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Does Peace Education Make a Difference in the Context of an Intractable Conflict?

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Although the big wars seem to be behind us, local conflicts and tensions, often bloody and sometimes entailing horrendous massacres, are still around us. And if it is not an overt conflict, then it is inter-ethnic controversy accompanied by manifestations of racism and xenophobia. Yet, while conflict, tension, controversy and violence are highly salient and visible, quiet activities of peace education, reconciliation, anti-racism and co-existence are carried out all over the world in such countries as Belgium, Sri-Lanka, Israel, Peru, N. Ireland, and Croatia. These programs are operated in a variety of forms, ranging from school-based curricula to weekend encounter groups, and from joint summer camps to joint theatre and expressive art groups.

The goals of peace education in its different instantiations are many and varied. But basically one speaks of changed attitudes, increased tolerance, reduced prejudices, weakened stereotypes, changed conceptions of self and of "other", reinforced sense of collective identity, and the like (see e.g., Bar-Tal, 2002; Bjerstedt, 1993; United Nations, 1999). According to a related approach (Salomon, in press), peace education ought to basically strive to legitimize or at least come to respect the other side's perspective, its collective narrative, fears, dreams and experiences. Indeed, some programs try to attain exactly that, thus attempting to promote co-existence and reconciliation (e.g., Bar-On, 2000).

But do such peace education programs have any desired effects? Even if we are to adopt very modest goals for peace education, such as a bit more tolerance and somewhat more respect for the "other", would peace education programs meet such challenges? Does the investment of good will, time, energy and financial resources pay off in the desired direction?

Nowhere is this question more important than in regions of intractable and protracted conflict such as Israel, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, or Bosnia. For in such regions, peace education might make a profound difference, if it actually worked, but it would be a painful source of disappointment and frustration if it didn't. And although, as I will show in a moment, peace education in the context of intractable conflict constitutes a class of its own, it entails enough communality with other contexts of lesser severity that lessons from it could be relevant also for the latter.

My talk here today is focused on the question of whether peace education in regions of intractable conflict has positive effects. I use the case of Israel where Jews and Palestinians are involved in a protracted bloody conflict for more than 100 years. I want to assume that if peace education works there, attaining desirable outcomes, that it may offer lessons of importance for other places as well, including places afflicted with racial or ethnic tension.

The question of whether peace education in regions of intractable conflict makes a difference is not a benign one. A close look at the nature of such conflicts would suggest that they do not give peace education much of a chance of being effective.

Intractable conflicts

What characterizes intractable conflicts? First, intractable conflicts are **stubborn**; they refuse to reach resolution. It is as if reaching a state of compromise and peace

demands too much of a price for the parties involved to pay in terms of their sense of unity, purpose, righteousness and glory.

Second, intractable conflicts are characterized by being **violent**. Third, they are **central** in societies' lives, in the sense of being on everybody's mind; and they are **total** in the sense that they affect all walks and aspects of life (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Fourth, and related to the above, intractable conflicts require **total devotion and involvement** which badly narrow a group's field of vision, leading to a **blind pre-occupation with one's own small world** and its internal logic. This logic appears convincing as long as one does not look at it from the outside (A. Rapoport, 1960). Last, intractable conflicts are accompanied by **strong emotions**, ranging from fear to rage, from uncertainty to collective self-confidence, and from pride to hatred.

In light of such characteristics, it is easy to see how difficult the life for peace education can be. Indeed, it faces a number of severe difficulties, or better yet – road-blocks, and challenges that by all accounts should nullify its intended effects.

The first roadblock is of course the **socio-political component** of the conflict that pertains to tangible issues such as land, water, independence, governance, language, control over resources and, of course, deprivation and death. It is very difficult to conduct peace education, let alone have it be effective, when suicide bombers are exploding in crowded buses and when tanks are rumbling through the streets of a terrified city under curfew.

But this socio-political component of the conflict has its complimentary bed-fel-low - a **socio-psychological** component in the form of a society's **collective narrative**. The two components are of course closely linked to each other, affecting each other reciprocally (Rouhana, 1997). The socio-psychological component, as many scholars maintain, is of no lesser importance and viciousness than the socio-political one as it provides meaning to political events, assimilates them into its historical memory schemata, uses them to reinforce its sense of identity and cohesion, and – most importantly – determines how the other side is to be perceived and handled. It is one thing when an opponent's suggestions are taken as genuine conciliatory moves; it is another if in light of one's expectations, they are perceived as no more than a political trap and are responded to accordingly.

Collective narratives are the backbone of the socio-psychological component of conflicts**; they are accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity** (Bruner, 1990). In this capacity, collective narratives are prime devices for providing a group's sense of **shared identity**, and thus, to an individual's sense of **social identity** (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A society's collective narrative, the story it tells about itself, about its adversary and about the conflict, is a major threat to peace education. In particular, its three components – **shared historical memories, shared sense of identity, and sets of shared beliefs** – function alone and in combination as very demanding challenges to peace education. Let me briefly look at them.

History is the most important source of a group's narrative, that is, the way the group constructs and construes its past and thus, it's present. As some scholars point out, collective narratives and collective historical memories are inseparable (e.g., Barthes, 1973). In this sense, as one scholar (Ignatieff, 1996) commented, the problem

with the collective memory of the past is that it isn't past at all.

It would be quite impossible to understand the Jewish sense of identity and the Israeli collective fear without evoking the memories of the holocaust;

It would be similarly difficult to understand the Palestinian collective narrative without mentioning their 1948 defeat (the *Nakhba*; Abu-Nimer, 2000),

Or, for that matter, understand the spirit of this country without reference to the way this society developed into a unified Netherlands in the late middle Ages (Huizinga, 1919/1996) or its struggle during World War II.

Historical memories hold in a tight grip a group's identity, sense of purpose and belief in its moral standing and superiority. Think of the Protestant commemoration of William of Orange by marching through Catholic streets, or think of that famous 1989 speech of Milosevic in Kosovo in which he awakened Serbs' 600 year old memories of conquest by the Turks. The importance of collective memories is underscored by the way groups rewrite their histories to adapt to current political-national needs. For example, Walker (1996) claims that the memories of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne in N. Ireland, were invented for political purposes in the late nineteenth century. The Finish scholar Sirkka Ahonen (1999) shows how some Baltic states totally reversed the historical roles of Sweden and Russia, to serve their newly acquired identity as independent Non-Communist states. Collectively held historical memories are thus the backbone of a group's proud sense of identity and the source of the stereotypes and prejudices it holds of others.

It thus should not surprise us that historical memories held by a community in conflict are one of the major barriers for peace education. First, they arouse all those national feelings of pride, continuity with the past and self-righteousness, and second they stand in the way of any attempt for reconciliation, understanding of the other side or validating its point of view. For that would be an affront to one's own sense of identity and history. How could the Palestinians accept the Zionist historically-rooted point of view, or the Catholics that of the Protestants in N. Ireland, without feeling that they betray their own history?

Beliefs: Another component of a group's shared narrative is the beliefs collectively held by its members. It needs to be said, and said again, that these beliefs, the ones relevant to coping with a painful and often threatening conflict, are by necessity identical to the conflicting parties. This does not mean that the conflict affects both sides in the same way: the fear of the Palestinians pertains to their immediate existence as a political entity; that of the Israelis pertains to their personal safety and to the danger of annihilation. Still, the beliefs mirror each other quite symmetrically. The roles of these beliefs are to satisfy the epistemic need for understanding of the conflict situation, to provide reasons for the suffering that accompanies intractable conflict, and to guide actual behavior toward the opponent. Why, indeed, are we engaged in conflict? What do we think of the other side? What is our role in the conflict? How should we respond in the face of their provocations? Here is a sample of beliefs one finds in most conflicts, held symmetrically by both sides:

- We are right; God is on our side; they are wrong
- We are the victims; they are the aggressors
- We only respond to their actions
- Even when we do harm, they are to blame
- We are so moderate; they are the radicals
- We make genuine concessions; they are manipulative and put up smoke screens
- They understand only the language of force

Such beliefs are explicitly or implicitly reflected in textbooks (Firer & Adwan, 1998), in the media and in the arts (Urian, 1997). When Jewish settlers are described as "colonialists," "oppressors" and "conquerors," or when Palestinian leaders are described as "blood thirsty" or as "terrorists," the message is loud and clear: the other side's collective view of the conflict, of "us" and of itself, is not legitimate (Bar-Tal, 1988). It is this narrative-based deligitimization that is at the core of the socio-psychological aspect of the conflict and thus is both one of the major obstacles to peace education and one of its goals: to override this deligitimization of the other side's point of view.

Built-in inequalities: In what concerns sets of belief, the conflictual parties are on equal grounds as the beliefs just described mirror each other quite symmetrically. But not so in other respects: in most conflicts the adversary sides are hardly ever equal in terms of their socio-economic, political, educational or demographic status. Intractable conflicts entail grave inequalities between the economically strong and weak, between conqueror and conquered or majority and minority. For one thing, it would be expected of the strong side to come and legitimize the narrative of the weak side. But can the latter be expected to do the same? For another, the two sides may have narratives at different stages of development – one still in the making, while the other is already worn out and needing refreshing. Such inequalities imply for peace education that the two sides pursue two different, often opposing agendas. Thus, for example, Israeli-Jewish teachers, supposed to jointly plan curricular units with Palestinian teachers, focused during their structured meetings with Palestinians on the pedagogical task assigned to them. Not so the Palestinians who preferred to dig into the past, trying to extract from their Jewish partners acknowledgement of past wrongdoings and recognition of their national identity. Given these two contrasting agendas, it is no wonder that the joint project did not fare very well (Maoz, 2000). Indeed, being recognized and acknowledged is "given urgency by the supposed link between recognition and identity" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25).

Similarly, the very conception of "peace" turns out to be very different for the politically strong and the weak, the conqueror and conquered.

Whereas 87% of Israeli Jewish youth see peace as mainly a matter of no violence, only 12.6% of Palestinians share this view. But whereas 92% of the Palestinian youth perceive peace to be a structural matter of independence and equal rights, only 3% of their Jewish peers perceive peace in that way (Biton, 2002).

Excessive emotionality: Intractable conflicts are often accompanied by excessive anger, usually directed at the other side for the pain, loss, fear and uncertainty that it

inflicts. Anger, stress, and related strong emotion, interfere with more rational judgments and perceptions (Janis, 1982), greatly debilitating one's ability to tolerate the other side, rationally judging its stand, and perceiving it in a less negative and threatening way.

We have recently piloted with the idea of **forced compliance** whereby one side is to present the **other side's** version of the conflict. Specifically, two pairs of Israeli-Palestinian teachers were to correspond over the Internet with two pairs of Israeli-Jewish teachers. Each side was to write down the way the **other** side sees certain conflictual events, past and present, and receive feedback from members of that other side. For example, Jews were to describe the way Palestinians see the 1948 *Naqbah* whereas the Palestinians were to describe the way Jews see their 1948 war of independence. The logic behind such an intervention is based in part on dissonance theory whereby describing the other side's perspective makes one disagree with it a bit less (Aronson, 1988).

The pilot study carried out by Ayelet Roth turned into a majestic failure. The eight participating teachers, all of them volunteers with pro-peace views, could not possibly detach themselves from their respective collective perspectives. The exchanges took place during the peak of the Israeli military suppression of the *Intifadah*, making Palestinian teachers particularly agitated, angry and frustrated. They said quite explicitly that they could not conceive stepping into the shoes of the oppressors of their brethren. It thus seems to appear that while forced compliance usually works (e.g., Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994), it can not work in contexts of intractable conflict when feelings are raw, strong and all consuming.

The context: Peace education often takes place in contexts of **animosity, fear and belligerence** that cultivate a mentality of siege and threat which makes peace education an elusive matter (Bar-Tal, 2002). A belligerent atmosphere can easily drown any peace education attempt. The success of peace education would require the support of politicians, the media, the education system, parents and the public in general. South Africa, but particularly Rwanda appear to be outstanding cases. The Tutsi, who were the main victims of the 1994 genocide and are now in power, initiated processes of reconciliation and healing, mobilizing local councils, the media and the educational system towards that end (Staub & Perlman, 2001). This, so far, is not the case in most other regions of active conflict, where such support is not given, making peace education some kind of a subversive activity.

These are then a few of the challenges uniquely facing peace education and raising serious questions about its chances of leaving any measurable and worthwhile traces. As Gordon Allport has said, it is easier to smash atoms than stereotypes, to which we could add that this becomes particularly difficult when the stereotypes are rooted in collectively held narratives, historical memories, beliefs about one's self righteousness and strong feelings of anger, hatred and frustration.

Recent findings on the effects of peace education in the Israeli/Palestinian context

It would seem that in contexts of intractable conflict, and in the absence of social and institutional support, peace education faces difficult barriers with very few chances of success even in the short run. How could a program succeed while facing the challenges it does?

But peace education programs continue to be designed and implemented, even under the worst conditions of violent conflict and continued animosity, as is the case these days in Israel, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, and other such regions of conflict. And although the continued implementation of peace education programs in the face of severe challenges may signal no more than naive inertia, they may nevertheless have some positive impact that could be quite instructive. To studies that examine such a possibility I turn next. I will report here, very briefly, the main results of three studies and of one real-life experience, an experience that complements the more controlled studies.

Effects on the conception of "peace"

Does participation in peace education programs change one's perception of what peace is all about and the means of attaining it? Biton (2002) studied these questions with more than 800 Israeli-Jews and Palestinian youths. Half of them participated in a school-based year-long peace education program in which they dealt with the history of the conflict, issues of democracy, justice, human rights, and the other side's perspective. They were also involved in a series of face-to-face meetings. The other, comparable half participated in another, unrelated project and served as a control group.

I will not bore you with technical details of the study or with all its findings and thus point out only two findings of interest. First, both Israeli and Palestinian participation in the peace education program increased the percentage of the youngsters who saw peace as a positive matter of cooperation and friendship: from about 10% to 37% in the Jewish group, and from 5% to 26% in the Palestinian. Participation in the peace education program significantly changed the youngsters' view of peace to be a more positive one.

Most interesting was the finding that pertained to means for attaining peace. The use of **war** as a means to attain peace **rose** among the non-participating Palestinians from 31.4% at pretest time (October) to 52.6% at posttest time (May); it **dropped** at the same time from 33.3% to 23.6% among those Palestinians who did participate in the program. The percentages among the Jews were low from the outset but among the non-participants it increased from zero to 11%. Among participants it increased only slightly from 0.4% to 4.5% .

Similar findings were found with respect to hatred of the Jews: a dramatic increase among the non-participants, and stability among the participants.

The increase in the percentage of non-participating youngsters advocating war or expressing hatred versus the decrease among participants suggests that peace education may not always change perceptions and conceptions in the positive, desired direction, but may serve as a barrier against the adverse effects of harmful external events.

Studying somebody else's conflict

One of the characteristics of intractable conflict is its tendency to cause people's outlooks on the conflict to become exceedingly narrow, blind to alternative views, particularly blind to those held by an adversary. Would teaching youngsters to see the other side, to consider the narrative of the adversary, be of any help? Not likely, as the

chances are that they would become defensive, not because it takes effort to change perspectives, but because of the epistemic need to hold onto one's own collective view (A. Rapoport, 1960). But what if they learn about an **entirely different** conflict, one in which they have no involvement?

Lustig (2003) studied the extent to which youngsters would widen their vistas and become able to look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from their adversary's point of view if they learned about as remote a conflict as the one in Northern Ireland.

The study was carried out during the height of the *Intifadah*, not the easiest time to carry out peace education or study it. Sixty eight Israeli twelfth graders participated in the study, a random half of them were assigned to participate in the program, while the other half served as a control group. Due to the *Intifidah*, the Palestinians withdrew from the program. Still, it was interesting to see if the Jewish participants can and will spontaneously and voluntarily step into the shoes of their adversaries – the Palestinians, and present their view fairly?

The answer, as it turned out, was positive. The youngsters wrote two essays about the conflict, one from the Jewish and one from the Palestinian perspective. Whereas hardly anyone from the control group could as much as write two sentences from a Palestinian point of view, 95% of the participating group wrote not only full length essays, but balanced ones, no less personal and no less positive than the essays they wrote from the Jewish point of view.

Apparently, exposure to the Northern Irish conflict, its two sidedness of claims and beliefs, so transparent to an outsider and so opaque to a defensive insider, enables outsiders to detect similar qualities in the conflict in which they are involved, thus "allowing" them to dare and write about the conflict from their adversary's perspective. More generally, it may well be the case that studying another conflict, one in which students have no stake and no emotional involvement, circumvents defenses such as entrenchment and reactance which would arise if direct persuasion would be attempted (Tormala & Petty, 2002).

Do new personal friendships change perceptions of the collective "other"?

So, let's say Israeli and Palestinians participate in a three day encounter group meeting, presenting their respective perspectives, fighting over historical facts and interpretations, blaming each other, reconciling, dancing, and doing what youngsters usually do when they are together. Some of them become friends with each other across national lines during the days of the meeting. This is fine, but certainly not the real goal of peace education. We are much more interested in whether such interpersonal friendships generalize to the other group and to its collective narrative. If Abraham and Muhammad become friends, does Abraham come to relate more positively to Palestinians **in general** and to their point of view? And what about Muhammad, does he come to perceive the Israeli-Jews and their perspective on the conflict any differently? Bar-Natan carried out a study with 170 Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian youngsters who participated in a standard two day joint workshop, intensively discussing the conflict. As expected, some participants became friends across national boundaries.

Her study yielded consistent positive results showing that in both national groups, friendship with an adversary generalizes to a more positive view of the other

side as a collective. Jews are willing to have closer contact with Palestinians and the latter with Jews. The more friends and the stronger the friendship – the greater the willingness for closeness with members of the other side.

I need to note that the relationship found between friendship and willingness for closeness was not a function of any initial views or dispositions towards the other side.

The effects of friendship remained six months later, suggesting that what one learns about the other group from acquiring a friend from that group, may substantially change his or her view of the other group and for a long time.

What about the effects of friendship on the way the other side's **narrative** is perceived? Israelis, the strong side in the conflict, are willing to legitimize the Palestinian narrative as a consequence of befriending and discussing the conflict with another Palestinian. Also this effect stays on for at least another 6 months. But not so among the Palestinians: for them, as pointed out earlier, acceptance of the Jewish-Zionist perspective implies the denial of their collective narrative with its historical roots. You cannot easily accept the point of view of the party you perceive to victimize you. And, indeed, whereas friendships affect Palestinians' willingness for closeness with Jews, as people, friendships do not affect their perception of the Jewish point of view. Friends are friends, and ideology is ideology.

The joint voyage to Auschwitz

This brings me to an event that sheds very important light on peace education and its chances for success. It is not a study; it is an event. The event, about which many of you may have heard already, was an Arab initiative to visit the death camps of Auschwitz jointly with Israeli-Jews. The reasoning behind this unusual initiative was that Jews and Palestinians won't be able to peacefully live together as long as the Palestinians won't become familiar with the sources of the Jewish traumas and, if you want, paranoia resulting from the Holocaust. Two hundred seventy people, half Jews, half Palestinians lined up. Unfortunately, there weren't enough funds to accommodate the many more who wanted to join. Nobody really knew how things would work out. Arabs taking Jews to Auschwitz? One has never heard of such an initiative before. There was quite a bit of hesitation and opposition on both sides. Many Palestinians wondered what is there for them to learn of the Jewish memories of pain while the Jews are inflicting pain on the Palestinians. And many Jews hesitated, feeling that going with Palestinians to the most sacred of grounds – Auschwitz, is to desecrate the place. Still, 270 braved it and went on the trip in late May of this year. 170 more, Jews, Moslems and Christians from France joined us in Auschwitz.

It turned out to be one of the most moving and instructive events we have experienced. Jews and Palestinians shared tears and compassion; Jews and Palestinians while hugging each other in the face of the most horrific of human crimes, felt the full force of humanity; we came to share the unshaken conviction that death shall not reign any more, that a solution for our conflict **must** be found and **can** be found. Was this because we, the Jews, were ready to give up our superiority, that we weren't playing anymore the role of the hero, the oppressor, the strong, but rather the painful victim

who needs the Palestinians to hug and console? Was it because positive emotions were so intensive on both sides, totally belittling the conflict between us? We are still pondering what was there that can instruct peace education.

Concluding Remarks

So, does peace education make a difference? Are all those efforts, investment of time, money, good will and energy paying off in some way? Can people come to relate more positively to their adversary during intractable conflict as a function of participation in some peace education program?

The answer is a qualified **Yes**. No study in and of itself, when carried out in the real world of real people involved in real conflict is without faults. Our studies are no exception. Still, the studies mentioned here today, as well as others not mentioned today (e.g., Maoz, 2000), suggest that there is room for cautious optimism. Peace education may neither make entire nations or ethnic groups fall in love with each other; nor can it solve the collision of interests or struggle for control and power underlying a conflict. But it can help people see things a bit differently. And this change, as we have found, is not a fleeting one; it stays on for quite a while. Moreover, the changes observed take place **despite** an ongoing ugly, stubborn and bloody conflict. Perhaps more than improving relations and attitudes, peace education is capable of preventing worsening them. It serves as a barrier against deterioration. For this and other reasons, peace education appears to be a worthwhile activity that leaves a positive imprint on its participants. We cannot afford the luxury of not doing it.

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