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Non-formal peace education founded on European youth work: A practitioner's critical reflection

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Abstract

This article is a critical self-reflection on this author's practice of non-formal peace education. Such critical reflexivity is considered integral to avoid pitfalls that could lead to the peace education activity inadvertently perpetuating structural violence – a phenomenon known as poststructural violence. Examples include unexamined assumptions about key concepts such as peace, inclusion, and rights. The article drives at the idea of discussing a concrete practice against a theoretical framework of critical peace education, exposing tensions between the two to lay the foundations for an improvement of my peace education practice. The discussion is informed by a positionality description of my own journey to become a peace education practitioner, a thematic analysis of the Erasmus+ programme, which is a key funding source, and a description of a concrete peace education project, all of which highlight influencing factors of my practice.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is crucial for learning, as well as for professional growth, empowerment, and transformation in any field (Brownhill, 2022). Delving into the larger aim of developing the field of peace education, Kester, Park, et al. (2021) encourage peace education practitioners to reflect upon how their efforts locate them within critical positions or structures, including political economy, state

interests, and identity. A failure to do so may see practitioners perpetuate the structurally violent forms we intend to address, a phenomenon known as post-structural violence (Kester, 2020; Kester & Cremin, 2017; Kester, Park, et al., 2021).

As a practitioner of peace education (PE) for nearly a decade, the notions of post-structural violence give me some concerns regarding my practice of PE. More pointedly, I harbor concerns about insufficiently examined references and assumptions of which I am a carrier when implementing PE efforts with funding from the European Commission's youth program, Erasmus+. References and assumptions can appear directly, in the form of conditions, or indirectly, as part of implicit discourses of vital concepts, such as inclusion and peace. Questioning guiding concepts, and other forms of power, is part and parcel of critical peace education (CPE), which is one of the focal points toward which the field currently gravitates (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Hajir, 2019; Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017).

The launching pad of CPE is the hegemonic qualities PE carries when theorization, values, and content are tailored in the North, and considered fit-to-wear also in the South (Kurian & Kester, 2019). Critiquing this phenomenon, CPE holds that all education efforts should involve a critique of the existing social order, and implores us to scrutinize all structures, including structures of education. This extends to educators and researchers alike, to also direct a lens at themselves to examine how structurally violent ways persist in what we do and how we produce knowledge (Kester, 2020; Kester & Cremin, 2017).

Answering the call outlined above, this article looks reflectively at my own educational practice of non-formal peace education at the Narvik War and Peace Centre. This critical reflection will graze discourses put in place or implied by the funding and organizational structures of my work, and discuss them in light of critical literature of the field. The driving research question is: *Which tensions arise when my practice of non-formal peace education, founded on European youth work practices, is held up against critical peace education?*

The article reviews relevant literature to bring in various perspectives on the different concepts employed in the article. The methodology section sets up the twofold approach to set up the baseline understanding of my PE practice, based on my personal journey and on Erasmus+ guidelines. This section also clarifies the theoretical framework of CPE. The two methods are then implemented as a critical reflection of my personal journey and positionality and a thematic analysis (TA) of Erasmus+. A case description of a concrete PE program I have implemented gives further ballast prior to the discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review supports the contextualized inquiry of this study, known as an argument literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120). It is not a comprehensive report of all that is known in the field but aspires to form a working canvas that my study, and others, can still contribute to, although not necessarily addressing a clear gap. As I proceed, I account for concepts that are relevant for my study, before moving to the forefront of those concepts in the field of PE.

Peace education is a concept that contains a lot. But in short, it is the combination of content, pedagogy, and theory that stimulates competence development that contributes toward peace (Brantmeier, 2009; Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017), meaning also that it is interrelated to other forms of education, including human rights education and citizenship education (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021; Kester, Park, et al., 2021). PE has gone through the paces both in terms of subject, approaches, pedagogy, driving forces, and views on peace (Harris, 2008, 2011). Today, the

field is drifting toward structural causes of violence (Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017). Known as critical peace education (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021), the primary emphasis is on deep interrogations of power. Decolonial thinking is prominent in this, to help us see things from a less privileged vantage point and capitalize on moments of disruption (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Verma, 2017).

Many argue that PE must be freed from the format of schools. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) was a well-known opponent to traditional schooling. Freire critiqued traditional, instructional forms of education, arguing that students become passive, uncritical receivers of the knowledge. Others hold that schools must be connected to a wider social reality to be effective learning communities (Bar-Tal, 2002; Harris, 2002; Shapiro, 2010). Bar-Tal expounds on this point, stating that only through experiential learning can values, skills, and attitudes be internalized, and behavioral tendencies challenged.

Youth work provides one avenue for a wider social reality, being a form of non-formal education (NFE). If we consider a three-pronged fork of learning settings, NFE will be the middle one. Informal learning, on the one side, can loosely be equated to everyday experiences and exposures from which we learn something. Formal education, on the other side, is structured, planned, and implemented in a top-down manner, such as in schools (Chisholm & Hoskins, 2005). NFE draws on elements of both of the above, as a semi-structured, voluntary, interactive, and participant-centered form of learning. It is construed to be a holistic means of learning, involving cognitive, practical, and attitudinal dimensions (Brander et al., 2021; Mara, 2021)—or engaging the head, the hand, and the heart, as it is often articulated.

Experiential learning is the primary approach of NFE in European youth work. According to Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (2015), the active experience comes first, followed by a debriefing or reflection around observations and potential take-aways from the experience. Ultimately, the aim is to widen the gaze and try to generalize what the findings could mean in real life, and how they can be put into practice.

The European Commission's youth program, Erasmus+, has supported mobility projects for young people[1] since the 1980s. The youth work part of the program currently covers 33 program countries[2] today, with many more partner countries (European Commission, 2022). The program primarily aims to be an instrument for lifelong learning, which will contribute to "sustainable growth, quality jobs, and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship" (European Commission, 2022, p. 6). The issue of a shared European identity looks to be a key aspect of Erasmus+ as a PE effort, with cross-border youth work being a cornerstone in the integration efforts of the European Union (EU).

One study indicates that European youth work leads to increased participation, appreciation of cultural diversity, and commitment to work against discrimination, intolerance, and racism, to name a few aspects (Böhler et al., 2022). Other studies highlight the constructive learning impact on participants of youth-led peace efforts (Ardizzone, 2003; Del Felice & Solheim, 2011). But there are also tensions involved in such education. Brown (2018, p. 94) looks at organizations' global citizenship education in the United Kingdom and Spain, finding that their project or activity objectives are unable to truly connect to issues of structural injustice due to the limited time perspective. Costas Batlle (2019) problematizes the competitive pressures imposed by neoliberal rationalities, contending that it heightens the focus on individual accountability rather than collective action. Cremin (2016) even calls it a crisis of PE that funders of activities have agendas which quietly but persistently shape the outputs. Costas Batlle (2019), though, concludes rather positively on behalf of NFE stakeholders, encouraging vigilance against such influences, and belief in the flexible nature of NFE (ibid, 2019, p. 430).

My study finds its place in the calls to vigilance and action highlighted latterly. And I posit that my critical reflection around tensions between my own PE practice, with its main sources of influence, and CPE, can contribute further to our knowledge in the field.

METHODOLOGY

As the main aim of this study was to conduct an introspection with a critical lens, the methodology must contribute to telling a coherent story of the sources of influence on my PE practice, to position the whole of it within critical positions and structures, as called for by Kester, Park, et al. (2021). The research question drives at sources of influence picked up by two prongs: my own journey to become a peace education practitioner, and the guiding foundations of the funding program upon which much of this practice has relied. Due to this, one research method alone will not answer the research question fully. But by drawing on critical self-reflection (Brownhill, 2022) and reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022), all available facets of my PE practice will come forward to form the basis for analysis with a theoretical framework of CPE. Hence, the basis for analysis is a multi-perspective gaze that critiques and challenges assumptions made in my PE practice, and checking their compatibility with CPE, as a form of critical ethnography (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, pp. 233–234) coupled with reflexive TA.

Critical reflective practice can, according to Brownhill (2022), be considered a dialogue between practice and theory that can contribute to an improvement or other transformation of what we do. For facilitators of an activity or program, reflection can be done both *in-action* (during sessions or programs), *on-action* (after implementation), and *fore-action* (Brownhill, 2022; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). The latter, also termed "forethought" (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 317), includes thinking ahead, anticipate what might come, and draw on one's experience to improve one's practice, and make the most also of unexpected and ambiguous situations.

Since I will be first leaning into my own experiences as a reflexive tool, I must acknowledge and own up to my own situatedness within this study, and the unavoidable subjectivity that comes along with it (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 12–13). This entails relativist theoretical leanings from the outset. With my situated knowledge as a practitioner of the field, I see what I see from my own perspective of experience in the analysis, known as a contextual epistemology (ibid, 2022, p. 185). Additionally, it is my own filters that determine that my selected points add contextual depth to the discussion.

Moving on to the review of funding and support-related sources of influence on my PE practice, I remain aware that the same subjectivity potentially lurks in the background, as I have nearly a decade's worth of hands-on work with the Erasmus+ program. Hence, a different method keeps this review more critically sound. The data for the TA come from two main sources: First, the relevant pages of the official program guide of Erasmus+, and official EU strategy documents that in some way inform or instruct Erasmus+. These are documents that are cited somewhere in the relevant pages of the Erasmus+ program guide. This review reveals guidelines, prompts, and incentives provided through the funding scheme. Within the Erasmus+ program guide, I limit my inquiry to the two project types that cover youth exchanges and residential training courses.[3] Second, I give some strategic insights into the organization I work for, as it also contributes to the discourse on which my practice builds.

Despite previous familiarity with the material, I have read all documents carefully, to identify sources of influence on my practice, and made multiple passes to code the material. These codes capture the essence of what particular bits of the documents are about (Braun & Clarke, 2013),

related to the possible influence they may have levied, and contribute to forming the final themes around which the discussion revolves.

Once the baseline data are established, thus narrowing down the search area, it is critical peace education that adds lumens to the work light. This theoretical framework calls attention to structural injustices which permeate educational, as well as socioeconomic and political, systems (Bajaj, 2008). Systems that put a premium on a certain kind of behavior, and reward a certain kind of person. With its clear links to Freire (1970), CPE puts the agency of people at the center. Learners are to be encouraged and empowered to observe and understand structural or systemic inhibitions to peace (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011). CPE opposes universalization and standardized norms for what the field should be, and looks to promote more variety of perspectives (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011). A resolute focus on context promotes relational understanding between people, and offers them the required openings to take part in decisions that matter to their situations. I will be looking at my PE practice in light of the CPE framework.

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

When it comes to critical self-reflection, it is instrumental to consider one's subject position, in the meaning of scrutinizing the discourses to which one is subjected (Heron, 2005). Any individual is typically exposed to various discourses, and therefore displays multiple subject positions. Kester (2020) draws on Bourdieu's concept *habitus* as a thinking tool to pin down influences and experiences that may have colored his way of seeing and interpreting in the field of peace education. He explains habitus as being "dispositions and behaviours cultivated through past experiences and external social pressures" (ibid, 2020, p. 65). Habitus then, in Kester's words, informs our decision-making, potentially in ways that may not be accordant with a critical inspection of an educational practice.

As I look to position *me* as an educator or interpreter of PE efforts, it is informative to borrow loosely from the above, to look at past formative experiences and pressures. My past journey, leading up to work within non-formal PE, is an attempt at identifying watersheds which tint my looking glass when shaping and implementing PE activities. As it stands, I have long been drawn toward simulation-based learning exercises that set the learner up for a hard landing when the scenario triggers contradictions between prior principles and actual behavior. This kind of confrontational nature has left me with a sense of educational catharsis never felt in formal education. Wanting to impart such moments to others, led me to become a trainer of NFE.

All along, I have been working for the Narvik War and Peace Centre in Norway. My job description has been to design and implement short and long learning sessions and programs to fit in with the strategy and premises of the organization. Topic-wise, my work has included human rights education (HRE), hate speech, conflict management, and remembrance work, to mention some central topics. My primary target group has been young people, either directly, in the form of group exchanges and learning sessions, or indirectly, via training courses for youth workers and teachers, or by developing new learning tools and methods. And I have drawn heavily on the European-wide practice of NFE programs, including Erasmus+ to fund activities.

Starting out, I was content when observing that the session worked out satisfactorily. A simple, yet important success indicator, has been that my participants leave the session with at least one new question or reflection in mind. I have found learning settings with a hard landing to provide ripe pickings of educational *a-ha* moments. With time, I started questioning some of these elements of the learning sessions, concluding that they were a relevant object of research inquiry

(Swedberg, 2021). Regarding hard landings, I pondered about the idea of focusing on what we do *not* want, to figure out what we want. While this is in line with a prevalent approach to peace studies, namely to examine what violence entails, as an antithesis to peace, to understand what peace is (Galtung, 1969, 1990), it now strikes me as a conundrum to focus so much on violence when we want to learn peace.

But this is what has drawn me into the field. Like Kester (2020), I have wondered how previous experiences inform my views and interpretations of events in the field. But where Kester concentrates on cultural capital, in the meaning of educational qualifications, affiliations, and "knowing" in the field, when tracing the experiences that has led him to the field (ibid, 2020, pp. 66–71), I find that it applies less to my case. Leaning into past experiences, and various forms of exposure to the in-between of the *haves* and the *have-nots*, my mind springs to a word, whose meaning has me thinking of structural violence and "otherness." The word is *compound*, in the dictionary meaning of "a fenced or walled-in area containing a group of buildings and especially residences" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

There were no such compounds where I grew up. No physical barriers or dividing lines of that sort. But my experiences with compounds have been so potent that the concept has stuck with me since I first met with one. Still a teenager, deployed for military service in Afghanistan, I got my first chance to pass the gates of a compound. My Norwegian military unit's compound within the larger base in Afghanistan served a few purposes. But it also separated us, who had things, from the people outside who did not have much. Some years later, volunteering for a youth organization in Deheishe refugee camp in Palestine, our compound cordoned off an area of calm where young people could just be young people. But perhaps the compounds that have stuck with me the most are the ones that ring in affluent residences in the South. Out of a varied, but still limited, selection of countries, I have spent the most time in Kenya. I visited people living in walled-in compounds who had multiple-bedroom houses, a maid, a driver, a gardener, and security guards out front—staff, all of whom were living outside the compounds.

Also, in Kenya, as a master's student there, I was taught that when reviewing literature, we should start with the most recent publications. But the university's access to academic journals was limited to five-year and older articles, probably due to costs, making it much harder to participate equally in academia. Such barriers mean that some voices have a much harder time being heard. When something is walled-in, it also means that something is walled-out. Or someone. I find this a good illustration of the whole idea of structural violence. The wall is an articulation of the gap between the ideal and the actual, which is essentially what structural violence is (Galtung, 1969). Those on the outside are the less affluent, with the inside of the compounds being the ideal place with less structural violence. In my adult life, I have been drawn to observe the outsides of such compounds, but always with the knowledge and safety that I held an access pass to gain entry to the inside of the dividing wall.

My interest in these barriers was consolidated by developing a "savior complex" of wanting to give back because of the globally privileged background I come from. But I have come to find that the challenges in any context are best tackled by those embedded in them. This is why I have been working in education in Europe mostly, where I more readily blend in. Having learned much from places where compounds are a real thing, I think it a good visualization of who is heard and counted. I try to spot dividing walls also in my work, which, despite being mainly in relatively affluent Europe, sometimes also fails to hear all voices and include all bodies. In keeping with Kester and Cremin (2017), such continuous scrutiny is required to keep post-structural violence at bay, so that I at least do not contribute to building the walls higher and impenetrable.

This does not remove structural violence as articulated by the metaphor of the compound. But, like Kester (2020), I think that this meta-awareness adds an emancipatory potential to the reflexivity and discussion that follow.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCING SOURCES

To track and identify the sources of influence on concrete activities and projects of my PE practice, I have applied a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My review and coding of relevant bits of the selected data material were done manually—multiple readings, highlighter in hand. Sitting by sitting, I have sourced the extracts I found to hold information relevant for the research approach of the study. I then noted in the margins my initial codes for each extract, before transferring these extracts and their codes to a separate document for overview. After revisiting my initial codes, and considering revisions, I landed on four themes that relate a coherent and concise story of influences levied by Erasmus+ and my workplace.

T1: Building participants' life skills to cope in a changing world...

When it boils down to it, Erasmus+, with its various target groups and tenets, is about improving knowledge, skills, and competences in its participants (European Commission, 2022, p. 4). It mentions specifically social and intercultural competences, critical thinking, and media literacy (European Commission, 2022, p. 10), and further aims to support participants to become "true agents of change" (p. 9), and empower people to participate in democratic life and civic platforms of engagement (p. 10).

The program also prioritizes competences linked to green change and digitalization, and states that the participants are the ones who are to become actors for social change. This is an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of society, and an encouragement for participants to stay in the loop of what is current in the continent and beyond. The program promotes lifelong learning, with emphasis on language skills and other competences that facilitate international cooperation.

T2: ...by including as many diverse people as possible...

Diversity is heavily emphasized as a strength of the overarching European project. This also shows in the prioritization of the Erasmus+ program. A plurality of voices are meant to be incorporated by the specific aim of including young people with fewer opportunities, whether social, economic, geographic, or other (European Commission, 2022, p. 139). The Commission's youth strategy communication also gives a nod to migratory phenomena, adding to the diversity (European Commission, 2018, p. 1).

The other side of the diversity coin is inclusion. The program contains various mechanisms to facilitate young people's inclusion, despite being at a disadvantage financially, geographically, in need of language assistance, accompanying persons, or other challenges (European Commission, 2022, p. 139). Support is also offered to organizations that are involved in work with young people who require something more than the norm.

T3: ...to create unity and cohesion

A key part of the rationale of the program is that the competences in focus, and the empowerment that ensues, benefit the EU as a whole. In other words, it is an investment into the future of the union. The program guide holds that a deepened understanding of the EU and what it represents fosters a sense of ownership or belonging among participants (European Commission, 2022, p. 10). A sense of European identity is an important building block to help the regional body function better (European Commission, 2022, p. 4).

The logic goes that active participation leads to a sense of ownership, which in turn means that people will stay invested to the idea of a regional block of exchange, cooperation, and integration. With formulations such as "EU common values" (European Commission, 2022, p. 4; 14), and "common priorities" (ibid, 2022, p. 12), Erasmus+ deals a full hand of universalisms to its beneficiaries.

T4: "Peacebuilding through knowledge of war"

The Narvik War and Peace Centre, my employer, is one of seven peace and human rights centers in Norway funded by the Ministry of Education. The Narvik region witnessed the biggest battles in Norway during 1940. The Second World War, therefore, forms a considerable backdrop for the education carried out by the organization, in addition to documentation work and research. The strategy of the organization's education plan is to cater to young people, challenge their points of view, and promote democratic values, attitudes, and competences, with HRE being the dominant approach to the educational setup (Stiftelsen Narviksenteret, 2020).

A CONCRETE CASE OF MY PE PRACTICE

In my PE practice, I have been formulating, accommodating, and implementing PE efforts with and for groups of young people and educators. This has ranged from multi-day programs to hour-long individual learning sessions. Common for both is that we look to stimulate a deeper reflection of the individual's and the group's situatedness in the context of the activity, as a step toward competence improvement. We try to connect the participants to dilemmas that may arise in various ways when working with the topic of the session, and challenge them to make hard choices. It is then integral to reflect upon factors that informed their decision-making during the experience. The steps of the efforts typically follow Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (2015), which enacts feeling, observing, thinking, and doing in iterations.

For context, I offer a brief description of a concrete PE effort I have been involved in, which was co-funded by the Erasmus+ program. My project partners and I implemented a 6 day residential training course for educators and youth workers from 10 countries in Europe, entitled The Peacebuilders. This training concept was a follow-up program of a previous training concept about conflict management, giving priority to previous participants. All previous participants were invited to share ideas for content and form of this new training program, catering to the overall idea of having a more forward-looking and proactive, and preventive approach to conflict. Our desired impact was to end up with a group of youth workers with a heightened awareness of obstacles to, and opportunities of, peace and committed to non-violent communication (as per Rosenberg, 2015).

We wanted to learn about concepts linked to PE, and develop competences and a support network that would help each participant spread their knowledge, skills, and attitudes back home. The next step was to apply for funding from Erasmus+. A successful application has to score above a minimum threshold for relevance and impact, project management, and dissemination. This means it has to speak to the guidelines of the program, and answer to the discourses baked into it. Even so, there is still a lot of room to wriggle, particularly with regard to how we formulate the program of the training course, and how we implement it. Our application received funding.[4]

In preparation, we surveyed our selected participants to gauge more concretely what topics interested them, and what needs they had in terms of learning form, content, and support. Based on this, a team of four facilitators (myself included) planned concrete activities. We included ample icebreaking activities as groundwork for a safe learning space, before moving on to various brainstorming exercises to map out contextual challenges and opportunities the participants observed in their regions. We spent ample time on an adapted version of the game-based exercise "Mission Z: One Last Chance," which simulates dynamics of war. The exercise is centered around a game map on which participants make their moves according to the rules of the exercise. But the exercise figuratively takes place elsewhere in the room, with the many hidden forces and influences that challenge participants' assumptions and interpretations (Arnøy, 2019). Other parts of the program included theater of the oppressed (Boal, 2022), communication exercises mainly centered around non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), lots of various reflection work, and planning of the participants' follow-up activities.

DISCUSSION

To refresh a bit, the backdrop of the discussion: As peace education has moved toward interrogation of structural and systemic hindrances to social justice and positive peace, there is onus on peace educators to question their role within this whole (Kester, Zembylas, et al., 2021). Educational activities, including PE efforts, that lack criticality of their own roots or couplings to structurally violent ways—be it school systems, key concepts, or methodologies—risk perpetuating the features peace education is aiming to work against. This blind spot has been termed post-structural violence (Kester & Cremin, 2017; Kester, Zembylas, et al., 2021).

Kester and Cremin (2017) elaborate a critique of peace educators along three main lines to concretize what post-structural violence may look like. The first is that the psychologized approach in which the empowered individual is the locus for change by way of competence improvement. This tends to weaken the onus on challenging social structures. The second deals with the presence of universalist value systems, and the idea that one can move from bad to good simply by replacing one value system for another. Lastly, they contend with the mind-centric epistemological approaches which they argue favors some cultural behaviors over others. Taking it all onboard, and relating back to my initial concerns that my PE practice fails to properly contend with post-structural violence, I will now proceed to discuss it against the theoretical framework of critical peace education.

Individual focus and competence improvement

The thematic analysis above showed some of the influences that act on someone who puts together and implements learning programs with funding from the Erasmus+ program. And the

case description gives an example of how I have been working with that program to implement non-formal PE efforts in my work. True to the aims of my place of work, the focus on competence improvement has been prominent (T4). When we speak of competences, we typically refer to values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Council of Europe, 2016). In multi-day, residential training courses, we also emphasize that it is up to each participant to gauge which competences, if any, they feel they have improved.

In The Peacebuilders training course, we set up a simple, yet visual way of reflecting on one's own competence development during the event: a horizontal bar chart on a wall, with one bar per selected competence. Participants were given this to assess their level in each given competence from 1 to 10 at the outset of the program, and to revisit this chart right at the end of the program to reflect on their development. Competence development is a key aspect of European youth work, in general (T1). But the rationale for it goes beyond just learning for the individual's sake. Rather, individuals are afforded such opportunities, as per the Erasmus+ program, to become better equipped to participate actively in democratic life (T3), as a form of grease for the cogs of a transnational, regional appliance.

Yet, organizations, typical beneficiaries also of Erasmus+, tend to aim for a desired impact beyond just the individual's competence improvement. Brown looks at Spanish and British organizations that use NFE in the hope that increased awareness and critical reflection among their participants will ultimately contribute to combatting social injustice (Brown, 2018); an approach that mirrors our attempt in The Peacebuilders, in which we encouraged our participants to spread their learning and inspiration to others. However, this is still so small-scale that it ultimately must be considered "soft" in that it mainly leads to individual behavioral changes (Brown, 2018, p. 91). Nevertheless, "soft actions" can open up spaces of dialogue and enable participants to reflect, thereby guiding them in the direction of praxis—which in a Freirean sense entails cycles of reflection and action (Freire, 1970). The restriction, though, in Brown's study, as it was for our training course, is that the formation of networks or collectives that encourage praxis take time, whereas many of the learning sessions conducted by NFE organizations are one-off events (Brown, 2018, p. 94). When the project funding is spent, the rubber of our participants' commitment meets the road. And all too often, it does not stick very long.

The limited time aspect of training courses is in tension with structurally oriented approaches such as CPE. In some ways, it even contradicts the modus operandi of the organization for which I work in that the strategic aim is to stimulate what needs to be a longer-term impact, such as advancing democratic values (T4). Because of the way a training course such as The Peacebuilders is set-up, there is a scent of short-termism about the place. Perhaps such efforts are necessary grains that complete the next brick of the temple. Brown's study garners support for the notion that NFE organizations provide support for individuals to take steps toward collective action for transformation by setting up spaces of reflection (Brown, 2018). In my case too, for longer projects, co-trainers and I have managed to assemble, train, and mentor groups of participants for longer periods subsequently promoting these as a pool of trainers within the topic or methodology in question.

Involvement of participants for decolonized epistemology

A core aspect of NFE is relationships. The realization that participants come together with the mindset that everyone can contribute and benefit from the setting, is built into the learning formula itself. In The Peacebuilders, we developed the program based on input collected from

previous participants in our networks. The bulk of the content was formed that way. Once the final participants for this activity were confirmed, we subsequently asked them for additional input about their learning needs and preferred forms of learning. It was our attempt to widen our way of seeing.

The Erasmus+ program rewards such involvement of the target group of any given mobility project. Inclusion and involvement are meant to encourage young people to engage and learn to participate in civil society (T2), which, in turn, strengthens the cohesion of the union (T3). Costas Batlle considers this a rosy presentation, and calls for specification of whose purpose NFE initiatives serve (Costas Batlle, 2019). In Erasmus+ and other funding schemes, the participating organizations compete for funding. They, therefore, have to shape their ideas to fit in with the criteria for funding. This applied to our case, as well. By the time we asked for more pointed input from our participants, the funding was already procured, with some fundamentals of the project, such as objectives and tentative program content formulated.

Cremin (2016) considers it a crisis of praxis in peace education that funders have agendas that drive efforts either implicitly or explicitly, as this may leave some assumptions of the effort unexamined. Speaking about formal education, Cremin holds that structural and cultural violence arise from this lack of criticality. She questions the legitimacy of education under such a structure. One of the challenges, particularly when seen from a CPE viewpoint, is that values and viewpoints may stand as universal. In Erasmus+, some of these leanings are quite explicit when we see mentions of "European values" (T3). In my practice, seeing as we rely on voluntary participation, we tend to draw in a certain crowd, which is oftentimes quite aligned when it comes to values and attitudes, anchored in dominant social discourses of the region.

PE is generally dominated by Western-centric thought and programming (Gittins, 2019; Kurian & Kester, 2019), commonly manifested through the assumption that democracy, capitalism, human rights, and international law are sufficient conditions for a just peace (Kester, Park, et al., 2021). But there is a lot of critique of such universalities. Noddings (2012, p. 56) even holds that the imposition of values onto others is a failed form of cosmopolitanism, terming it, instead, a form of exceptionalism. Bwanyire, on the other hand, argues that "the core values of peace education are 'blind' to culture, race, religion, and gender, among other things" (Bwanyire, 2016, p. 22). He holds it aloft as a collision between universalism and cultural relativism, and argues that basic, natural, cosmopolitan values exist, largely based on natural rights all human beings have. Tibbitts, reviewing both theoretical and empirical arguments for and against universal values, finds a range of common ground in between (Tibbitts, 2020). She concludes that there is room for a hybrid approach, which she terms "qualified universalism" (2020, p. 115). This approach could incorporate elements both of universal and particularist positions, with the dynamic variable being pedagogy, ranging from more socializing influence with younger participants, to increasingly critical and reflective styles with older participants.

Gruber and Scherling (2020) clatter into the neoliberal rationality of education, by which most things are measured in economic terms and metrics, and with the result trumping all. They equate it to a colonial practice, subordinating human capital to the market, and effectively elevating the market to the main moralizing mechanism. They call for CPE to thoroughly engage the neoliberal paradigm of education, arguing that PE becomes complicit in constructing or perpetuating everyday injustices unless it is delinked from Eurocentric capitalism (ibid, 2020, p. 21). In neoliberal terms, peace just about becomes synonymous with progress. However, due to core characteristics of NFE such as dialogic learning, reciprocity, collaboration, and a generally flexible nature, non-formal PE can function as an educational counterweight to neoliberalism (Costas Batlle, 2019, p. 429). It must be said of Erasmus+ that,

despite the strong neoliberal foundations, we are strongly encouraged to facilitate learning in a variety of ways, with many ways of *seeing*. However, there remains a pull to eventually end up *being* a certain way (T3).

Experiential learning and ontological pluralism

Many scholars have argued unfavorably for schools being a suitable venue for PE (see Bar-Tal, 2002; Harris, 2002; Shapiro, 2010), at least by themselves, without any connection to out-of-school experience. The learning approach I draw on in my practice is experiential learning, as outlined by Kolb (2015). According to Kester, Park, et al. (2021), experiential learning ticks all boxes for principles of PE, which includes the need to be dialogical, participatory, values-based, critical, and reflexive. Judging from this, NFE projects, fulfilling these criteria, can be considered a form of PE also if the topic of the project is not concertedly about peace.

Verma considers PE to be about the interruption of hegemonic forms, including hegemony of knowledge that may occur in other subjects in the classroom (Verma, 2017, p. 7). It is also about capitalizing on teachable moments that may arise at any given time, and viewing such tensions as "possibilities of peace" (ibid, 2017, p. 11). This is fitting also for what I aim for in my PE practice. Asking reflective, hard questions, and actively setting the stage for dilemmas make for teachable moments. The whole point of the exercise of interruption, is to counter totalizing discourses, power relationships, and binaries (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). CPE approaches this by emphasizing local context, as well as by engaging, head on, global phenomena such as racism and economic inequalities.

This goes beyond merely understanding, as Brown (2018) points out. Citing Mezirow, she underscores that for learning to be transformative, participants must become "critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4, cited in Brown, 2018, p. 82). In The Peacebuilders, we put source critique under the spotlight, asking repeatedly how the participants knew what they knew, and what information or influence made them behave the way they did. This is an epistemological approach. What we tend to aim for, and the objectives set, show that we have worked under the assumption that a lack of the right kind of knowledge is what needs to be addressed for issues of peace and conflict (Kester, 2023, p. 5). Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) have challenged this assumption as simplistic, positing that because education as knowledge improvement has failed to deliver on other desired constructs, such as equality, it is likely to do so for peace too.

Working with co-funding from Erasmus+, we are being pulled toward a way of being that aligns with the value base of the program. Participants are to be critically thinking so that they participate more effectively in democratic life (T1) and they are to feel ownership to "European values," so that the EU becomes or remains a cohesive union (T3); or rather, inclusion in the sense that young people get trained and qualified to come inside the regionalist compound, with its template for what a responsible and desirable citizen is. There is, in a sense, an impetus to be similar. Kester problematizes this, arguing that we need to look more concertedly at ontology and allow for other ways of being for it to qualify as PE (Kester, 2023). He points out that the dominant ontologies in education spring from Western epistemologies, and generally mean being a rational citizen. Kester finds that the Western-centric foundations of liberal peacebuilding, and PE, push for an erasure of the other (ibid, 2023). This abyssal thinking means that something is either this or that; conformity or erasure.

If we attempt to bring this into the analysis of Erasmus+, we may indeed find that there is a type that is more accepted and valid than others. An ontological sameness, one might say. I have also not contested this idea in my PE practice, thereby perpetuating a form of post-structural violence. We tend to be rather conflict shy, and typically spend ample time to create safe learning spaces. Perhaps nearing an approach of contact theory (Allport, 1979), bringing us all onboard for cooperation toward common goals, to forge friendly, peaceful relations between us. This applies to The Peacebuilders project, and other PE efforts I have conducted. We construct a safe space for dialogue, but perhaps tacitly sacrifice potential challenges to structural, engrained power relations and traditions. An approach that runs counter to this approach, but perhaps aligns better with CPE is known as pedagogy of discomfort, in which issues of difference are tackled head on, rather than avoided (Kester, 2023). Inequalities, racism, structural inequities, and other categories are brought up explicitly to challenge participants to direct their eyes at taken-for-granted assumptions of all kinds and to rethink what peace is and might be. Moreover, to consider who is included in this peace, and who has to compromise to cede to this form of peace. Kester (2023) finds that this approach pushes the boundaries of PE in a postcritical manner.

What the discussion shows, as a minimum, is that non-formal PE conducted with the financial support of Erasmus+, as I have described, requires reflexivity on norms of the field, as well as taken-for-granted practices. This can be thought of as second-order reflexivity (Kester, 2023; Kester & Cremin, 2017), entailing that practitioners of a field, say PE, try to place themselves and their praxis in the wider fields and their norms. This way, we can more readily seek a break with the practices or influencing elements that contribute to us reproducing unjust or structurally violent practices. For the case of NFE, it is necessary to look closely at influencing factors stemming from the personal journey of the person(s) in charge, and the funding scheme and its larger packaging.

CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to reflectively examine my own PE practice from the somewhat elevated vantage point of CPE, and checking for tensions between the two. I have done so by focusing more concertedly at how and why a few key aspects of my PE practice are the way they are, aided also by a thematic analysis of some key influencing factors, that is, Erasmus+ and my workplace. However, placing my PE practice alongside CPE in this manner, as a dialogue between practice and theory, is an attempt to improve or transform my practice in an advantageous manner. The exercise of this article has therefore been one of reflecting on-action, as well as providing some forethought for future actions (Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

Brown and Clarke inform me that conclusions can be drawn that relate to data, analysis or theory, to existing scholarship and the discipline in which one works, to the method or methodology, or related to the wider societal context (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 146–147). I find that my inquiry points to a combination of a few of these. Informed by existing scholarship and CPE, I have drawn on a research methodology to discover room for improvement in a practical discipline. The discussion has pinpointed tensions in a few areas. These include the focus on individuals' competence improvements; that educational actions are time-limited and "soft" (Brown, 2018), holding limited potential to contribute toward structural changes; and the presence of the funder's agenda for key concepts such as citizenship, participation, and peace, which seep into our activities and ways of doing things (Cremin, 2016).

Working for an organization that conducts education, it seems clear-cut that I should be focusing on the learning, or competence improvement, of our participants. This is not an overt breaking point with CPE, as it is also about learning. But CPE, seeking a rupture in knowledge and visions that open up for multiple ways of seeing and being, is more focused on the collective form that can spur on social transformation (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). Achieving more collective action from participants of educational activities we are involved in, would necessarily mean having to expand their time scope, as Brown underscores (Brown, 2018).

The perhaps most prominent point is the tension of unexamined assumptions and the adopted understanding of certain key concepts in our activities. We have seen Cremin argue that unexamined PE efforts contribute to structural and cultural violence when drawing on concepts that are held up as universally applicable (2016). Following the reasoning of Costas Batlle, we learn that people's personhood must not be selected and served to them by someone other than themselves (Costas Batlle, 2019, p. 429). There is tension here too, along ontological lines, as beneficiaries of Erasmus+ are encouraged to design their efforts to propel participants closer to the EU ideal of a citizen, or way of being.

Although my conclusions are linked to a critical inquiry into the Erasmus+ program, I hasten to add that this program has been a helpful platform for partnerships, funding, and support for my practice for many years. Even so, it is also a paymaster that has a number of implicit conditions for all its support. While it should come as no surprise that this is so, a more valuable takeaway is that practitioners need to be cautious in their application of key concepts that we typically consider to be benevolent and constructive for society as a whole, such as inclusion and participation. From the above discussion, we are implored to ask who we are including, into what we are including them, at whose expense; and, participation in what, for what end? Ultimately, these conclusions are centered around a practice that is quite specific but can be generalized, to some degree, to encompass all forms of PE-related NFE carried out in a European context.

This implication also extends to the understanding of peace. It is a concept that has close kinship to citizenship, participation, and access to rights. If any of these concepts remain unexamined when planning, preparing, and implementing non-formal PE efforts, we can easily fall into a prescribed ontology of peace, reflecting the main influencing factors of the practice, such as the primary funding scheme. This is quite a generalizable line, if we consider this article a partial response to the call for more critical self-reflection in the field of PE (Kester & Cremin, 2017; Kester, Park, & Sohn, 2021). Taking this back to my workplace as well, the Narvik War and Peace Centre, there is certainly merit in inspecting more critically our handling of our own epistemologies, embedded, as we are, in a context that looks at transitions from war to peace and vice versa.

Identifying tensions between a concrete practice and the theoretical forefront in this way is proving to be a constructive thinking tool. It adds heat to the tub without having to throw the bathwater out—and certainly not the baby. My inquiry indicates that I, despite my own positionality, and decolonial driving force, have fallen short of a proper inspection of factors and agenda that may influence how I do things. I come around to the approach of this inquiry being the most conspicuous takeaway for reflective practitioners of PE, and therefore the crux of the conclusions. While it may not be in the power of any one educator to remove the dividing walls of a structural violence-forging compound, everybody can do their critical bit by locating and pointing at the masons.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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NOTES

[1] Ranging from 13 to 30 years old, and indirectly through people who work with this age group.

[2] These are the 27 EU member states plus North Macedonia, Serbia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Türkiye.

[3] Both of these project types are part of Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals. The project types I focus on are formally referred to as Youth Mobility and Adult Education Staff Mobility. Youth Mobilities are typically youth exchanges of groups from two or more countries. Staff Mobilities are most often (though not always) residential training courses around a selected topic or theme.

[4] The Peacebuilders had the Erasmus+ project code 201-8--1-NO0-2001192 with a grant of €24 248, and was implemented in November 2018 in Norway.

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