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Maria Hantzopoulos  
Vassar College, mahantzopoulos@vassar.edu

Monisha Bajaj  
University of San Francisco, mibajaj@usfca.edu

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Article

## **Mapping Our Dreams and Rooting our Futures: Possibility Trees as Essential Pedagogy and Praxis in Peace, Social Justice, and Human Rights Education**

Maria Hantzopoulos\* & Monisha Bajaj\*\*

Vassar College and University of San Francisco

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\* Maria Hantzopoulos is Professor of Education at Vassar College, where she is the coordinator of the Adolescent Education Certification Program and a participating faculty member in International Studies; Media Studies; Urban Studies; Women, Feminist, and Queer Studies; and the Forced Migration Committee. She is the author of four books as well as many articles on school culture, project-based assessment, peace and human rights education, and critical ethnic/social studies curricula. As a community-engaged scholar and practitioner, Maria regularly conducts professional development for educators both locally and globally, and is active in writing curriculum for schools, NGOs, and youth organizations. Her projects and research have been supported by the Spencer Foundation, the British Council, and the Social Science Research Council. [mahantzopoulos@vassar.edu](mailto:mahantzopoulos@vassar.edu)

\*\* Monisha Bajaj is Professor of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco as well as a Visiting Professor at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa. She is the editor and author of eight books and numerous articles on issues of peace, human rights, migration, and education. Dr. Bajaj has developed curriculum and teacher training materials—particularly related to human rights, racial justice, ethnic studies, and sustainability—for non-profit and national advocacy organizations as well as inter-governmental organizations, such as UNICEF and UNESCO. In 2015, she received the Ella Baker/Septima Clark Human Rights Award (2015) from Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). [mibajaj@usfca.edu](mailto:mibajaj@usfca.edu)

## Abstract

*In this article, we explore a pedagogical and conceptual tool we have refined and developed for the fields of peace, social justice, and human rights education: “the possibility tree.” Initially introduced in our 2021 book, we explore this tool in more depth in this article to show how such pedagogical and conceptual processes are key components of peace and human rights education praxis with greater implications for both research and teaching. Our aim is to provide an applied praxis-oriented framework for educators, practitioners, researchers, and theorists that are concerned with larger issues of peace, justice, and human rights. While we do not delve into the distinct theoretical concepts and genealogies (and their intersections) of peace and human rights education in this article, we use this opportunity to expand upon the importance of pedagogical and conceptual practices and their applicability, as these integral processes have ultimately remained underexplored in scholarship. To illustrate the potential, we also discuss how the concept of the “possibility tree” has been used by scholars and practitioners since the book’s publication in 2021. We posit that tools such as the possibility tree are necessary interventions, especially as pedagogies and practices of peace and human rights education are often sidelined in broader discussions that privilege theoretical framings over implications for pedagogy and praxis .*

**Keywords:** peace education, human rights education, social justice, critical pedagogy, praxis

## Introduction

Over the past five decades, peace education and human rights education have moved out of the margins and have emerged distinctly and separately as global fields of scholarship and practice. While it was quite common for these formerly obscure fields to be somewhat peripheral to other more mainstream forms of education or scholarship (to the extent that some people have never heard of them), the terms peace and human rights education are no longer as unknown as they used to be. Promoted through multiple efforts, including through the United Nations (UN), civil society, grassroots educators, in preschool to grade 12 educational settings, and in higher education, both of these fields consider content, processes, and educational structures that seek to dismantle various forms of violence, as well as move towards broader cultures of peace, justice, and human rights. Both fields consider the *content* as well as the *processes* of education, and analyze the *structures* in which learning takes place in formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). Though these two fields have developed distinctly and separately, their growing

presence in movements, scholarship, and educational settings have often raised questions not only about what each is, but also about how they are distinct and similar.

In 2021, we, the authors of this article, published a book (which also launched a new book series on Peace and Human Rights Education with Bloomsbury Publishing) that transpired after over two decades worth of conversations between us and among our colleagues and students about the similarities and differences in the fields.<sup>1</sup> As both of us are scholars whose work and teaching engages these fields separately, but also bridges them, we decided that this introductory book could help untangle the core concepts that define both fields, unpacking their histories, conceptual foundations, models and practices, and scholarly production. Moreover, we also considered the overlap between them (and their relationship to social justice education) to produce fertile ground for new engagement across the fields. As a result, *Educating for Peace and Human Rights: An Introduction* (2021, Bloomsbury) was born. The book examines the nexus of these fields and provides a review of the scholarly research on the challenges and possibilities of implementing peace and human rights education in diverse global sites. While these fields are distinct with their own unique bodies of literature, genealogies, epistemologies, and practices, their intersections provide a bridge for those whose work rests at the nexus, and view it as a launching point for more robust critical engagement.

Although these theoretical distinctions and intersections are the crux of the manuscript, the book also introduces pedagogical possibilities that remain at the core of peace and human rights education. In this article, we discuss one of these options, “the possibility tree,” a pedagogical and conceptual tool introduced in our 2021 book. We assert how it and similar tools are key components of peace, social justice, and human rights education praxis, with implications for both research and teaching. We conceive of the possibility tree as an *applied praxis-oriented framework* for educators,

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this article draws on our 2021 book *Educating for Peace and Human Rights: An Introduction* ([www.bit.ly/Hantz-Bajaj](http://www.bit.ly/Hantz-Bajaj)), and we thank Bloomsbury Academic Publishing for permission to use sections of the book for this article.

practitioners, researchers, and theorists that are concerned with larger issues of peace, justice, and human rights. In particular, the possibility tree can be utilized (1) to make meaning of learning and envision possibilities for more just futures; (2) to complement Freire's "problem tree," a popular education tool described later in this article, in order to identify new avenues for community engaged praxis; and/or (3) to map new research directions. While we do not delve into the theoretical distinctions and convergences of peace, social justice, and human rights education in this article (see Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021, for that), we view this article as an opportunity to expand upon the applicability of conceptual and pedagogical tools like the 'possibility tree' that were introduced in the book. In the subsequent sections, we also discuss how the possibility tree has been utilized and purposed by other scholars and practitioners since the book's publication in 2021 in various ways. We posit that tools such as the possibility tree are necessary interventions, especially as pedagogies and practices of peace and human rights education are often sidelined in broader discussions that center their theoretical framings, yet rarely go beyond the abstract.

### **Pedagogies of Peace, Social Justice, and Human Rights**

At the heart of much of the work of peace, social justice, and human rights education across contexts is both reflective and ongoing engagement and praxis, and the opportunities to imagine and work towards more just and sustainable futures. While we explore more deeply the theoretical foundations of these fields in the book, we note here that that work and pedagogy of the late Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire (1970) in particular—rooted in critical consciousness, dialogical relationships and practice, transformative agency, and problem-posing—is often a vehicle for the enactment of peace, social justice, and human rights education. While there are other theorists and practitioners that provide pragmatic guidance for these types of pedagogies (Reardon, 1995), we are inspired by Freirean approaches because of their explicit transformative liberatory potential. Though Freire noted that education has the potential to indoctrinate and perpetuate hegemony and the status quo, he was unequivocal in its possibilities to also liberate, stating,

“Education either functions as an instrument... to bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which [human beings]... discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2000, p. 34). Moreover, Freire (1970; 2000) always maintained that this type of critical engagement for social change “... cannot be purely intellectual but must also involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must also include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis” (p. 65). Thus, the commitment to reflection and thinking insists upon and opens up space for praxis-oriented teaching, research, and practice; in turn, this continual reconsideration and type of pedagogy is fundamental in enacting peace, social justice, and human rights education (Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016).

### **Freire’s Problem Tree**

While Freire (1970; 2000) employed several types of dynamic pedagogical tools in popular education (participatory research and action, culture circles, generative word mapping, etc.), one of the methods used for problem-posing was the “problem tree.” The problem tree is a visual device that allows people to explore the root causes of a particular issue that affects their daily lives by mapping these causes in relation to quotidian experiences and larger systemic policies and practices. By making and visualizing the connections between one’s lived experiences and structural framings, the idea is that people in communities can collectively analyze and come up with ways to transform their social worlds towards a more just and humane future. The problem tree has resonance with other heuristics developed by peace theorists such as Johan Galtung (1969) in his elaboration of the ‘triangle of violence,’ which offers an analytical tool for identifying forms of direct, structural and cultural violence in society. Freire’s problem tree has been taken up by local actors in a variety of settings and this specific community engagement is critical to its enactment (see Hantzopoulos, 2015). In many ways, the process of creating a problem tree is one that not only invites local engagement, but also encourages *local* analyses and solutions to *local* problems, while simultaneously connecting them to larger structural and systemic issues others are also facing. Overall, the problem tree activity is

concerned with both the *process* and the *content*, and sees these two threads as intertwined, ongoing, and embedded in non-teleological continual reflection and dynamism.

The work of urban education and Indigenous studies scholar Eve Tuck (2009; 2012) with New York City (NYC) youth and other local stakeholders is an illustrative example of how the problem tree can be deployed in both conceptualizing and mapping issues, and, in this case, with their experiences with NYC public schools. The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD),<sup>2</sup> which Tuck documents in her work, was formed to conduct youth participatory action research on New York City public school policies and practices that produce school push-out (see [www.evetuck.com](http://www.evetuck.com)). As part of their work, they undertook mapping a problem tree about how and why their school system wasn't working for them. In the reproducible tree they created, one can visually see how the roots, trunks, branches, and leaves, all give a full generative picture of why NYC schools are not working from the perspective of students who are ostensibly recipients of that system.

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://faculty.newpaltz.edu/evetuck/index.php/credd/>







represents the attitudes or beliefs that keep the symptoms in play. Examples of ripples of the trunk might include *there aren't enough seats for all of the students in my classes*, *resources are unfairly distributed*, and *the generally held fear of young people in the U.S.* We then ask the question, “What roots the trunk?” in order to map the roots of the problem. The roots are the systemic and structural sources of the trunk ripples and the leaves. The roots might include *capitalism* and *hierarchical power systems of domination*. (<http://www.evetuck.com/problem-tree>)

As researchers, the CREDD project adapted this method to not only conceptually map systemic issues in NYC public schools, but also used this as an approach to “collaboratively generate research questions, as part of our participatory design of research projects, as a tool of data collection in focus groups, and as a tool to facilitate collective analysis of myriad data” ([www.evetuck.com/problem-tree](http://www.evetuck.com/problem-tree)). Problem trees are therefore not only simply utilized to describe problems; they also function as community-led dialogues or conversations, and can be utilized as a springboard to generate critical consciousness and inspire new ways of imagining more just and inclusive spaces. By focusing on how one’s lived experiences intersect and are shaped by larger systemic issues, they can be used as a point of departure to consider contextualized approaches that move towards dismantling oppressive structures and creating new ways of being in the world. In this sense, problem trees hold potential as both a pedagogical *and* conceptual tool with implications for teaching, learning, research, and practice.

### **The Possibility Tree**

Inspired by the pedagogical process and visual product of problem trees (which helps map the structural roots and the quotidian realities that manifest from injustices that individuals and communities face), we decided in our book (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021) to flip this model to create the ‘possibility tree’—a tool that both conceptualizes and delineates the ways in which peace and human rights education might be intertwined, and also one that provides a visual catalyst for imagining new worlds and possibilities. According to Reardon (1988), envisioning is vital to the pedagogy and practice

of peace education that is aimed at sustaining justice and human rights, as she explains that, “Thinking about how the world might be and envisioning a society characterized by justice are the essence of conceptualizing the conditions that comprise positive peace. If we are to educate for peace, both teachers and students need to have some notion of the transformed world we are educating for” (p. 25). In the following sections, we delineate how the possibility tree might be used as both a pedagogical tool for teaching, a conceptual tool for research, and sometimes both simultaneously as the distinctions are often blurred in both the process and product.

### ***The Possibility Tree as a Pedagogical Tool for Teaching***

The initial catalyst for creating a possibility tree was born in a classroom as a means to illustrate and model some of the fundamentally fluid and generative pedagogies undergirding critical approaches to peace, social justice, and human rights education. In order to embody both the spirit and the heart of this process rather than just impose only our own understandings, in the introductory chapter of our book (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021), we included a possibility tree made with Maria’s former undergraduate-level students after they took the course “Education for Peace, Justice, and Human Rights” at Vassar College. We share their work to both show how local meanings shape people’s perceptions of peace, justice, and human rights, as well as model the dynamic process.

Reflecting a similar process as Tuck (2009), the students mapped out the roots, trunks, branches, and leaves to obtain a more thorough understanding of the fields and their relationships to each other by considering “What does a culture of peace, justice, and human rights look like?” This process took place during several meetings outside of class in the Fall of 2019 over the course of two months, and Maria (the instructor) only provided the prompts and questions. The group of undergraduate students—Kevin Arce, Natalie Bober, Grace Han, Alice Woo, and Adam Weil—took the process from there to flesh this out over time and met on their own without Maria. While they were all undergraduate students at Vassar at the time, and shared a lens that was certainly influenced by that context, they all also have



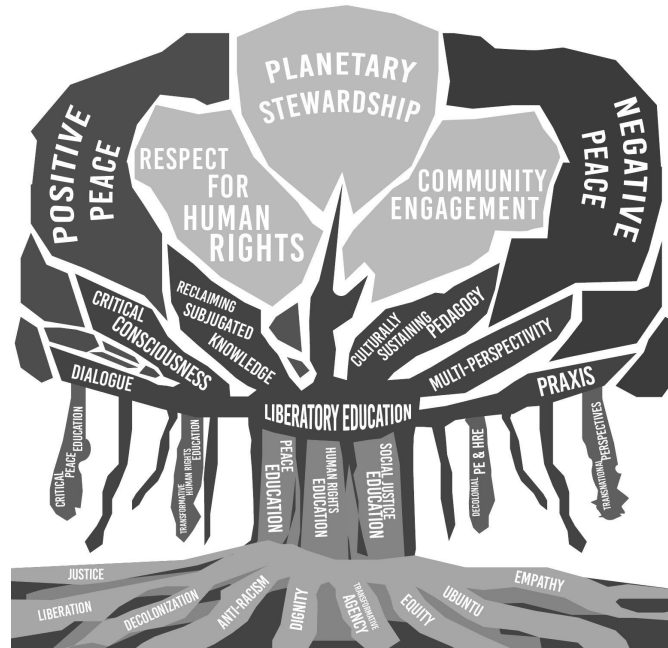
included education, the eradication of direct violence, the enactment of positive peace, people protesting for social change, and more. While the group did not name notions like critical consciousness, transformative agency, or even peace and human rights education (just education), their symptoms often implicitly relied on these processes through the ways they relate to the roots and the branches. In other words, there was an assumption of what education truly should be (to inherently embody these concepts) when looking at the tree as an interconnected (and not isolated) whole.

To articulate what would be listed in the branches, the group decided to build off the “nourishment” from the symptoms and describe how this might manifest in policy and practice; they included concepts like healthcare, redistribution of wealth, etc. The leaves then became the articulations of these concepts and more specifically, how these policies manifest in individuals’ and communities’ lived experiences. There is a range of possibilities expressed including voter rights, paid family leave, affordable housing, and more. Further, one can see how each branch/vehicle leads to the possible lived experience – the branches and subsequent leaves were color-coded in the original (reproduced in greyscale here) – to show how the branches nurture the leaves.

While this tree is partial and incomplete, is contextually-situated and bound, and certainly more could be added or defined (or even contested), it shows the pedagogy of peace and human rights education in action, both in process and through a ‘work-in-progress’ product (as it is something that can be remade and shifted over time). As well, the tree visually presents ways to view how these two fields might interlock foundationally—despite their distinct characteristics—which is the crux of the arguments developed in the book and also expanded upon in the next section with Figure 3 (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). Moreover, for Figure 2, the possibility tree can also serve as a complement to Freire’s problem tree to begin to map avenues for addressing the issues that plague our schools, communities, and societies. In this sense, while this example illustrates its potential as a pedagogical tool, it also may serve as a conceptual tool to map understandings of the shared intersections of the fields of peace education and human rights education.

### *The Possibility Tree as a Conceptual Tool for Research*

As we were working on our book, and as suggested above, we were deeply influenced by the impact of the image of Maria’s students’ possibility tree and began to think how we might visually explain some of the conceptual arguments that we were articulating in the book. We decided that a visual heuristic in the form of a possibility tree might provide readers an opening to what we explore more deeply in the book through charting the holistic ecosystems of peace, social justice, and human rights education. As a result, we use the visual shown in Figure 3, titled Educating for Peace and Human Rights Possibility Tree (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021, p. 140), to illustrate the intersections and common principles of these fields after we discussed them separately in earlier chapters. We then offer a framework in that chapter for how educational visions can grow out of the common, shared soil of liberatory education projects, such as peace education and human rights education. Thus, we explain and bring this tree to the forefront in Chapter 5 of the book when we deeply discuss some of the intersections of the field and provide this visual to intersect the points, as seen in Figure 3.



*Figure 3: Educating for Peace and Human Rights Possibility Tree*

As seen in the Figure of the possibility tree, the single tree takes the form of a banyan tree to illustrate some shared underpinnings of the fields and the fertile terrain of their conceptual intersections. The roots are the foundational concepts and include dignity and transformative agency as well as the broader concepts of justice, liberation, decolonization, antiracism, equity, Ubuntu,<sup>4</sup> empathy, and solidarity. The large trunk of liberatory education has the fields of peace education, human rights education, and social justice closely wrapped around it, with many overlaps and intersections among these fields. Despite their key differences, peace education, social justice education, and human rights education—in their more critical, transformative, and engaged forms—coalesce around the goal of honoring the inherent dignity of learners and fostering within students transformative agency, defined as the ability to act in the face of structural constraints to advance individual and collective goals related to positive social change (Bajaj, 2009; Bajaj, 2018; Bourdieu in Reay, 2004; Hantzopoulos, 2016; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

We have conceptualized the branches as the ways learning takes place in these interrelated fields and include approaches such as dialogue, praxis, critical consciousness, culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), reclaiming subjugated knowledges, and multiperspectivity. The leaves and

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of *ubuntu*, a Nguni Bantu word meaning “humanity,” informed a collectivist philosophy known as ubuntuism propagated by decolonial thinkers throughout parts of Southern sub-Saharan Africa when nations like Zimbabwe and South Africa transitioned to majority rule. For instance, *ubuntu* informed the spirit of South Africa’s post-apartheid national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as defined by Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu to mean my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in [others]. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “a person is a person through other people.” I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good. (1999, pp. 34–5)

Peace education scholar Murithi argues that *ubuntu* offers a framework that emphasizes a shared humanity through “a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness” and promoting reconciliation, further elucidating the relevance of *ubuntu* for peace educators (2009, p. 227).

<sup>5</sup> The shared tenets of liberatory education, exemplified by peace education, human rights education, and social justice education, are as follows (1) Contextually Relevant Curricula/Pedagogy, (2) Recognition of Learners’ Inherent Dignity, (3) Deep Analyses of Social Inequalities, (4) Fostering of Critical Consciousness, and (5) Cultivation of Transformative Agency (see Bajaj, 2018; Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021)

fruits represent the broad outcomes that the fields espouse, such as positive peace, negative peace, community engagement, respect for human rights, planetary stewardship, and global citizenship. One of the unique features of banyan trees is their capacity to drop down new roots (which over time, conjoin and coalesce with the primary trunk). We argue that these new drop-down roots are the renewals of the field, spurred by its global spread and engagement by new scholars, reviving and building upon firm foundations and traditions in the spirit of reflexivity and growth. A few new directions in the image include critical peace education, transformative human rights education, decolonial approaches to peace and human rights education, and transrational perspectives; however, there may be and are more, and we have intentionally left some of the roots (as well as branches and leaves) blank to consider other possibilities. While this is not a complete metaphor for all of the linkages and themes raised among the fields in the book, we imagined that this possibility tree – as a work-in-progress product - might spark conversations about how these visions are entangled.

### ***Renewals and Extensions of the Possibility Tree***

At one of our book launch events in 2021, we were fortunate to have activist, scholar, and peace educator Margo Okazawa-Rey—who also serves as part of the advisory board for our book series—respond to the book. While she spoke about many themes (liberation, “mainstreaming” peace and human rights, putting civil rights in conversation with human rights) that related to the book, she was struck by both the possibility and problem tree metaphors, suggesting ways to push the metaphors further as we continue to think about addressing root causes of violence and imaginaries for more just sustainable futures. She offered:

I am thinking about the tree metaphor. I love the tree of possibilities as well as the problem tree. It’s interesting that now we are moving toward the tree of possibilities and not just staying with the tree of problems. Looking at both the problem tree and the possibility tree, I wonder about what kind of soil each tree is growing in? About the tree of possibility, what kind of soil must it, or its seed, be planted in



to ensure it thrives? What are the nourishing elements of that soil? What kinds of trees of possibilities must be planted and grown to ensure the survival of the planet and all its inhabitants? Perhaps equally important, what are the ways we can take the problems from the problem tree and compost them so that compost could and will enrich the soil in which it is growing to produce healthy “fruits” and “nuts,” to give the tree a chance to become healthy and fruit-bearing? Could that same compost be added to, or even constitute the soil mixture to plant and grow amazing new trees, more beautiful and generative than ever before?

I’ve been thinking about composting because, in my experiences as a teacher and activist, our main work is analyzing problems, then throwing away the problems, or unlearning something, like racism, or undoing something like various kinds of oppressions. I’m not sure unlearning and undoing are even possible. How can we ever unlearn how to ride a bicycle? How can we undo harm that has been inflicted? Are there ways to take all the bad stuff that’s with us, and somehow compost it? To think about the essences of some of those terrible things as “compostable” that provide us possibilities of transformation—which is what composting is. I wonder if we can use that metaphor to think deeply and creatively about not just getting rid of stuff, like anti-racism and anti- any form of oppression, but having a generative way to think about what to do with the problems growing on the problem tree—the politics and methodologies of possibilities and transformation. ([Book Launch Zoom Event](#), October 9, 2021)<sup>6</sup>

In this powerful passage, Okazawa-Rey discusses how the possibility tree can be further used to not just think about what comprises the roots, trunks, branches, and leaves, but also what is in and nourishes the actual soil on which the tree is planted. Moreover, she suggests the problem tree and its problems might be integral to this process of creating a possibility tree. She implores us to think about ways of not just discarding the “bad stuff,” but actually composting these branches and leaves and roots because, in reality, these things would need to be transformed, not simply tossed, even if

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<sup>6</sup> The October 9, 2021 book launch event recording can be accessed on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZGRR2JRjqQ>

radically altered and uprooted. As educators and researchers, this conversation sparks even more possibilities for mapping and envisioning. How might we not just consider the soil rooting the trees, but also the air quality, the light, and the water needed to nurture the tree and allow it to thrive (or conversely decay)? What new plants or grass can also sprout up in a more peaceful and just ecosystem? Or which roses, thorns, and buds manage to break through despite the odds and rise through the concrete (Shakur, 1989)?

Since the publication of the book and its launch, many people have been inspired by and used the possibility tree both as a conceptual tool for their research or as a pedagogical tool in their classrooms, and sometimes both simultaneously (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). Below, we share some of the concrete examples to both show how people have applied this in their own practice and also illustrate how they have made it their own.

jamal epperson is a doctoral candidate in International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco as well as a higher education professional. In the Group Leadership course that jamal teaches at Loyola Marymount University, they have had students create possibility trees to represent their social change models and approaches. In that class, jamal offers the following guidance to students:

Please use the following prompts to help guide your illustration/development of the Social Change Possibility Tree. As you create the tree, you might find it helpful to consider the following questions, with the trunk of the tree representing Social Change.

- *Roots:* What exists in the soil where we're planted? What historical events/life situations/external factors shaped our society?
- *Trunk:* What is at the core of our lives/what empowers us to work towards social change within?
- *Branches:* What theories, concepts, and practices grow from our goals and social change?
- *Leaves and fruit:* What are some of the outcomes of social change in the work we do?
- *New roots:* What new directions might praxis lead us towards?

- *Soil*: What kind of soil does this tree thrive in? What kinds of compost can help to nurture its growth? (From Dr. Okazawa-Rey's comments from October 2021: 'How do we compost the problems to enrich the soil of possibility—so that we are not just eradicating problems, but generating new possibilities?') (personal communication, February 7, 2024)

jamal reflects on students' responses to their introduction and extension of the possibility tree pedagogical tool in their class:

People have lowkey loved this activity with the tree. I think it does a really great job tying in the different levels of even the ecological systems theory to see how small roots can begin to flourish in new trees that create change. Love is already incorporated throughout each level as well and having the different sections with the roots being the foundational concepts, the large trunk of liberatory education, etc. provides a really great foundation to apply this tree to other fields like the Social Change Model we use for my class and more. ... I've also adapted some of the pieces we used from another course at the University of San Francisco with Dr. Emma Fuentes (on theoretical foundations of education) where she tied [Hantzopoulos & Bajaj's] tree to abolition. (personal communication, February 7, 2024)

While using the possibility tree in their work in higher education, jamal has also utilized the possibility tree framing for their dissertation research on restorative justice (RJ) in higher education. jamal states, "[I plan to use] it within my dissertation where love is intertwined throughout the tree to understand restorative and transformative justice in higher education" (personal communication, February 7, 2024). In a qualifying presentation for the department, jamal presented the research questions for their dissertation in a way that drew on the possibility tree to develop three levels of inquiry for their dissertation study (see Figure 4) to examine restorative justice through its praxis dimensions and the experiences of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) RJ practitioners in higher education.

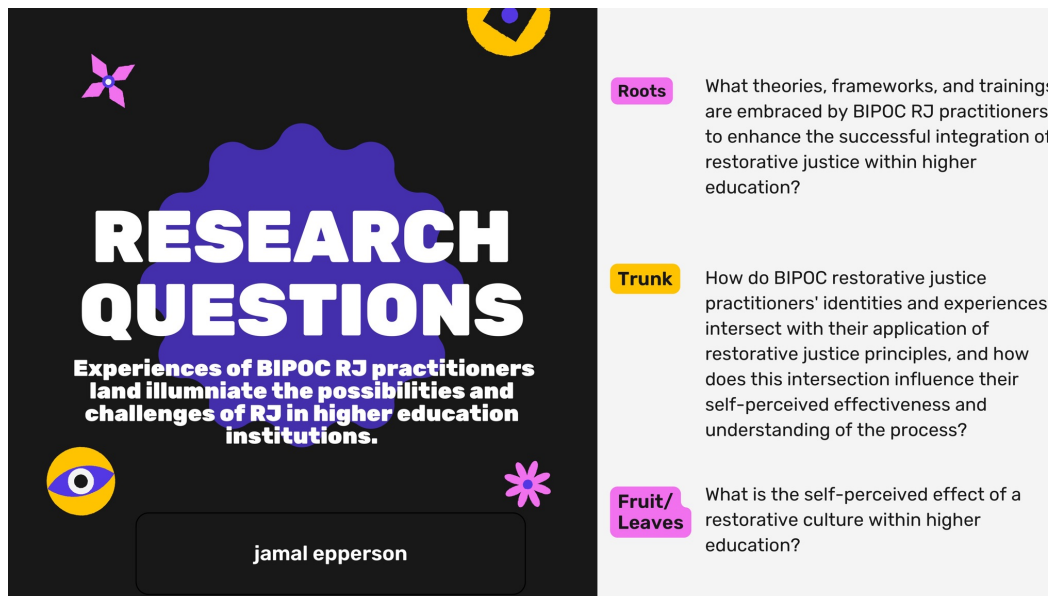


Figure 4: jamal epperson's Dissertation Research Questions and Framing

Nomisha Kurian, a researcher at the University of Cambridge, also has utilized the possibility tree both for framing new interdisciplinary research she has undertaken as well as in her higher education teaching. She shared the following:

The biggest practical application I can name right now is that I'm using [the possibility tree] to talk about building more links between the world of artificial intelligence (AI)—the very technocratic technology-driven, engineering-dominated and scientific, paradigm-dominated world—and the world of children's rights and the work of educators, social workers, community workers and child psychologists. The image of the possibility tree is helping me in many different ways.

First, it's putting forward this idea of two disciplines talking to each other. In the book, it's this beautiful link between peace education and human rights education and I'm trying to build on that and make a similar link between AI development and education, child rights, child well-being. It's helping me present a powerful ecological metaphor for the need to bring these two fields together.

Second, this image of roots and branches intertwining, there's a suggestion there of not just bringing two fields into conversation, but really thinking, do we actually have shared concerns? Are there maybe more shared histories than we think? Is there some unexpected common ground? And what happens if we try to grow together? It offers an opportunity to play around with possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration and actually being able to talk about practical possibilities for two or more fields growing together.

Third, it also provides a vocabulary to talk about the stakeholders in that ecosystem because if we're building on the metaphor completely, then we also have this chance to name everybody who's in the ecosystem around this possibility tree. In my case, it's everyone from robotics engineers, to software developers, to teachers, to community workers, to families, and to, of course, children. So overall, it works very well as a holistic metaphor. (personal communication, February 12, 2024)

In our conversation, Nomisha discussed how mapping the intersections of these two seemingly-disparate fields for her research has offered new ways of thinking for her and her collaborators.

Nomisha also discussed her teaching at the University of Cambridge and her integration of the possibility tree in a course she has designed on the ethics of AI and critical AI literacies. She used the possibility tree by placing an image of the tree from the book (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021) on the board, with a modified question, “what does an ethical AI future look like?” Nomisha reflected that the possibility tree “is such a fun tool to use in a classroom because it helps provide a hopeful atmosphere” and that she was able to use the tree as a “jumping off point to get students brainstorming about what ethical AI might look like” (personal communication, February 12, 2024). Nomisha found that students exercised their own “agency to develop more branches of the possibility tree,” seeing “themselves as change agents” (personal communication, February 12, 2024). She reported that students had a stimulating discussion about questions and ethical dilemmas such as “Do we really need AI?” “Is it the best replacement for human-to-human interaction?” and “What are some positive or socially just uses of AI?” In reflecting

on her engagement with the possibility tree in both her research and teaching praxis, Nomisha shared that:

Right now, with some of the most pressing global challenges, from poverty to the climate crisis to violence, there is a great need for research and knowledge to be deeply interdisciplinary. We simply can't afford to be in silos. I would love to see a copy of the possibility tree in every department at the university and every think tank, or anything at all that's been used to prompt people's thinking. (personal communication, February 12, 2024)

jamal and Nomisha's extension and application of the possibility tree framework in their teaching as well as research demonstrates how creative extensions of the heuristic are exemplifying what we have called for in terms of the continual renewals of the field – where ideas are built upon, refined, extended and made more relevant in the contexts in which individuals in the field are engaged in praxis.

At Boston College, two instructors of courses in the graduate school of education, Kiruba Murugaiah and Aaron Coleman, have integrated the problem tree and possibility tree with their students. Kiruba noted the following:

In Spring 2023, I designed and taught an undergraduate course, *Reimagining School and Society*, for the Department of Formative Education at Boston College's Lynch School of Education. The course interrogates American schooling's formal and hidden curriculum of tacit norms, behaviors and values reflecting the dominant cultural ethos. We also think about ways to foster children and youth's learning and education to address the urgent need for justice and love for nature and humanity in contemporary U.S. schooling by drawing on cross-cultural wisdom. Students read and discussed original texts (e.g., Horace Mann's *12th report*, W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*, Carter G. Woodson's *Miseducation of the Negro*, John Dewey's *School and Social Progress*, etc.) to develop their philosophical thinking on what it means to be an educated person. They also read empirical studies and critical essays from contemporary scholars like bell

hooks, Lisa Delpit, David Labaree, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kevin Kumashiro, and others.

Facilitating in-class discussions around these texts was a daunting task. I kept asking myself, what is the best way to both capture the higher level ideas without losing sight of nuance over the course of the semester, and to do so in a collaborative manner. Throughout the semester, we problematized different manifestations of inequity and injustice in children's education and schooling. I used the problem tree to help students distinguish between root causes, what feeds a system of oppression, and how that manifests in the classroom and schools. It helped to make sense of a problem that at first seemed impossible to grapple with.

Towards the end of the semester, we shifted gears to "reimagining" by rooting ourselves in cross-cultural wisdom. For this, the possibility tree was useful in our visioning. During one of the classes, students collaboratively brainstormed on the question "How, if at all, can bell hooks' ethics of love, African conceptions of ubuntu, Indigenous knowledge, or other ideas inform an education toward a culture of peace?" Students generated and shared a plethora of ideas connecting these concepts to their own settings by thinking about curriculum, pedagogy, classroom practices, discipline, and school-community relationships. (personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Both Kiruba and Aaron discussed how the visual of the trees inspired discussion and application among students of different backgrounds from the U.S. as well as among international students who began to consider structural dimensions of schooling in their home contexts.

In the Spring of 2022, Maria also worked with another group of her students (Melanie Hidalgo, Arlene Chen, Samantha Cavagnolo, Jordan Shamoun, Lily Thompson, Cyan Jackson, Kevin McAuliffe, Valerie Munoz Gonzalez, and Felicity Rakochy) to partner with a local teacher, Shanna Andrawis, in her high school Economics class. Together, the group developed a six-week course on Human Rights, Migration, and the Economy for 12th



graders. While the goals of the unit were multifold,<sup>7</sup> the intent was to create a curriculum that allowed students to both make meaning of their own experiences, connect these to the distinct experiences of others, and use these as *catalysts for social change and action*. In their opening lesson, they used possibility trees to have the high school students think about what tangible items are needed to both live in dignity and justice and meet basic human needs (manifested in the leaves, fruits and flowers of the trees) while grounding the systems needed for these items in roots. This was a quick activity that opened up the class to thinking about “human rights” in general, even before introducing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In this case, it was used more as a warm-up, rather than synthesis of information, but definitely opened the way for more robust thinking.

Inspired by this activity, Shanna Andrawis, the teacher, decided to extend the possibility tree metaphor to another class, her 10th grade global history class, to open up a unit on human rights and specifically the UDHR. In this case, she augmented the process as a “recap” tool to think about what they had already studied that year, so that they could apply that knowledge to their understanding of human rights. For example, she gave her students three prompts:

- **Leaves, fruits, flowers:** *What rights do people need in order to live in dignity and justice? YOU DECIDE!*
- **Roots:** *What historical events or documents have you studied this year that have helped to bring about those rights? Prior Knowledge!*
- **Trunk:** *What people have we studied this year who have helped make those rights possible? Prior Knowledge!*

In this case, the tool wasn’t just used for envisioning, but also for synthesizing what they had previously learned and applying it to the process to understand what human rights are more deeply. The students then worked in groups on creating their trees. However, Shanna added one more element to the process that she implemented a few days later. After studying the Rwandan genocide, she asked students to go back to their human rights

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the goals of this collaborative course between Poughkeepsie High School and Vassar College, see, <https://sites.google.com/vassar.edu/our-lives-our-world/home?authuser=o>

trees, and to create “dead leaves” to describe the rights that were violated. The process is explained below:

- **Ask:** In your small groups, create a “dead leaf” for your human rights tree *describing ONE human rights violation experienced during the Rwandan genocide.*
- Sentence starter, “During the Rwandan Genocide, the right to \_\_\_\_\_ was violated.”
  - *Write the right, not just the Article #*
  - *Explain how the human right was violated*
  - *Explain how the violation affected people*

By revisiting the tree that they made earlier, Shanna used this process to apply what they had just learned to something that they previously learned. In a way, she was able to engage them in a cyclical process of praxis and meaning-making, and inspire critical reflection on deeper issues about rights being violated and unmet. She was able to do this in an age-appropriate way for her 10th graders.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As we have seen from these examples, there are myriad ways to apply the possibility tree that we have developed (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021) to both learning, research and praxis. The prompts around cultures of peace, justice, and human rights that Maria’s students utilized (see Figure 2) could be engaged or modified based on context. As we see in Poughkeepsie High School, it can be applied to understand what has been studied as well. Moreover, this type of pairing with something akin to the problem tree doesn’t have to involve two trees, as we have seen in Shanna Andrawis’ idea to add “dead leaves” or Margo Okazawa-Rey’s call to compost and regenerate the problems into the soil upon which possibilities might grow and expand. Or similar to the way that Jamal Epperson has utilized the heuristic as a frame

for their dissertation, the possibility tree could engender new forms of thinking about issues, topics, or phenomena.

The problem tree activity, conceptualized by Freire as a means to understand the root causes of forms of violence and oppression, can be paired well with the possibility tree activity, where, once problems are identified and discussed, new practices and ways of being can be imagined and brought into focus to spur necessary action. In this way, the possibility tree can be a tool for “freedom dreaming” (Kelley, 2002; Love, 2023) and visioning beyond the present to preferred futures. This aligns with scholarship in the field of peace education that calls for “futures education” with scholars, such as David Hicks, stating that “A futures perspective is crucial to effective teaching and learning in peace education. By enabling learners to think more critically and creatively about the forces that create probable and preferable futures, they are able to engage in more purposeful and focused action for change” (Hicks, 2008, p. 132).

As a futures-oriented conceptual and pedagogical tool, we hope that the possibility tree inspires students, groups and communities to craft their own trees, tailored to their own realities, hopes, and visions. Such efforts can help “pluriversalize human rights education and peace education” in order to “recognize and include forms of knowledge that have been subjugated by modernity and coloniality... and to advance epistemic justice” (Zembylas, 2020, p. 23). With many trees of possibility sprouting across context, they can offer needed oxygen to fuel our efforts, movements, and imaginations towards envisioning greater peace and justice in our schools, communities, and across the world.

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