

What peace education taught me: Reflections from my internship at Peacemakers

By Natsumi Masumoto



I grew up in Hiroshima, receiving peace education for nearly ten years before I ever set foot in a classroom as a trainee teacher. By the time I arrived in Birmingham for my internship at Peacemakers, I honestly believed I already understood most of what peace education had to offer. I was wrong - and admitting that has turned out to be one of the most valuable lessons of my life.

Two kinds of peace

The turning point came on the second day of my internship, in a conversation with Sara Hagel, Peacemakers' director. She introduced me to a distinction that reframed everything I thought I knew: peace education can be divided into 'for peace' and 'about peace'. That single idea put words to a discomfort I had carried for years.

Since before I can remember, I was taught about the atomic bomb — the history, the suffering, the survivors' testimonies. But I was never really taught how peace is built, or how many different shapes peace can take. Hiroshima's model of peace education, I realised, focuses almost entirely on preserving memory. It is powerful, but it isn't complete.

I had long assumed that the opposite of peace was war, and that peace simply meant the absence of it. Yet so much of the suffering I see in Japan and around the world - bullying, environmental destruction, everyday conflict - has nothing to do with war at all. Understanding peace as something multifaceted, something that lives in ordinary life and not only in history books, was the beginning of a real shift in how I think about my own work.



Peace, right where you are

What finally resolved this tension for me was watching Peer Mediation in action. When 'peace' feels too abstract or too global, children can start much closer to home - in their own friendships and disagreements. An argument with a friend is, for a child, often the most immediate experience of 'not peace' they know.

Peer Mediation doesn't just teach children to help their friends resolve conflict. It gives them a moment to pause, breathe, and think clearly when things go wrong. Watching Peacemakers' trainers Jackie Zammit and Libbs Packer lead these sessions was genuinely humbling. I spent a lot of my internship simply in awe of the skill, creativity, and patience behind their facilitation, and I came away with a new conviction: peace education doesn't have to reach for global scale to matter. It can start in a classroom circle.

Speaking of circles, I noticed something almost embarrassingly simple. Japanese classrooms are typically lecture-based, one teacher speaking to many students from the front. In peace education sessions here, facilitators sit with children, at their eye level, both physically and emotionally. As someone who works hard to help children feel comfortable opening up to me, I wonder now whether part of what I've been missing is something as basic as where I choose to sit.

The small moments

Some of my favourite parts of the internship weren't the big workshops at all - they were the check-ins and seat-changing games at the start of each session, watching children's shoulders drop and their guards come down within minutes, no matter which school we were in. Those small, ordinary moments felt like peace itself.

Bringing Hiroshima into the room

Delivering my own Hiroshima workshop, with the support of The Peace Hub's Pete Doubtfire, was the most challenging and rewarding part of my internship. Teaching children about the atomic bomb - 'about peace' education, in Sara's framing - in a way that is age-appropriate, respectful, and still hopeful is genuinely difficult. Pete helped me rephrase children's questions, clarified points I struggled to explain in English, and kept the whole session on track. I know I made extra work for him, and I'm deeply grateful he did it anyway.

Sharing the story of the hibakusha ('bombing survivor')* I've been entrusted to represent, in my own imperfect English, was one of the proudest moments of my time here. She has told me many times, "I am grateful just for your willingness to carry on this history," and more

recently, "I have no regrets now. Please go out into the world." Standing in front of those children, I felt I was finally doing exactly that.

Two things I now believe

Reflecting on all of this, I've landed on two conclusions about what 'about peace' education is really for.

The first is empathy. Children in Birmingham can't fully grasp the political history behind Hiroshima, and they don't need to. What matters is that they feel something for the people who lived through it – and that feeling can grow anywhere, regardless of where a child was born.

The second is planting seeds. I don't want to be someone who simply spreads Hiroshima's history or teaches paper cranes. I want to plant a seed of peace in each child, and then let them decide, in their own time, whether and how to grow it. My own seed was planted at six years old, watered slowly over more than a decade, and didn't sprout into real action until I was eighteen. There is no 'right' pace, and no seed should ever be forced into growing. But even if a child sets aside the idea of 'peace activities', I believe we must never let them abandon the idea of peace itself.



Thank you

To Peacemakers and The Peace Hub: thank you for welcoming a complete stranger so warmly, and for trusting me to help lead a workshop despite my limitations. Of the nine months I've spent studying abroad, this internship has been the most meaningful by far. I'll carry what I learned here back to Japan, into my own classroom, and into every seed I try to plant from now on.

* A Hibakusha is a 'person exposed to radiation, a person affected by nuclear exposure' and is a status allocated to certain people, mainly by the Japanese government. About 650,000 people have been recognised as *hibakusha*. The Hibakusha suffered ongoing health effects and discrimination and for a long time were not allowed to speak out and were forced to keep silent. Today, Hibakusha do speak out. They tell their stories to help protect others from experiencing the emotional, physical and social horrors of atomic bomb effects. (Wikipedia)