

## Conflict and Peace: Theory and Practice



### IN THIS EDITION

Teaching peace, conflict  
and mediation through  
the citizenship curriculum

### ALSO INSIDE

Identities and P-Pop  
Global Citizenship projects  
Resources and reviews



**Theme**

- 4 **Editorial**  
Hans Svennevig
- 8 **CPD Programme**  
Zoe Baker

**Theme: Peace and conflict:  
Theoretical Underpinnings**

- 9 **Introduction**  
Dr Anna Liddle
- 10 **Framework for Teaching about Conflict  
in the Classroom**  
Terri Barry
- 13 **Powerful Knowledge: Learning About and For Peace**  
Dr Lee Jerome, Hans Svennevig, Professor Hugh Starkey,  
Dr Anna Liddle, Isabel Cartwright, Ellis Brooks
- 18 **UCL Peace Education Special Interest Group:  
A Call to Action**  
Hans Svennevig, Alexis Stones
- 20 **Citizenship means teaching conflict  
and mediation skills**  
Ellis Brooks
- 26 **Non-Violent Action: A Force for Change**  
Helen Griffin
- 29 **Can violence ever be justified in a democracy?**  
Dr Lee Jerome
- 31 **Conflict as a Citizenship Topic  
- Concepts and Knowledge Map**  
Kirsty White
- 34 **Discussing Conflict with Students: The Targeting  
of Uyghur Muslims in China**  
Aneira Roose-McClew
- 38 **How the darkest events in human history  
challenge young people to "be the change"**  
Samantha Hunt MBE
- 41 **Teaching about Rwanda: Case study of  
reconciliation and peace**  
Hope Nyabienda

- 44 **How to teach young people about trade unions**  
Mary Sayer
- 47 **Strike Map for Democracy!**  
Robert Poole
- 49 **What are arms companies doing in education,  
and why**  
Emma Sangster and Luke Starr

**Features**

- 51 **EduSpots: promoting active citizenship through  
a network of education spaces**  
Cat Davison
- 53 **Linguistic Diversity, Pop Music and  
Citizenship education**  
Dr Ruanni Tupas
- 57 **A Black Activist Citizenship Teacher Experience**  
Michelle Codrington-Rogers
- 63 **Suggestions from the Citizenship community  
- Applying to the PGCE**  
Amit Puni, Hans Svennevig

**Regulars**

- 5 **News**  
Liz Moorse
- 59 **Review: Diverse Educators: A Manifesto**  
Madeleine Spink
- 60 **Review: Citizens: Why the key to fixing everything  
is all of us**  
Scott Amott
- 61 **Review: Development Education Centre South  
Yorkshire (DECSY) - Non-Violent Action: A Force for  
Change Lesson Plans**  
Helen Blachford
- 62 **Review: Mystery in the Palace of Westminster**  
Aroosa Azam

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# Linguistic diversity, pop music and Citizenship education

**Have you listened to any K/P/J-Pop and wondered what the fascination and appeal is? Have you connected this yet to citizenship education and identities? If not let Dr Ruanni Tupas help explain why we need to bring this pop-culture into our classrooms by discussing ALAMAT a popular p-pop multilingual group and how by bringing in pop-culture to the classroom we promote self-reflective student learning about concepts around citizenship knowledge and action. This article can be read with Teaching Citizenship Issue 51 and Helen Blachford and Dr Lee Jerome's Protest Songs article.**

Immersing myself in pop culture has given me the opportunity to locate my work in multilingualism and education in spaces most familiar and comfortable to many people. In these spaces, our pupils and students are the experts from whom we can learn about the complex and multicultural worlds they navigate today. The pedagogical principle which underlies this is straightforward: if our pupils and students find their education relevant to their everyday lives, it is highly likely that they can take ownership over the construction of their own identities as citizens of their own country, and of the world for that matter. Many studies about participatory citizenship through the mobilization of pop culture such as what is found in K-Pop (Benitez, 2022), hip-hop (Mitchell, 2000), and other entertainment genres and platforms (Van Zoonen, 2005), have demonstrated convincingly the importance of making our pupils, students and other community members active constructors of their own pathways to identity formation, engaged citizenship and nation-building.

I recently wrote an article about Philippine languages and published it in a local Filipino UK magazine. The content of the article concerns the need to recognize the more than 180 Philippine languages as 'languages', not 'dialects'. This is not a trivial topic: our local languages have historically been devalued as dialects in favour of colonial languages such as English and Spanish, as well as Filipino, the national language. Through the years this has had symbolic and material effects: many Filipinos denying the importance of their own mother tongues, and the educational system itself complicit in erasing the role of local languages, identities and cultures in teaching and learning. In other words, the framing of Philippine languages as dialects is part of a broader system of beliefs and practices which constitute inequalities of multilingualism in the country.

In the article, I wrote about ALAMAT, the only multilingual boy

group which sings in multiple Philippine languages. It is a group which aims to entertain and educate at the same time, thus it has embarked on an ambitious and challenging plan of drawing on historical and cultural references in its music and choreography, while making sure that it remains relevant and familiar to young Filipinos who sift through sounds, visuals and meanings using the lens of contemporary and global pop music. Even visually, ALAMAT is global and local at the same time, assembling cultural forms, artefacts and meanings which affirm but also transcend national identities.

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## Everyday acts of assertion and resistance

Just recently (September 2022), ALAMAT began a series of provincial and mall tours to promote its music. I was surprised when I was tagged on Twitter by random people. I found out that the fans of ALAMAT – they are also called 'stans' – called the Magiliws ('the affectionate'), decided to print copies of my article together with some information about and photos of the group, and distributed them to casual and curious people who attended the group's shows and mini mall concerts. Some of them posted photos of themselves talking to particular individuals about my article.

One of the most amusing photos was that of a fan who brought a copy of the article to school and shared it with his teacher. The school has been one of the most enduring colonial institutions which propagate the idea of the inferiority of local languages, and the photo of the student handing

his teacher a copy of the article which criticizes the school as a generator of inequalities of multilingualism is symbolically meaningful (Tupas, 2015). It is a powerful instantiation of how individual acts of assertion or resistance against disempowering discourses and practices may be mobilized in the most mundane everyday way. The assertion that Philippine languages are languages, not dialects, means a lot to those who, through pop





Photography: Ahleks Fusilero | Styling and Designer: Jhay Layson | Grooming: Danah Rioflorido and Emerson Go | Models: ALAMAT

culture, for example through the music and advocacy of ALAMAT, have reconnected with their own mother tongues and found new appreciation of their own cultural identities as speakers of these languages. Nation-building typically refers to the construction of a unified 'nation' and 'culture'; thus this means the suppression of cultural diversity in all its forms, including the devaluing of local cultures, languages, literatures, histories, traditions and customs (Kymlicka, 2000). Thus, in the name of nation-building, minoritized groups and communities whose values and cultures do not align with those of the dominant in society, have been silenced and disempowered, deprived of their right to shape their own future, in many cases through physically violent ways. Thus, when people begin to reclaim their own languages and cultures through everyday acts of resistance or assertion, it is usually suggestive of broader experiences of discrimination and social injustice (Sercombe and Tupas, 2014).

#### **The classroom and the 'real world': How do we bridge the gap?**

Educational systems have, of course, been explicitly engaged in transformative pedagogies. We educators are acutely aware of the many forms and acts of discrimination experienced by people from marginalized communities. The challenge, however, has been about how to get our students (and the educational community in general) to become self-reflective citizens of the country who do

not simply question prevalent harmful practices and ideologies but, more importantly, who act on them and work toward transforming them.

One way forward – although by no means the only way – is to draw inspiration from the everyday acts of assertion and resistance of fans such as those of ALAMAT. Instead of 'feeding' our pupils and students with educational content which we assume to be relevant to them, we should rather ask why our students find such content irrelevant or useless. By entering their world and endeavour to understand them through their music, fashion, and dreams, we act as bridge to the gaping distance between the classroom and their world (Rennie, 2011). Many students have dm'd me (messed me privately on Twitter) and expressed their frustration over their teachers looking down on their plans either to use P-Pop (Philipino Pop music) in their class projects on history or culture, or use it as their topic for their research because

it is supposed to be not a serious topic or not academic enough. I must say these are huge opportunities missed to open up conversations on very important topics concerning social identities, social justice and nation-building in ways that our pupils and students can truly invest in. Our students are experts in pop culture. If we recognize this and thus begin to give them voice on topics over which they can claim ownership or authority, we may just be able to crack open conversations which can lead them – on their own volition -- to act on injustices which saturate their everyday lives.

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### Learning from our students

What the fans of ALAMAT did to my article was in no way anticipated or planned. We can certainly learn from it by trying to understand why they did what they did. First of all, they must have found the content of the article accessible and relevant. From my perspective, I wrote it to promote awareness of inequalities of multilingualism in the country. All my life as a scholar and educator, I have sought to visibilize multilingualism and multiculturalism in the country, itself an irony in a country which is deeply multilingual and multicultural. The Philippines is an archipelago with more than 7,000 islands and close to 200 indigenous languages, but educational policies have historically favoured colonial languages, especially English for the past century, and the Manila-centric Filipino national language. All other Philippine languages (including literatures written in them) have been relegated to the margins, and their speakers discriminated against because of their *promdi* ('from the province') accents and languages. One of the members of ALAMAT, Tomas, whose mother tongue is Bicolano, once narrated in an Instagram live, how he lost commercial and movie opportunities in the past because his accent was viewed as markedly *promdi* but expressed relief over the fact that ALAMAT has taught him to embrace his own regional identity as Bicolano, unafraid and unashamed of his own language and accent.

But how does one visibilize multilingualism if one only speaks to scholars and educators? For this advocacy to be successful, the public at large, the young people most especially, must be engaged in the conversation. This is why I have sought to do it with P-Pop. This is by no means an innovation. Scholars and educators have been engaged in the use of music as cultural and linguistic projects, for example in community initiatives to use hip-hop and its accompanying 'resistance vernaculars' (Mitchell, 2000) to preserve cultures and languages. In my case, it was not a 'forced' advocacy; I started as a stan of many P-Pop groups such as the globally successful SB19 about whom I have written on hegemonic visuals, identities and languages in national newspapers. Consequently, I found an ally in artists such as ALAMAT. One scholar and colleague once introduced me before my talk as someone who has changed my research areas – from Unequal Englishes and inequalities to P-Pop. This is untrue. P-Pop is one context within which I talk about these topics.

Secondly, if people are firmly invested in what they feel and do, they take ownership over their own actions. In teacher education,

the focus is largely on 'how to' approaches to teaching and learning, and much less on helping student-teachers unpack and problematize prevalent practices and beliefs in the field (Fránquiz et al., 2019). ALAMAT fans who distributed copies of my article were not taught to do it. They must have thought of it on their own because of their own self-realization about unequal languages and suppression of regional identities and cultures. ALAMAT has offered them a culturally multilayered discography, even as it entertains them with the group's powerful visuals, fashionable ensemble of street and formal wear, and intricate but sometimes alluring choreographies. For example, *Kasmala*, a song literally about one's obsession for a woman, could be read as Filipinos' unending submission to colonial mentality, thus the need to break free from it. *ABKD*, a child-like playful song, actually highlights colorism as one of today's social ills and raises awareness of the discrimination of our indigenous people, such as the *Aetas*. *ILY ILY*, inspired by a regional Hiligaynon lullaby, reframes the narrative by making it a story about Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) and the social impact of the separation between them and their families back home. This is edutainment – education and entertainment at the same time.

Just like many educators with a sophisticated vision of education, ALAMAT does not teach us what to do or how to act on current social problems. It enjoins fans and casual listeners to participate in deep conversations about these problems and helps them create or experience cognitive and affective breakthroughs. If one watches reaction videos to ALAMAT's music videos on YouTube, they will find a stunningly wide repertoire of affective responses. Upon hearing their local language(s) in an ALAMAT song, their facial expressions show disbelief, shock, elation, and sadness; some are rendered momentarily speechless, with tears flowing down their cheeks. Note that the "languages" in the songs are a mere few words and phrases, moving from one language to another, yet what is fascinating is that these have triggered an immense amount of emotions from the reactors. All this only shows one thing: it is not common to hear one's own

mother tongue(s) in mainstream Philippine songs. Historically, they have been silenced by dominant voices of colonialism and nationalist politics such that what may be described as token use of particular languages has generated small but unexpected shudders of emotion. These may have mobilized the (re)opening of spaces for the reassertion of people's suppressed identities and languages. Emotions are "historical in nature" (Park, 2015, p. 61), thus affect and

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emotion have a key role to play “in mediating the integrated relationship between the individual’s lived experiences and structural conditions of everyday life” (Park, 2015, p. 71; Williams, 1977). We should, in other words, never underestimate everyday acts of assertion, agency and/or resistance because these may constitute affective citizenship interventions (Zembylas, 2013) mobilized by individuals to act against conditions of unfreedom and disempowerment in the process of their participation in nation-building projects.

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### Concluding Thoughts

It is difficult to pin down the specific instantiations which may have triggered some ALAMAT fans to advocate for multilingualism and promote it as a cultural resource, but knowing that they have chosen to distribute copies of my article, it is probably safe to say that these may have to do with their newly found desire to reaffirm linguistic and cultural diversity

in the country as central to the nation-building project. Again, they were not taught how to do it; they were encouraged, perhaps even provoked, by some sort of music and the conversations surrounding it to do something about it. I believe that one of our main tasks as educators is to bring the world of our pupils and students into the classroom and be immersed in it as we aim to “educate” them. Pop culture in all its forms such as music, fashion, and everyday language, is a cultural resource for the (re)affirmation of our multiple identities which have long been erased or suppressed by projects of nation-building. Linguistic and cultural diversity shapes all nations today, thus as we prepare our pupils and students to become citizens, we should be clear first of all about what citizenship education is all about -- and it is about drawing closer towards and embracing everything about our pupils and students, their worlds, their languages, their accents. ●

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