve high-needs populations (for school demographic information, see [Table 1](#)) situated in community contexts where violence is a part of daily life (Luthern 2019). Though the purpose of this study is not to explore the direct interaction between these social contexts and the impact of PW, educator perceptions can provide insights into the interaction between this peace education and broader systems.

There were two reasons we approached this research through focus groups with teachers and administrators. First, extracting and analyzing quantitative research would not prove illuminating at this early point in the evaluation as

Table 1. School demographics.

School Designation	Enrollment Overall	Gender (Female)	Racial/Ethnic Make Up	Free/Reduced Lunch
School 1	544	65%	Hispanic: 96% White: 1% African American: 1%	93.6%
School 2	255	25%	Hispanic: 100%	94%
School 3	384	56%	African American: 76% Asian: 20% Hispanic: 4%	80%
School 4	426	56%	African American: 96% Biracial: 2% Asian: 1%	100%

there were not large samples of data to be examined, for example in relation to student behavior (i.e. referrals, attendance, suspensions). This possibility will be considered later, as the current qualitative investigation is an exploratory step to build on for future evaluation (Power et al. 2018). Second, focus groups can help illuminate how individuals perceive the effectiveness of programming (Massey 2011). Based on previous research on peace education, teacher and administrators' investment in and views of such programming are critical to success. Focus groups provided us with an inclusive and collaborative environment in which to solicit educators' perspectives related to these areas. While the presence of administrators may have skewed conversation toward positive impacts, we felt it was important to have their broader perspective as part of the conversation. Additionally, the comments were not all positive; areas of growth and improvement were also identified.

Data gathering and researcher positionality

All procedures were approved by the MU Institutional Review Board. First, principals at each school were approached by the researchers and PW staff to request their institution's participation in focus group discussions. Principals then coordinated recruitment of teachers whose classrooms had participated in PW. The focus groups – one per school with faculty and staff from that institution – lasted 30 to 45 minutes and took place at the sites. Focus groups with Schools 1 and 3 had three participants and with Schools 2 and 4 had four, with at least one administrator in each. Discussions began with a short introduction and then opened to a semi-structured conversation (see Appendix A for focus group protocol). Specific questions included, what differences, if any, can you identify regarding violent/nonviolent behavior comparing the students who attend the program and those who do not; and, how would you change the program to have even more effect on nonviolent behavior among students?

Discussions were recorded and transcribed by researchers and staff at the Center for Peacemaking. They were then examined for patterns as a collective effort among the Center's staff and researchers (Arthur, Waring, Coe, and Hedges 2012; Basch 1987). This process involved multiple readings of the transcripts, coding for themes by individuals, and collaborative discussions to identify patterns (Creswell 2013). This approach also helped add to the validity of the themes that emerged, as the staff had also been active in the schools and witnessed the implementation of PW.

Researcher positionality

The focus groups were led by the principal researchers from MU, including a developmental psychologist with cross-cultural experience on evaluating peace education and an international scholar on youth, peacebuilding, and justice. Both had extensive experience with the PW program and its curriculum. While

PW staff contributed to the framing of the research and portions of this paper, the data gathering, analysis, and writing process was driven by these researchers to bolster the validity of the findings. The research team included members who identified as White, Latinx, African, as well as natives to Milwaukee and others with only a few years of experience in the city. Given the history and modern ways that segregation and its intersection with violence (i.e. high rates of community violence in communities of color linked to structural racism), we strove to be intentional about drawing on the strengths of various perspectives of our research team while also being attentive to our positionality as outsiders to these schools and the communities within which they are embedded.

Analysis and findings

Participants in all four focus groups expressed that PW had an impact on students, both individually and collectively, which in turn positively influenced school culture. Three dominant themes emerged regarding the effect of the program and possible obstacles to building a culture of peace: PW created the opportunity to develop a shared nonviolent language that positively influenced school culture; PW provided strategies and skills that were useful in promoting nonviolent behavior; and, a rather significant gap developed between students and faculty who participated in PW and those who did not. A fourth theme was present in three of the four focus groups, but did not arise in the discussion at School 2: the need to address possible challenges in families and societal contexts to creating transformative change.

Shared language in building school culture

Each focus group emphasized the impact of the shared language created through PW. Participants noted observing students grasping and utilizing a language of nonviolence that led to more thoughtful, peaceful responses in situations that previously may have been volatile. They referred to how students exhibited greater ability in resolving situations before they escalated through this learned nonviolent communication.

Exemplifying this theme, the principal from School 4 described a noticeable difference in the sixth graders who had participated in PW the previous year when they were in the fifth grade. The School 4 principal then described where this change came from:

We want our kids to understand the early 20th century theologian teaching that the road to peace is not the road to safety . . . when conflict arises, we've been trying to invoke a lot of that language so that the kids are able to have that learning experience and connect it back to the bigger cutting concept of peace education for this and that particular issue as they arise. Peace Works has been super helpful because its presence allows us to uh grapple with a common language that we can then employ.

A teacher from School 2 expressed noticing similar differences between the younger students in her school who had not received PW and those who had: 'The biggest difference I can tell between the fourth and fifth graders, is with the fifth graders you can use a little more mature wording or vocabulary. And that's just because they've had the program. I don't think I could normally say words like cognitive right and them knowing.'

Other focus groups observed students routinely using key terms from PW classes in conversation, such as 'empathy,' 'feelings,' 'positive self-talk,' and 'self-confidence.' Rather than resorting to physical violence or retreating from further dialogue, students were observed to effectively use nonviolent language, such as 'to restore whatever they broke in an argument or [verbal] fight.' While there was acknowledgement that this development may be related to students maturing over time, teachers and administrators in these focus groups directly associated the more thoughtful reactions and language to participating in PW.

Participants also discussed how through this nonviolent communication, students exposed to PW demonstrated a greater range of skills and strategies that fed into a broader positive school climate. The principal of School 1 suggested positive relationships developing among students who participated in PW had started to permeate the entire school:

[Students] now have the skills that they need to be problem solvers and productive citizens, but there's just a different sense of community. There's a different sense. You can't quantify it, but you can feel it, you can see it, and you can hear it . . . You get the feel of community, you get the feel of safety, you get the feel of love.

This principal noted that students involved in PW acquired new skills, but that the broader impact involved a deeper sense of bonding and support across the school.

In these examples, a shared language based on PW's lessons entered specifically into moments of tension or conflict in the school. Students demonstrated that they not only learned, but also could apply nonviolent communication in a way that altered the school environment.

Providing skills to promote nonviolent behavior

A second, connected theme that emerged was how PW provided students and faculty with the skills, or 'toolbox,' for dealing with interpersonal tension and conflict. Teachers and administrators in the focus groups detailed observing students actually applying different concrete strategies that they had been taught. The consensus view, as described by one teacher from School 3, was that PW succeeded in 'giving the kids options and opportunities to think about how to interact with each other without [resorting] to violence.'

The link between language and behavior was evident in an instance recounted by the School 4 principal when ten students approached him to discuss concerns about a teacher who they believed was assigning too much homework. Initially, the principal assumed this would be a griping session filled with complaints. However, the principal was pleasantly surprised to find that the two student leaders of this group, both PW, 'framed the conversation in front of the other eight' in a responsible, measured way. The principal noted that the nonviolent language of PW provided them with tools to engage with him in a conversation about how to handle this tension peacefully. The two students who had been exposed to PW took the lead and offered to craft an email drawing on this language. The principal considered this a 'piece of evidence where there is a level of thoughtfulness here that isn't common among seventh graders.'

In several focus groups, participants highlighted specific lessons that impacted their students. These skills focused broadly on students reflecting on themselves, others, and their actions in order to solve problems peacefully. Concretely, these included understanding how cognition, emotion, and action relate, active listening, and perspective taking.

Teachers in Schools 1 and 2 referred to a specific PW lesson on the cognitive triangle, which entails the connection between thought, feeling, and behavior. One from School 2 noted:

... I think for some of them, it helps them to be proactive and not respond in the way they might have been thinking about. For others, it really helps them in reflecting on [why I felt] that way and why I acted that way and if I could have changed that feeling before and calmed myself down then that would have made a difference.

In both schools, teachers noted how the concrete lessons of PW, like the cognitive triangle, promoted students incorporating nonviolent strategies tied to cognition, reflection, and emotion into their decision-making and action.

Additionally, the focus groups highlighted how students employed active listening and perspective taking in their interactions with others. These two skills emerged in the discussions of the educators from Schools 3 and 4. One teacher from School 3 shared how her students were developing 'the ability to have a conversation and listen to the other side of the conflict that they might not agree with' while learning how to 'not just tolerate differences, but really embrace them and understand that's what makes up peaceful communities.' Students were observed to begin to see outside of themselves while taking the emotions and needs of those around them into account. This orientation to action was reflected by another teacher in School 4 who noted seeing a change in students that he had been trying, unsuccessfully, to promote before: 'stand up when you need to or promote peace in other ways.'

In the focus groups, active, nonviolent behavior was not only noted in students who had been engaged in PW, but participants also expressed pleasant surprise that the program provided them with tools and motivation to both enact and promote nonviolent behavior themselves. The principal of School 1 noted that she had ‘worked in several different places and adults also sometimes need these reminders.’ Similarly, another teacher in the same focus group pointed out that she often used to yell in class. Participating in PW allowed her to ‘reset my own educational values . . . and settled me as well.’ She noted:

I know I have said things that are not nice and I know the things that are being done in my classroom are not always nice, and we just have those moments where we reset, and we go, you know, I’m really sorry for what I’ve said. It wasn’t appropriate. [PW provided] me with self-reminders and I’m really trying to build a culture in my classroom that supports peace.

This reflection suggests working with the PW curriculum indirectly influenced this teacher’s orientation toward interactions and difficult moments with students.

Across the focus groups, the reflections from teachers and administrators suggest that PW lessons contributed to nonviolent behavior. They explicitly noted becoming aware that nonviolent behavior goes beyond simply avoiding physical confrontation.

A gap between participants and nonparticipants

The third theme that emerged was the disconnect between students and faculty who participated in PW and those who did not. Across focus groups, participants noted how school-wide culture change was difficult if the shared language remained limited to those administrators, teachers, and students who participated directly. This gap was tied to suggesting a need to expand PW more broadly within the schools.

This gap was also often connected to expanding professional development to show all teachers how to incorporate nonviolent language into their classes. In PW’s current implementation, a major obstacle identified by these teachers and administrators was that the shared language was not explicitly described to all staff. For example, the principal of School 4 identified a difference between teachers who participated and those who did not. She went on to state that expanded professional development focusing on teaching nonviolent language was a clear path to extending the program’s impact. Connecting back to the first theme, this principal stated that the language itself needed to have greater consonance across the school. She identified value in the program, saying that PW was ‘helpful because its presence allows us to grapple with a common language that we can then employ.’ A teacher from School 3 expressed a similar sentiment when she stated that training more staff would mean that ‘everyone

can speak the same common language to reinforce the skills.’ In this way, across school focus groups, participants expressed that a more ‘monumental impact’ of PW would come from expanding and extending the program.

Challenges to transformative change: families and societies

Lastly, the focus groups discussed the possibility of the program creating school-wide and even broader change, while identifying some challenges to this outside of the students and teachers. School 1, 2, and 3 focus groups included discussion of parent and family involvement, while all four noted obstacles in the broader societal context. In this way, a theme that emerged was situating PW and its impact in relation to forces at socioecological levels beyond the individuals and schools.

In three of the four focus groups (Schools 1, 2, and 3), teachers and administrators stated that family members noticed changes in their children that these educators directly attributed to PW. At the same time, the participants in the focus groups also drew on these observations to highlight how intentionally including families could deepen the program’s impact. First, they noted that despite the lack of explicit engagement with families, caregivers had noted changes in language or behavior of their children, which these teachers and administrators connected to PW and its emphasis on nonviolent communication. For example, the School 3 principal commented:

[PW] is trickling into the home life. So, I have had several parents during parent meetings informally state that they have noticed a difference in their child’s behavior. Specifically, most of the parents recognized the sentence stems, like ‘I feel blank because this happened’ and some parents comment a little jokingly, ‘I don’t even know what they are talking about’ and other parents are just impressed with the growth that they have seen in their child.

Even when families noticed change in students who participated in PW, they still struggled to understand and connect with this language, according to School 1, 2, and 3 participants. Across these discussions, there was much agreement that parents ultimately need some level of awareness and participation with PW to successfully create a lasting school culture of peace.

Participants also identified challenges and, at times, expressed skepticism about how these could be accomplished. Barriers were located both in relation to families and in broader contexts, which could also in turn influence family dynamics. Two distinct obstacles were identified. First, participants from School 1, 2, and 3 noted that even parents who recognized changes in their children were unable to attribute that to PW because they had not been made aware of the program’s existence or content. The second obstacle involved beliefs about handling confrontation that exist in society and may be reinforced in the home.

The focus groups noted that many students were learning different strategies for addressing conflict outside of school (including in families). The School 1 principal described this challenge:

Educators always want these quick fixes for things and this is not a quick fix. Because it's certainly not. It's a lifelong process, a mindset change. Sometimes it's even a mindset change that has to trickle into our families because [from a student's standpoint] when I'm home and when I'm in my neighborhood that may be unsafe, I'm being told to stand up for myself and my family, that sometimes means being aggressive with my words and behavior. We're really trying to educate and have this trickle into the families and the neighborhoods where our kids live. I think this is a long-term goal.

These examples highlight that the focus groups acknowledged that social norms and expectations outside of school may be discordant with nonviolent communication and behavior. On the whole, these myriad forces were not described as preventing students from changing through participation in PW, but rather as an obstacle to the change across socioecological levels that the program's model targets.

Discussion

The goal of this beginning empirical investigation was to investigate teachers and administrators' understandings of PW's impact. The focus group setting allowed these educators to freely and meaningfully communicate their perceptions and discuss collectively trends they had been observing. While there were differences across the schools, we identified the similarities to better understand the opportunities, challenges, and areas for development of PW within urban contexts with high rates of violence in Milwaukee. Focusing on educator perceptions provides a first step to broadly understanding the potential for PW to contribute to transformational change. PW is currently being further developed based on these findings as part of a mixed-methods, iterative research program (Power et al. 2018).

Analyses of the focus groups indicated that PW had a positive impact on the students who have participated in the program and that school culture improved in terms of promoting nonviolent behavior. There was also ample evidence from these conversations that PW could have a broader influence on school culture if it were expanded to reach more students and staff. Participants expressed less certainty about the potential of the current approach to connect families and push back on norms and expectations students receive in home and society.

First, teachers and administrators' reflections highlighted that an approach focused on nonviolent communication building to nonviolent behavior had value within their schools. This evidence is an important first step in validating the PW program's underlying orientation to building a culture of peace. PW's

model of change focuses on developing nonviolent communication skills among students in order to build more broadly across socioecological levels. As defined by UNESCO in Article 1 of Resolution 53/243, a culture of peace does not explicitly entail attention to multiple socioecological levels or nonviolent language and communication, but rather is 'a set of values, attitudes, traditions, and modes of behavior and ways of life' (p. 2). More generally, peace emerges from how individuals are, act, and live in a society, all of which can be taught and promoted through education (Bajaj 2008; Harris and Morrison 2013). In its theoretical model, PW's development of nonviolent communication offers a specific pathway through which fostering skills and behaviors in the individual promotes a broader culture of peace. These include differentiating observations from evaluations; identifying, experiencing and expressing feelings; and making and responding to requests in order to contribute to human flourishing (Rosenberg 2002). In building a culture of peace, a focus on nonviolent communication therefore involves a call for a new form of language to create a new way of being in relationship – a humanizing relationship – with one's self and with others (Latini 2009). This approach to peacemaking is based in individual orientations and interpersonal interactions. In considering peace at communal and societal levels, peacemaking and peacebuilding must also address the conditions, structures, and histories of violence are necessary. PW alone will not address the layered and complex nature of violence in Milwaukee, but may offer an intervention to support change within schools and thus contribute to a broader peace.

The current study's findings indicated that teaching nonviolent communication can translate to promoting a culture of peace within the school. The focus groups noted students not only drawing on this language, but also using it in their relationships to resolve conflicts with peers and staff. Overall, the analysis provides some support for peace education that situates nonviolent behavior as a kind of language comprising of a way of speaking; that is, a reflective disposition that is in touch with the self in order to de-escalate potential violence to the other.

Second, the study supports further development of PW based on a socioecological model for peace education amid contexts of community violence, while highlighting important challenges and areas of growth. Peace education is often operationalized by skill building and change at an individual level (Harris 2004). A socioecological framework draws attention to the multiple spheres of influence within which individuals are embedded. PW's model situates developing nonviolent communication and behavior in students as part of a broader system change. Students develop these skills, which can foster nonviolent behavior interpersonally and then expand outward across the levels to the school and community. The focus groups provided evidence that these pathways were being partially activated: students were drawing on common language, enacting it, and, to a degree, spreading it within their schools.

Nevertheless, the data also revealed barriers that must be addressed in promoting broader change and responding to factors across various levels of the system. Within the institution, partial implementation led to some students and teachers not being as versed or connected to nonviolent communication. To successfully provide space for students to deeply engage, undergo personal change, and then enact nonviolent behavior, future development of PW could build on this finding and prioritize incorporation across school personnel and systems (Hantzopoulos 2011). Similar types of interventions, as well as cross-national analyses, demonstrate that impacts on young people's social and civic development are much greater and more sustainable when implemented throughout entire schools (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011; Walton, Priest, and Paradies 2013).

A second barrier identified by the focus groups related to broader contexts, including families who were not connected into the program or exposed to the shared language of nonviolent communication. This obstacle also tied into norms and expectations more broadly in violent communities, where nonviolent communication and behavior may be devalued (Leschied 2011; Seifert and Ray 2012). Messages and norms about how to handle violence, at individual and collective levels, are key socialization influences and present risk factors for young people (e.g. Lindstrom Johnson et al. 2011; Roche, Ahmed, and Blum 2008; Seifert and Ray 2012). For PW, while the focus groups provided evidence of change within individuals and some impacts on school culture, the identification of these obstacles raises the question if lessons learned in PW within the safety of the school environment are not being reinforced – or even being counteracted or inhibited – once students are outside of the school. Further development of the program could consider incorporating approaches from critical peace education, which draws attention to the need to connect the teaching of skills and nonviolence to students with structural and systemic factors motivating violence (Bajaj 2008; Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011).

Next steps and conclusion

To respond to these findings, the Center for Peacemaking is developing a more robust PW program across socioecological levels. The Center secured funding and has begun a pilot program to introduce families of PW students to the curriculum and nonviolent communication. In this extension of in-school efforts, PW students and parents will receive monthly locally-sourced meals paired with brief PW lessons. These sessions teach listening and conflict resolution skills that can be practiced and implemented at home. As part of the program, peacemaking strategies will be integrated into meetings attended by students and their parents. Ultimately, one of the four schools from this study was selected to pilot this family program. Data is being gathered about the number of families that participate, their experiences, and family, student, and teacher perceptions

of how the skills in these sessions are employed with the goal of identifying if the initiative supports the building of a culture of peace across contexts. The next steps in the more holistic approach to evaluating the impact of PW and gathering stakeholder input will also involve surveying and interviewing families to gain insight into their perceptions of the program and its efficacy.

Overall, the focus groups provided some evidence that PW is promising as a peace education program with a socioecological framework to promoting transformative change in schools. The importance of more cross-level work is also supported by critical peace education theory emphasizing that transformative change requires drawing links between language, skills, and behaviors of students – i.e. individual level development – to broader systems and structures (Bajaj 2008; Chubbuck and Zembylas 2011). While PW, and peace education approaches in Milwaukee more broadly, has been in existence for multiple decades, communities across the city still struggle with high rates of violence and managing the impacts on young people. One perspective is that deeply rooted structural racism and oppression creates untenable conditions for promoting nonviolence at individual and interpersonal levels. PW – and supported by the exploratory findings in discussions with educators who employ it – seeks to address such racial and class-based inequities through a critical framework rooting young people’s development as peacemakers and agents of change. Still, building a culture of peace across socioecological systems is a difficult challenge that requires deep and critical connections, as well as research-based program development.

The current study reflects an effort to begin systematically evaluating and refining the PW program with a focus on stakeholder input and attention to how to improve its cross-level impact. Assessing the impact of peace education can be difficult (Baesler and Lauricella 2014; Nevo and Brem 2002). This work serves as the first step in a broader, iterative research endeavor (Power et al. 2018). Future studies of PW will examine quantitative data related to the number of referrals and suspensions as well as interviewing families. Additionally, we are currently working with public and nonreligious charter school partners to make sure to include diverse educational contexts in the evaluation of PW. The goal is ultimately to foster the development of PW as a peace education program that can be implemented in ecologically valid ways to promote transformational change in community contexts of violence (Hantzopoulos 2011; Walton, Priest, and Paradies 2013).

Disclosure statement

Three of the authors are employees with the Marquette University Center for Peacemaking, which runs the Peace Works program. They were not involved in data analyses, but contributed to the writing of this article.

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