Nonviolence Education as a practice of rehumanization:

Can self-enquiry practices positively reshape teachers'relationship with their social world?

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Received April 2025
Accepted for publication June 2025
Published November 2025

Abstract

The underlying philosophy of nonviolence encourages practitioners to recognize the humanity in those who are different or thought of as less valuable. Developing empathy is a key in that recognition, and this is why it was a key component of a nonviolence training program undertaken with trainee teachers in Chile. Participants engaged in a series of exercises aimed at fostering empathy and compassion, informed by the principles of contemplative pedagogy. Challenges notwithstanding, results show success in recognizing the many shared elements of our human experience and in helping participants develop feelings of warmth and closeness towards others.

Keywords: *nonviolence education; empathy; teacher training; contemplative pedagogy; holistic education; emotional regulation*

(1) Introduction

There has been an increased interest from North America-based researchers in bringing non-violence strategies into colleges and teacher training programs, (see Lauricella, 2019 for a study in Canada, and Wang, 2013 and 2018, for research conducted in the United States) as well as prisons (McCarthy, 2014), along with an effort to integrate contemplative practices such as meditation, breathing exercises, journaling and self-reflection into the classroom ecosystem, in order to facilitate an atmosphere of collective well-being that links to the ideas above concerning interconnectedness (Barbezat and Bush, 2014; Bollinger and Wang, 2013, Lin et al, 2019). These perspectives and approaches are currently missing in Chilean scholarship at a time when studies have begun to look into classroom violence and its causes (Becerra et al., 2019; Trucco and Inostroza, 2021; U. de Chile, 2022); as a consequence, there was a clear opportunity to address such instances of violence at a time when, as Lopez et al., (2021) indicate, Chilean teachers currently face the challenge of needing to be more dialogical and less punitive in their praxis, in a

country where exclusionary and harsh disciplinary practices are and have historically been acceptable.

With this in mind, I embarked on a 6-month long research project to co-develop a pedagogy of nonviolence with Chilean trainee teachers. Nonviolence education has gained traction over the last decade; this can be seen in the work of Wang (2024) and her advocacy for cultivating inner peace; Butler (2020), who positions nonviolence as a social practice that seeks to promote equality, and Herrera-Fuentes (2021), who uses contemplation and self-inquiry as a pedagogical practice. Therefore, an integral part of this project was the use of contemplative practices in each of the 28 sessions we had together, guided by the question *"Does the use of self-enquiry practices produce any change in the ways student-teachers view themselves and their relationship with their social world?".* This paper, which represents a smaller part of a larger research project, details the impact contemplative practices had in reshaping participants' view of others, their relationship with them and their paradigms shifts concerning their engagement with their social world.

(2) Conceptual Framework

2.1 Eastern philosophies and approaches within this research

Contemplative practices, as described by Barbezat et al. (2013) seek to cultivate in the learners not only higher self-awareness, but also greater empathy and improved relationships with others and the world , without advocating an ideology or belief system (nor negating them). Studies by Hutcherson et al., (2008) and Pace (2009), for instance, have shown the positive impact of training on loving-kindness meditation at the level of social connection and positivity towards others. These principles should be an intrinsic part of the classroom ecosystem, and they are particularly relevant in Chile, where this research was carried out. To illustrate this, since 2006, the so called "Penguins Revolution" [1]and right up until October 2019, there were a series of student movements that demanded educational reforms, such as eliminating school admission tests, universally free college tuition, universally free school transport and the eradication of policies that perpetuate segregation (Bellei et al., 2014). Often, however, these demonstrations and movements have been marred by groups of participants that have routinely resorted to and justified violent acts; these have included barricading the entrance to schools and universities, looting, and burning and destroying public property, such as pharmacies, commuter buses, subway stations and supermarkets, (Marino, 2006; Muñoz, 2006; Ponce, 2019).

2.2 The Eastern perspective on inclusiveness and inter-connectedness

Bell hooks (1994) highlights Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas on teaching as a cornerstone to her own pedagogical approach, particularly his emphasis on teaching in a way that 'emphasizes a wholeness, a union of mind, body and spirit" (p.14). Nhat Hanh, a peace activist who travelled across the US with Martin Luther King Jr., giving peace talks during the Vietnam War, and taught Buddhism at Columbia University. Later, he created a movement called 'Engaged Buddhism' (Nhat Hanh, 1987). In an effort to bring greater social engagement in the middle of the war he founded the Order of Inter-Being ('Tiếp Hiện' in Vietnamese), bound to a set of practices aimed at bringing the monks out

[1] Note by the author: The Penguins Revolution, or March of the Penguins, was the name given by the press to a series of student protests carried out by Chilean high-school students in 2006. The name derives from the colors of the school uniform at public schools in Chile: gray pants, white shirt and navy-blue jacket.

of monasteries and engage them with the very real problems Vietnam (and the world, for that matter) were facing in 1966; these practices were called the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings (Nhat Hanh, 1987), and were his response to what he saw as fanaticism and intolerance.[2] One of the main features of this training, is how it addresses our seeming separateness by arguing that human beings are all interrelated and mutually dependent on each other, thus training practitioners in developing a broadly inclusive mindset: one rooted in understanding rather than a dualistic view bound to a specific “doctrine, theory or ideology” (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p.37). This notion, a core concept of Buddhist thought, overlaps with the very definition of ‘yoga’, which in Sanskrit means ‘to harness’, ‘join’ or ‘attach’ but which in the 6th century was also defined as "the oneness of one entity with another." (Vasuveda, 2004, p.235). These ideas illustrate how the views of non-separateness, oneness and union pre-date Western ideas regarding inclusiveness and have also, as in the specific example, informed them.

The notion of inclusiveness is contained within the four principles upon which the Order of Inter-Being exists: one is non-attachment to dogmas or existing views, in line with the ontological turn of Viveiros de Castro (1998), and including the views we hold regarding identity constructs, ways to relate to one another, and ways to approach education. The second is the use of meditation in order to look into our inter-dependence, a notion not only supported by Sirimanne (2016), who contends that the personal transformations achieved through meditation is an effective (in her view, the only truly effective) remedy in dealing with ingrained sexism and other forms of discrimination, to achieve knowledge of a true, genderless, classless self; it also in some ways informs the relevant work of Ting-Toomey and Dorjee in “*Communicating Across Cultures*”(2019). The third is to engage in the practice of Buddhist teachings in a way that is both helpful and relevant to people, in the way that is needed today (Nhat Hanh, 1987); this is a dimension that brings relevance to the issues we are facing today, particularly social division along identity lines. Finally, the use of skilful means to guide people through ‘language, images, methods and practices’ (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p.74).

As humans, we have tended to label, classify and identify groups in often one word or a combination of them, and even more so in binary terms such as Black - White, male-female, straight – gay, rich-poor (Hanafi, 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Schall et al., 2020) and yet non-Western philosophical traditions show us how this labelling has prevented our inter-connectedness through polarization and the imposition of norms from one people to another, be it for racial, sexual, geographical, linguistic or ethnic reasons. Eastern practices and knowledges advocate for the non-attachment to all these external elements (skin colour, culture, place of origin, etc.), to be free from the social constructs and the separation built around them. It is this freedom, claims Iyengar (1993) in his commentary of the Yoga Sutras, that allows us to be in harmony and peace with the world around us.

2.3 Contemplative practices and non-violence in education

The incorporation of Eastern-influenced practices of contemplation rooted in non-violence in classrooms is not new. Barbezat and Bush (2013) have documented areas in which meditation had a positive impact, offering “increased concentration and attention, increased sense of physical and mental well-being, increased sense of connection and loving-kindness, greater understanding of

[2] Historians’ common view is that the Vietnam War was as much an armed conflict as an ideological one, and one that was representative of the harsh dualism of the times between communism and democracy representative of Cold War ideology– see Hastings (2018), Karnow (1983) and Sheehan (1988)).

course materials and increased creativity" (p.23). These effects can also be found in a 2011 study by Wadlinger and Isaacowitz, which showed evidence of students responding positively to emotionally challenging situations; having established a link between attentional dysfunction and negative emotions, their study sought to propose a model aimed at training an individual's attention in order to achieve greater emotional regulation[3]; such model, though interdisciplinary in its concept, highlights the effectiveness of meditative practices in improving emotional health; their research incorporated two kinds of meditation: concentration, in which an individual's attention is on a specific object (such as one's breath) and insight, which aims to develop and increase awareness without a specific focus.

While scrutinizing the impact of introspection, Barbezat and Bush (2013) also point to the fact that the uses of this practice declined as theories were produced that moved from a speculative nature to a more scientific one. And although they also admit that deep introspection requires lengthy and focused training - for learners to develop the necessary skill in developing and accessing insight, as well as the ability on the listener to skilfully discern such insights from 'embellishment' (p.38) - they also highlight the importance of introspection in developing greater self-awareness of their inner states so they can achieve a more constant, steady state of well-being.

Bolliger and Wang (2013) provide us with two concrete examples from different contexts in the United States, which show how some of the philosophical elements that inform contemplative inquiry have been used in building non-violent learning environments. Bolliger, a pre-kindergarten[4] teacher who has been a yoga practitioner for almost two decades, wanted to bring these notions into her classroom to help learners curb aggression and reduce tantrums. First, by developing a soothing, calm environment and then by integrating simple yoga poses, establishing rest time, using gentle lighting, soft music, and encouraging learners to communicate in positive terms with each other. She posits that her students have shown fewer outbursts and a friendlier, more peaceful behaviour as their ability to act calmly has increased. Wang, on the other hand, teaches in higher education and has reported success in improving her students' understanding of and commitment to social justice by conducting her classes in a manner that integrates contemplative practices (active walking meditation, quiet breathing exercises, and sitting meditation) to other activities, such as participating in social investigation projects and fostering non-violent relationships with non-human beings, such as nature.

Wang (2019) has further suggested ways in which to stimulate inter-connectedness by taking an experiential approach within the classroom. Instructing learners to write autobiographical accounts of their relationships, using different forms of literary expression and, more importantly, doing projects that require learners to engage with the community at large. Although she acknowledges in a 2013 article that self-reflection can lead to individualizing the communal experience, I suggest that this practice of self-enquiry has an impact in the students' ability to relate to others more harmoniously. I do not argue here that self-enquiry alone can challenge the structural problems that create anxiety and stress in the first place, but self-enquiry in the forms I have described here does have the potential to equip the individual with greater

[3] Wadlinger and Isaacowitz define emotional regulation as" maintaining desirable emotional states and terminating undesirable emotional states" (2011, p.3)

[4] In the North American school system, pre-kindergarten is for children age 4 and 5.

emotional and behavioural balance that can translate into enhanced relationships and greater social harmony. Wang herself in her 2013 study with pre-service teachers, documents a change in perspective through the implementation of these practices: whereas her students defined justice as ‘an eye for an eye” at the beginning of her research, or an “us versus them” mentality, that by the end of the study had morphed into a moral concern for those who had been marginalized. Incorporating elements of indigenous worldview of inter-connectedness as well as readings from Desmond Tutu’s book “No Future Without Forgiveness” (1999) and Gandhi’s early writings on non-violence, her research focused on the implementation of nonviolent approaches to shift relational dynamics through meditation, critical reflection, and role-play to find alternatives to solving conflict, focusing on the needs of others while engaged in dialogue, negotiating needs without aggression and writing up agreements that could lead to more harmonious co-existence as a community; because violence, she argues, is fundamentally the collapse of human relations ,to successfully challenge social injustice it is necessary to first establish positive relations in order to then ‘dissect the norm of violence and carve out compassionate understandings and commitments’ (Wang, 2013, p.495). And doing that, I argue, begins with the inner work of self-enquiry.

(3) Methodology

Participants were 38 Chilean higher education students enrolled in an elective course titled “Radical Pedagogies, Nonviolence and Change”. The course was taught at two different universities, Universidad de O’Higgins (UOH), where 14 participants took part in the course during the first semester, and Universidad Catolica de Valparaiso (PUCV), where 24 students were enrolled during the second semester. Full ethics approval was given by both institutions, and informed consent was granted by those partaking in the course.

Within the framework of research methodology, Ørngreen and Levinsen (2017) describe workshops as “an arrangement where a group of people learn, acquire new knowledge, perform creative problem-solving, or innovate in relation to a domain-specific issue” (p.71). I found this to be a suitable structure both within the scope of the chosen design and the research context, as participants discussed and generated ideas in order to tackle specific social and structural issues concerning violence and inequality.

The workshops were undertaken in a blended pattern, that combined a conceptual and an open format; this means there were pre-designed activities (reading assignment and reflection worksheet) while at the same time providing a space for participants and researchers to continuously negotiate format and content during the iteration of the workshop cycle; the latter allowed for changes to occur spontaneously as unforeseen elements emerged.

The course itself was organized as a series of 14 participatory workshops. each exploring a specific pedagogical approach to non-violence. The first four sessions were done online and did not include self-inquiry practices; the remaining ten were in person on university premises. The workshops were structured as follows:

1. A pre-session reading assignment that varied depending on the workshop’s topic. Such reading was accompanied by a reflection-type worksheet where participants were asked to record answers to specific questions.

2. The workshop itself began with 15 minutes devoted to contemplative practice. Participants were asked if they desired to partake in this activity, and if they did, instruction was provided for the practice chosen on that day.

3. 30 minutes were devoted to share and discuss the questions from the pre-workshop reading tasks. |

4. The remainder of the session was spent on what Kemmis et al., (2014, p.25) define as ‘communicative action’: an opportunity for collective dialogue to uncover the issues that needed to be addressed, and then reaching a consensus on how and if it could be addressed.

5. The last 10 minutes were devoted to finalizing and delivering their reports by presenting them to other groups.

Contemplative exercises for the first seven sessions were chosen and guided by me. The remaining three sessions were devoted to peer-led teaching on nonviolence: groups of three or four students planned and taught an aspect of nonviolence pedagogy and led their peers through a contemplative exercise of their own choice. The topics and contemplative exercises done each week are noted in the chart below; the first lists those led by me and the second one those led by participants themselves. The tables below show the topic discussed in each of the sessions and the contemplative practice done at the beginning of each workshop. Table 1 details the contemplative exercises led by me, and table 2 lists those led by the students.

Table 1
Teacher-led topics and activities

Week	Topic	Contemplative Exercise
5	Getting to know each other	Breathing meditation
6	Nonviolent Communication	Developing empathy (peer interview)
7	Fostering democratic learning environments	Compassion practice (Barbezat and Bush, 2013)
8	Feminist pedagogy in action	Nor putting people into boxes
9	Gender / sexual inclusiveness	Emergency empathy
10	Nonviolent strategies in education	Highs and Lows
14	Final session (feedback and comments)	Breathing exercise (Iyengar, 1993)

Table 2
Student-led topics and activities

Week	Topic	Contemplative exercise
11 – Group 1	Indigenous knowledge and interconnectedness	Tonglen meditation
11 – Group 2	Gender-inclusive pedagogy	Reflection on personal labels
12 – Group 3	Cosmopolitanism and intercultural communication	Me and a different me: exercise to acknowledge and embrace difference
12 – Group 4	Nonviolent communication: compassion / empathy / non-judgement	Empathy through your eyes
13 – Group 5	Nonviolent communication: compassion / empathy / non-judgement	Reflection on and recognition of individual feelings

As mentioned in the introduction, the guiding research question was *“Does the use of self-enquiry practices produce any change in the ways student-teachers view themselves and their relationship with their social world?”.* Prior to our last session, participants were sent a reflection-type worksheet to discuss the extent to which contemplative / self-inquiry practices had affected such a change, if it had. Data collected was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022).

The findings detailed here form part of a much larger study. The themes I have noted below (Table 3) are the ones that specifically correspond to this paper:

A. On the connection between contemplative exercises, empathy and compassion.

B. Contemplative Education beyond the practice of mindfulness, and

C. Challenges to the practice of contemplative exercises

Table 3
Examples of themes and codes

<table>
<tr><th>Themes</th><th>Examples of codes included</th></tr>
<tr><td>On the connection between contemplative exercises, empathy and compassion.</td><td rowspan="3">-Empathy through exposure to existing violence
-The system fosters individualism and lack of empathy.
- Empathy and nonjudgement
-Empathy and inclusiveness
-Impact of contemplative practices</td></tr>
<tr><td>Contemplative education beyond the practice of mindfulness</td></tr>
<tr><td>Challenges to the practice of contemplative exercises</td></tr>
</table>

Participants have been given a number preceded by the university acronym given above (UOH or PUCV). Therefore, for instance, UOH1 corresponds to a non-identifiable participant enrolled from Universidad de O'Higgins. Finally, and to minimize researcher's bias, data was triangulated by using both method triangulation and data source triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). First, and as noted above, different forms of data collection were used about the same theme, and secondly, these data sets included both individual and group outputs; participants had the opportunity to provide insights and reflections individually, and prepare group outputs for their group discussion. I have noted the data source for each of the participants' excerpts. These include individual written reflections, audio and video recording and group discussions.

(4) Main findings

4.1 On the connection between contemplative exercises, empathy and compassion.

When thinking of usefulness or possible positive impact of contemplative practices, two elements that were most often mentioned are how the regular engagement in these activities helped participants develop a sense of empathy. This was expressed in different wordings, from being more willing to listen to others, being open to explore each other's differences, and being willing to hear and understand other people's points of view. The second point often mentioned was the importance of not judging or labelling others. Both notions not only overlap but also circle back to the application of nonviolent communication.

As PUCV 15 notes:

> *"In order to create an inclusive classroom certain values need to be accounted for and empathy is one of the most important, as it enables us to understand the feelings and concerns of others. We strongly believe and agree that practicing contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness are the perfect way in which we as teachers can make possible the development of empathy in the classroom"* (written reflection)

Different scholars, literature and traditions have defined empathy and compassion in different ways, so before analysing the above comment I will briefly explain both terms as I use them personally and how I use them in the context of this study. Nussbaum (1996), for instance, defines compassion as a "moral sentiment" (p.28), and the key connection between an individual and the community, that allows us to establish a link between our own interests and those of other people. On the other hand, my own

understanding and use of compassion matches Maull's (2021), whose concept is rooted in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Rather than a sentiment, it is the desire to alleviate suffering in others, which can take the form of being willing to suffer with the other and provide solace or comfort or taking action to mitigate someone else's difficulties. Empathy, on the other hand, is generally defined as the willingness to feel as accurately as possible as others feel. In other words, being able to relate to and experience what others are experiencing, which can have both positive or negative connotations, such as sadness or happiness (Nussbaum, 1996; Maull, 2021; Zembylas and Papamichael, 2017).
Contemplative exercises did have a positive impact in reshaping the participants' sense of empathy, and as such, their ability to see the world through someone else's eyes. As UOH7 highlights:

> *"I really enjoyed listening to others' problems, and just give them space to tell us about their feelings. I consider myself a great listener, I enjoy hearing people's stories or what are they going through…I think that from now on I will try to use this as a mean to learn about the other person's perspective in. I think it is always important to have a good communication in every relationship"* (written reflection)

When moving beyond the individual practice into the classroom environment, it is not difficult to see how the regular engagement with this practice could have positive effects on a macro-relational level and in fact, participants did express how learning about and practicing Nonviolent Communication (NVC) with each other, has helped them re-examine some of their work and family relations outside the classroom. For instance, one participant noted how prior to familiarizing themselves with nonviolent communication strategies they used to raise their voice and be more judgmental when engaging with people who thought differently, and how these attitudes had changed over the course of the project. Another one noted how they would often refute what people said, which extended to conversations with parents, their partner and people at school. They observed that through the readings on nonviolence and the practice of contemplative exercises. There was a willingness to engage with others in a friendlier manner, such as saying hello, smiling at others and listening more attentively. In their words, they discovered *"there is a Buddha inside all of us"* (UOH3, audio journal).

4.2 *Contemplative education beyond the practice of mindfulness*

Contemplative pedagogy and research into its application have gained traction particularly since the creation of the Contemplative Mind in Society in 1995, but Morgan (2014) traces its inclusion into educational programs in the US as far back as the 1970s. However, and as I have explained in earlier sections, though the study and practice of contemplative pedagogy is widespread in North America, such efforts are not common in South America and entirely absent from the Chilean higher education curriculum.

One of the aims of this study was to work collaboratively within a framework of non-violence, inter-connectedness and communal harmony, and to do this in ways that are rooted in some of the principles present in Eastern philosophies, in which individualism gives way to acting for collective well-being. I sustain that contemplative pedagogy and its practices offer a wide range of possibilities to explore this. In their influential book "Contemplative Practices in Higher Education", Barbezat and Bush (2013) documented the positive impact that activities of self-reflection have in creating opportunities for greater connection with others; many of these

activities are aimed at finding elements of interconnectedness, such as greater compassion and empathy, thus allowing for a deeper social connection.

Exploring ways to generate the kinds of connections illustrated above were key to this project, and it was in that light that each face-to-face workshop began with a contemplative exercise that linked to that week's theme. Participant engagement and participation in these exercises, as well as the general perception of their usefulness, varied depending on the exercise. For instance, in the first session I led a silent meditation that focused on following one's breath, which most participants found challenging, as they were not used to sitting still doing nothing. One participant admitted that they simply couldn't do it. Amongst the challenges to meditation-oriented practices were distraction. Participants' comments on this point ranged from *"I have ADHD"*(UOH7, written reflection*)*, to *"everything that happens outside distracts me"* (UOH9, written reflection). Lack of focused attention is a common challenge for those who are beginning to meditate, and one that requires time to overcome. Subsequently, one participant in particular (UOH3) expressed that meditation was not for her, as sitting still and focusing on her breath made her feel more anxious. In the final session, while preparing the feedback report, she stressed the fact that although the other contemplative practices were useful, meditation itself was not for everyone. In the end, these difficulties and the absence of adequate time to work on these challenges led me to shift the activities from guided meditation, which require regular training and practice to notice changes, to something easier that had a more visible element of social connection. These included exercises done in pairs to generate compassion for others to an exercise drawing from *Highs and Lows* (Ruffin, 2019) these were much more successful in engaging participants and feedback was more positive.

Below is an example of positive change, showing a shift from first-person to third person focus because of thinking about the ways to develop greater empathy:

> *"I think we stopped thinking too much about ourselves and started thinking about the other, so we left some selfish thoughts behind. It was a way to see that we are all equals, all human, all deserve the same respect. Individually we all want to be happy and we should think the same about others. And for me, like the most significant think that I learned was to empathize with other…* (UOH12, video journal)

This point is particularly relevant because one of the first things that emerged during the course was that participants were mainly focused on how others treated *them* or spoke to *them,* without showing much awareness of how *their own* actions affected others. Hence, shifting from thinking about the self to thinking about others (and beginning to consider their feelings) is of great importance here, as it allows for smoother social connection based on empathy.

One of assumptions participants had prior to commencing the course concerned what they saw as a connection between contemplative practices and Eastern philosophy that were somewhat removed from classroom pedagogy. For example, one participant noted: *"I have always related them to yoga or mindfulness practices somehow far from the classroom setting*" (UOH14, written reflection*).* However, after the fourteen weeks of the course, and having had experience with a range of contemplative exercises that were reflective in nature but not meditation-based, his perspective had changed:

> "*I would like to highlight how contemplative practices have changed their meaning to me*; *they indeed have become an integral part of my own teaching practice. Next time I intend to teach a certain content or ask my students to pay attention to a certain phenomenon or situation, I will absolutely include a contemplative practice that allows them to look at each other (classmates, peers, friends), and focus on our similarities and differences, and how they make our world a better place"*(PUCV11, group audio recording)

It should be noted that the shift in viewpoint concerned not only the nature of the exercises but how they can inform one's pedagogical practice. The recognition of differences, the ability to look at each member of our community and recognize our shared humanity, and how self-reflection can assist in appreciating our own place within the dynamics of a community such as the classroom.

Regarding which practices contributed to participants' relational outlook, this comment provides extremely useful insight into the specific exercises that are potentially most impactful. When asked to reflect on the overall impact of contemplative practices on their pedagogical and personal outlook, this participant states:

> *"Particularly, "not putting people into boxes" allowed me to witness and participate in an eye-opening experience, exploring my classmates' lives and sensibilities, their frustrations and own self-perceptions. I completely appreciated the inclusion of such an instances. Additionally, I found the use of "turning judgment into observations" extremely helpful. It is a practical way to deal with our own opinions and baseless thoughts towards others"* (PUCV 15, written reflection)

This participant mentions two specific practices; the first, "not putting people into boxes", was adapted from an activity created by St. John Fisher University in 2020[5] and aims at raising awareness and recognition of the fact that most of us have, regardless of our background, culture, sexual identity or education, been witnesses or participants of similar life experiences: being bullied, bullying others, experiencing heartbreak, being in love, overcoming challenges or being sick, just to name a few. The second, turning judgement into observations, is taken directly from Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication book (2003) and it helps reframe opinions and judgements as something we can observe ("I saw him throwing food on the ground" rather than "he's a dirty person"). Both constitute practical ways to approach our relational dynamics without judgement because the classroom is a particularly complex and diverse ecology, so learning to relate to one another with a deeper understanding of our shared human experience as well as learning to notice and observe rather than judging, are arguably key in building such an approach. These are exactly the points the participant's extract above reveals: how these practices helped him – and will further help him, in his view – to deal with difficult situations through empathy and mutual understanding.

4.3 Challenges to the practice of contemplative exercises

The practice of contemplation and self-inquiry is not devoid of challenges. I noted earlier how the first group of participants had difficulty engaging in meditation-type practices due to several reasons: lack of time for adequate training, distractions and inability to concentrate. A meta-analysis by Khuory et al., (2013) on over 12,000 participants presents strong evidence that long-term meditation practice has positive effects on the physical and mental well-being of participants. However, the challenges this practice

[5] https://projects.sjf.edu/media-and-diversity-fall-2020/2020/11/06/dont-put-people-in-boxes/

presents to the initial practitioner are also well-documented. These range from difficult emotions, to sleepiness, restlessness and doubt (Bodhi, 2005), some of which correlate to what participants in this project expressed. However, non-meditative practices presented participants with their own set of obstacles; first, the exercises done throughout this project required practitioners to interact with one another and often to make eye contact, two things that a few participants said it was hard on account of their perceived lack of social skills. Wilson (2021) notes how this, the act of being present for another, is key in the development of a contemplative mindset and in engagement with the contemplative tasks themselves; this is what Nhat Hanh (1997) describes as being mindful – a concept that in my view is often misunderstood and misrepresented in debates and conversations on this issue, where mindfulness and meditation are often used interchangeably. Being mindful is, simply put, being here now: our attention is fully devoted to this moment, and our awareness is in what is occurring at this moment. This of course includes whichever interaction we are involved in, and hence the challenge really is about that: about being as present as we can be, giving our attention to the present moment without concerning ourselves with past or future worries, like thinking about something else while engaged in a conversation with someone.

The second challenge expressed by the first sample of participants was the use of meditation at the beginning of the sessions; I started this project with the intention of providing learners with basic instructions on simple mindfulness exercises, such as awareness of the breath or silent meditation. These practices, however, did not fully engage the participants; the silent meditation proved particularly difficult, and in fact, during our last meeting (which was entirely devoted to feedback), when asked which element of the workshops they would do without, silent meditation was the only component some of the students said was not particularly useful. Their insight was that "meditation is not for everyone," "it was difficult to be still" and "it's not particularly useful." While obviously respectful of participants' views on meditation and any legitimate resistance they might have had, I also attribute these views to what I personally see as a) inadequate instructions on my part b) not enough time to gain a sense of growth in the meditation practice (10-15 minutes twice in one month); as Chödron (2007) observes, developing a sustainable meditation practice requires both adequate instruction and steady commitment and engagement.These considerations notwithstanding, I decided not to do guided meditation with the second group, and to focus on activities that directed attention at developing empathy and that, in my view, encouraged the development of a sense of community and reflexivity. This choice was based in two factors: the first was the content of some of the reflections, participants submitted during their online phase, which showed that some of them struggled empathizing with others, while the second was that the tasks chosen might help raise their self-awareness on issues of empathy, collaboration and shared humanity.

Yet a final challenge noted by a participant is to engage in the actual use of these exercises when the situations that call for it overwhelm us. In her own contemplative teaching in Women and Gender Studies, Wilson (2021) notes how difficult conversations about privilege, oppression, racism or homophobia can be, and how often her students experience a sense of hopelessness before arriving at feeling hopeful. This was the case with one of the participants, who for the first four weeks continued to ask if they were doing anything wrong, as they felt an extreme sense of anger at the sexual violence they and their partner had experienced, as well as other forms of discrimination they had witnessed. No matter how

aware we are of the unsustainability of violence, being faced with oppression or injustice will present us – and in my experience this is particularly true with someone less trained – with a daunting challenge indeed, and this is fully acknowledged. Challenges notwithstanding, contemplative practices are tools for self-transformation; the self-transformation that took place had a positive impact not only in reshaping classroom relations within the study but also in assisting participants reimagine their own classrooms as empathy-driven communities.

4.4 Ensuing transformation and paradigm shifts

This section discusses paradigm shifts expressed by participants that emerged because of this research. More specifically, this section examines how the study impacted participants' views, and how they saw themselves and their understanding of the main themes by the end of the project.

Perhaps the most significant paradigm shift that occurred throughout the project was in the participants' view on what nonviolence is, and the role it can potentially play in promoting greater inclusiveness. This shift is indeed of paramount importance, as the other changes in perspective I detail below are intimately bound to this newly acquired understanding. In some cases, this shift brought a new awareness of how much violence has to do with our thoughts and intentions, such as in the case of UOH2:

> *"What resonated the most with me was the idea that violence is related to what we think. Our thoughts towards people. I started to think that I should not think bad things about other people because it would be excluding them in some way and it affects the way I see them. I need to start seeing them as equal without moralistic judgement"* (individual reflection)

Often, paradigm shift manifested within the individuals' personal lives and experiences, as reported by participants below:

> *"...My approach to the concept has definitely changed as a result of what we have discussed as a group throughout the lessons. If before I would talk about nonviolence as "I'm going to avoid responding to this person because otherwise I'm going to get angry with them", now it is more like "I'm going to talk to this person, calmly, about the things that seem wrong to me and that could be different or modified"* (PUCV4, group discussion)

> *"I immediately found myself very interested in gaining more knowledge so I felt like I needed to continue in the course, and this was especially because at that moment I was in a very dark place and the readings were giving me a lot to think about, to reflect on, first concerning myself and then about others, to reflect on my actions and others actions and especially on my feelings and how to process them correctly"* (PUCV9, audio recording)

Evidence from participants points to the fact that the practices we engaged in – contemplative activities, reading and reflecting on the cultivation of nonviolence and nonviolent action, collectively thinking about ways to address violence – had a self-actualizing effect which manifested in willingness to engage with others differently. This is well exemplified by two insights; the first emphasizes the value of self-care considering challenges in bringing inclusive, non-violent practices to the classroom, while the second highlights the importance of teacher self-development if we are to engage in social justice efforts:

> *"There are different things I can do for my own well-being. As a person, I think it is necessary to learn to have a healthy relationship with myself, to achieve this it is*

> *necessary to go to therapy and try to improve day by day. This is why it is necessary to maintain good communication with my students, and that we can all express our needs without fear"* (UOH8, audio recording)

> *" In relation to the inner work, we do and what we do as educators in terms of social justice, I believe that by doing these practices like self-exploration and self-understanding that dive deep into the inner self we can also promote them to our students"* (UOH14, video recording)

The viewpoints offered here by pre-service teachers who, according to their own shared experiences, had been bullied at school by classmates and teachers even to the extent of physical violence being exerted upon them, provide an optimistic outlook into the possibilities of nonviolence education in their current context, and into the way they see themselves as nonviolence practitioners. Chubbuck and Zembylas (2011) point to the role of their teacher participant in guiding the conversation towards questioning the way violence has been historically used as a means of domination; concerning the latter dimension, they note how that teacher's approach was one filled with *consistency*. This consistency manifested in the way she remained committed to the practice of nonviolence even in the face of challenges, such as when her students expressed themselves or acted violently, and personal struggles with anxiety.

(5) Discussion

When reflecting upon the potential impact of contemplative practices in the way participants saw themselves and their relationship with the world around them, several of them acknowledged how a systematic approach to non-judgement, not labeling and fostering a deeper mutual understanding was not something they had been equipped with. The same reflections, shared by the time we had reached the end of the workshops, also revealed how self-inquiry practices helped them look at themselves first and the actions they could take to reduce violence rather than trying to change other people's behavior or passing judgement on others. To different degrees, these practices provided them with a practical approach to stop reproducing the cycle of violence; several participants spoke of a broader perspective regarding human relations, and a shift in how they saw others under a more compassionate lens. What this confirms, in my view, is how inner change helps us see others and the world around us differently; what Wu (2023b) describes as "the world being a mirror of our consciousness" (p.2); it also points to how these different contemplative practices helped participants experience a sense of mutuality in our shared human experience, rather than one lived in isolation or imagined self-sufficiency. On a larger, and for me, even more important point, these insights point to human beings growing in their awareness of others not as separate from each other but as part of the same human fabric, and therefore more able to connect and work harmoniously with others.

Further to these considerations, the evidence available from former studies on the impact of contemplative pedagogy from a relational standpoint concurs with what Chilean participants expressed; Bagshaw (2014) describes a sense of connection amongst peers and with instructors; Zajonk (2013) speaks of greater empathy and improved attention while Dorais et al. (2022) report improved relational well-being after interventions with counselling trainees. This later study sheds light on an important point; although their study was of a primarily quantitative nature measuring outcomes over time, one of their findings is key here: there needs to be time built into a practitioner's life to develop such traits as mentioned here. Participants acknowledged that much when describing prospective challenges, as

they feel both the university curriculum with them as students and the school curriculum with them as teachers does not provide them with time to engage in these practices on a regular basis; however, as I noted earlier, participants from the second cohort, who did in fact have more time to engage in self-enquiry exercises, expressed themselves on a more positive light concerning ways to bring these practices into their classrooms.

Another important result was a greater sense of oneness and sameness, which challenges the oppressive, differentiating nature of power and lack thereof. This is well illustrated by several of the participants' comments, who spoke of newly gained insights into how regular contemplative exercises can equip practitioners to better deal with inequality and discrimination, as they assist in developing a greater capacity for self-awareness and emotional self-regulation, and with that the capacity to establish more harmonious relationships. These insights are important in that they shed light on the fact that self-inquiry can in fact be a form of resistance and inform social justice efforts.

Throughout his writings, Foucault (1978, 1997, 2000, 2005) upheld the view that resistance must take form through creating and shaping an autonomous self not as societies wants us to be and which current systems impose on us, but as one where our own creativity and imagination help us create a new mode of existence; one where the "care of the self" (2000, p.278) leads to the transformation of the self. The participants' comments in fact encapsulate this exact idea: their insight points into contemplation, leading to new perspectives on resistance, and how the care of the self these practices embody led to some degree of self-transformation. This process of self-transformation should not be dismissed as passive or removed; as Wu (2023b) posits, social advocacy is not just about endeavoring to better our world externally, but also about embarking on a path of change within.

(6) Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the theories and practices implemented throughout the project had a transformative effect in the way the participants saw themselves, their students, their peers and their interpersonal relationships; this shift was reflected in a more empathetic and compassionate view of others; a willingness to engage with the world around them in a nonviolent manner; and an explicit desire to learn more about nonviolence, contemplative pedagogy and nonviolent action as a means to social justice. Although there were, as I have discussed here, limitations to this project, this research succeeded in creating a collaborative space where participants were able to openly discuss their views on each of the themes presented, and more importantly, where they were capable of collectively strategizing ways to deal with educational inequalities. It is in this participatory effort, in the themes studied and in the practices we engaged in as a collective that this project contributes the most to a context where nonviolent approaches within classroom settings were absent.

Learning and using contemplative practices had a positive impact in helping participants feel more empathetic and compassionate towards one another; while the challenges of meditation were acknowledged and the feasibility of this specific practice in their own context questioned, other practices, such empathy and compassion development were well received and positively commented upon. Once again, these practices and exercises had previously been absent from the participants' curriculum as HE student teachers and remain largely absent from classroom practices in Chilean schools.

It should be noted that this study was carried out within two specific groups of university students. While the group's makeup was heterogeneous in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, cultural capital and years of teaching experience, students were all South American . It is acknowledged that this may limit the replicability of this study in different cultural and educational contexts. Although this study was conducted in Chile with a clear rationale in mind, further studies on the impact of contemplative practices might benefit from a wider range of cultural perspectives and a more diverse cohort of participants.

Potential researcher bias should also be addressed here. I acknowledge that myself acting as a facilitator of some of the contemplative exercises done could have potentially influenced participants into providing a more positive view on the impact of these. There are several ways in which I tried to reduce this; the first was by shifting from led practices to ones where they could share their insights with each other rather than with me. The second was to have them choose their own contemplative activities later on the course, and lead them themselves during peer-led sessions. Finally, the feedback provided at the end of each iteration of the course was entirely anonymous and in fact, as I have indicated here, it was due to their own feedback that the focus of contemplative tasks was changed to a more collaborative one.

When looking at possible directions for future research, from a pedagogical standpoint, there is evidence indicating that the practice of contemplative pedagogies brought tangible benefits to participants; this comes to support earlier work in this area but also presents researchers with new avenues to explore, as this as currently an area of praxis that is under-developed in the Chilean context. Finally, when thinking about an inclusive curriculum, there should be a more concerted effort to integrate perspectives that deal with inclusiveness from a holistic, wide-ranging perspective rather than one guided only by early Global North narratives, as well as further investigation into how nonviolence can provide a path towards social justice. Looking at these dimensions, there are examples we can look at which I have presented at different points in this thesis as well as participants' insights that can guide us in the future work we do.

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Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Glasgow ethics board, as well as the two research sites where the study was conducted.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymize the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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