

On the frontline



AT A GLANCE

■ Because it does not exclude or discriminate, public education has a vital role to play in promoting peace

■ Children want to discuss and understand current world events at school

■ Teachers need appropriate resource material to support them in creating a human-rights framework in their teaching

■ The union has launched a campaign to promote a peaceful world

Peace is an entitlement, not an optional extra, writes Helen Vines.

“Give peace a chance,” sang John Lennon back in the sixties. At a time when some countries have the capacity and, it seems, desire for extraordinary—often indiscriminate—levels of violence and destruction, Lennon’s delicate lyrics sound a bit serendipitous. Peace shouldn’t be about chance, it should be about certainty. But, of course, it isn’t.

So, what role do teachers, and public education generally, play in educating and promoting a peaceful agenda within schools and the community at large? There is a pressing need for explanation and discussion with children about the implications of current world events. Their “contradiction antennas” are twitching wildly and are on full alert, according to Angelo Gavrielatos, Senior Vice President of the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation.

“There are double standards in terms of how certain UN

declarations, treaties and the like are observed for some matters and disregarded for others,” he argues. There is a glaring contradiction between what is taught in playgrounds and classrooms everyday—that bullying and harassment are unacceptable, that the resolution of conflict through peaceful means is the only way forward—and what students observe on the international stage. Teachers have a responsibility to support peace, says Gavrielatos. “It’s core teacher business.”

The role of public education as a vehicle for the promotion of peace is enormously powerful. The public system does not exclude or discriminate on the basis of class, ethnicity or religion, and actively promotes diversity. In this sense, it is “truly the crucible within which our democratic, multicultural, accepting society is born”, says Gavrielatos.

By working closely together in an education environment,

children from different cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds learn the skills to be tolerant and understanding of each other, and understand differences. One of these key skills is the ability to think critically about issues. Teachers need to be able to teach these skills, and demonstrate peaceful conflict resolution themselves, so children can also see this knowledge in action.

Appropriate resource material is essential, says Susan Hopgood, AEU Deputy Federal Secretary, so that teachers can have a framework for promoting a better understanding of the wider world and its conflicts. But there is also a place for specific training, she argues, which will enable teachers to pull together their skills and knowledge, and see the connections between what they do and the creation of a tolerant, harmonious and peaceful society.

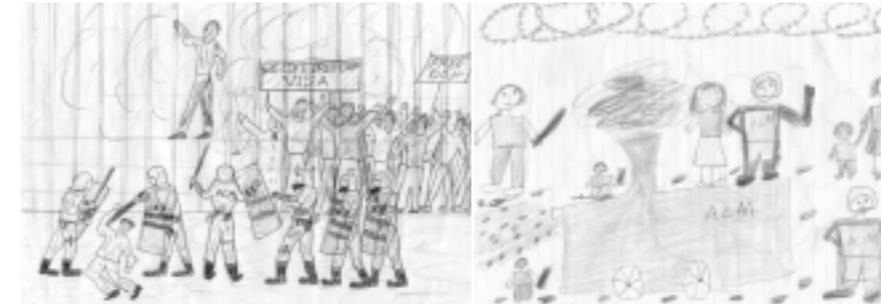
The AEU has passed a resolution to actively promote a peaceful world, and the campaign will aim to raise community awareness of the role public education has to play. In this way, it is hoped, governments and education departments will be pressured into providing the necessary support for schools.

A Human Rights Education Training manual has been put together by the AEU in collaboration with Amnesty International. Its function is to provide training for workplace representatives, but already the manual’s significance for broader purposes has been recognised. TAFE teachers could incorporate units into their own work and teachers can use it for professional development. There is talk of making it more widely available.

The AEU’s campaign, says Hopgood, is to encourage members to take their responsibilities seriously, to be more conscious in implementing “a human rights model approach



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to teaching”. The AEU’s website and the use of e-mail provides the best opportunity to link up networks of teachers keen to share experiences, talk through issues and be generally active in the promotion of peace.

The other major area for the AEU is at an international level. Australia is a signatory to Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That article says: “The education of the child shall be directed to the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship amongst all people, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origins.”

As signatories to that convention, we are obliged to prepare the child in that way, says Gavrielatos. “As teachers, we have a responsibility to promote peace, acceptance and understanding. And we must do so,” he says. ■

HELEN VINES is a freelance writer.

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W See www.aeufederal.org.au for the decision adopted by the 2003 AEU Federal Conference on “Working and Teaching for a Peaceful World”.

National Public Education Day

Celebrating the work of teachers, allied educators, parents and students in public education and training.

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