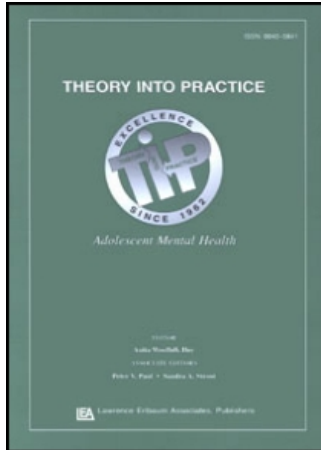


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Lessons to Be Learned From Research on Peace Education in the Context of Intractable Conflict

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Lessons to Be Learned From Research on Peace Education in the Context of Intractable Conflict

Recent research on peace education entails important practical lessons about educational work in regions of intractable conflict. Peace education in this context must deal with collective narratives and deeply rooted historical memories and societal beliefs. Research findings from a series of studies with Israeli and Palestinian students and teachers demonstrate the challenges of attaining durable and worthwhile effects through educational activities: short-term benefits may erode over time, ongoing violence and hostility may block attempts to understand the opponent's perspective, and power and status asymmetries may dictate incompatible agendas or prohibit a mutual

common ground for constructive interaction. At the same time, these studies offer several promising directions to enhance the potential of carefully designed peace education programs. Such programs are likely to foster participants' ability to acknowledge the adversary's collective narrative, engage in constructive negotiations over issues of national identity, and express a less monolithic outlook of the conflict.

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ONE OF THE JUSTIFICATIONS for carrying out research on peace education programs is the nontrivial lessons that can be derived from them to design and improve future peace education practices. We focus here on the practical lessons that can be learned from recent research on peace education in the context of an intractable conflict. Such a conflict is characterized by being violent, perceived as a zero sum game (where one gains only if the other loses), irreconcilable, central, and total in a society's life (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). We wish to claim that peace education in such regions differs in important ways

from regions with nonviolent intergroup tension based on ethnocentrism (Bar-Tal, 2004), or in regions of relative tranquility, such as Sweden, as well as from education for interpersonal conflict resolution as conceptualized and practiced in schools (Salomon, 2002).

There are at least three qualities that set aside peace education in regions of intractable, often bloody, conflicts that distinguish it from other programs. First, the main focus of peace education in areas such as Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Israel/Palestine, or Rwanda, is not the conflict between individuals who need to acquire conflict resolution skills but rather between collectives (Coleman, 2003). As individuals, members of groups involved in the conflict may not directly engage in actual conflict resolution. Indeed, there is no conflict to be skillfully resolved between an individual Hutu and an individual Tutsy in Rwanda (Staub, 2002), or between Israelis and Palestinians as particular individuals. The focus of peace education in such conflicts is on the treatment of the collective conflict (Azar, 1990; Foster, 1999), rather than the acquisition of particular skills for interpersonal conflict resolution (Deutsch, 1993; Sandy, Bailey, & Sloane-Akwara, 2000).

Second, intractable conflicts are deeply rooted in each side's collective narrative, the story each side tells about itself, its identity, aspirations, perceived role in the conflict, and, mainly, its past and current history (Bruner, 1990; Salomon, 2004). History, in particular, holds the conflicting sides in a firm grip that often ignites and then sustains the continuation of the conflict (Devine-Wright, 2001; Roe & Cairns, 2003). Think of the way memories of the 14th Century Turkish conquest of Kosovo played out 600 years later in the conflict between Albanians and Serbs (Troebst, 1998), or the role that the collective memory of the *Naqba* (catastrophe) of 1948 play for the Palestinians in their fight against the Israelis (Tamari, 2002). This is one of the major challenges facing peace education in the context of such conflicts; it is a challenge not often faced by peace education in either a region with no adversaries or in situations requiring conflict resolution in schools.

Third, peace education in the context of intractable conflicts faces the challenge of deeply rooted

beliefs held by each side about itself (we are right, God is on our side, we are the victims) and about the adversary (they are wrong; they are the aggressors; they understand only the language of force; they force us to do ugly things; Bar-Tal, 2000). Such collective beliefs are perceived as unquestioned truths and are thus highly resistant to change (Weick, 2001).

Conflict resolution programs in schools do not face similar challenges of collective narratives, histories, and beliefs (though they may encounter weak manifestations of such issues). Their main concern is with the cultivation of orienting, perception, emotional communicational and creative abilities, the creation of positive and supportive classroom environments, as well as the development of conflict resolution skills (Bodine & Crawford, 1998). It is for this reason that much of the research carried on in such programs is of only partial relevance for peace education in the context of intractable conflict; peace education in Northern Ireland would be far more concerned with intergroup mutual understanding (Cairns & Hewstone, 2002). Still, there is partial overlap between the different kinds of peace education and conflict resolution, commonly aiming at the improvement of understanding the nature of conflict, listening, and empathy. Thus, some of the lessons described later, although derived from research in a country of violent and protracted conflict, may be partly applicable to programs in contexts of tranquility or school-based programs of conflict resolution.

In what follows we report on a few studies conducted on peace education programs with Israeli-Jews and Palestinians and point out some general lessons that we have learned from them. These lessons are applicable beyond the context in which the studies were carried out. We have chosen studies where difficulties or failures were encountered as well as more successful ones, as both kinds of studies are very instructive.

No Lasting Change Without Continued Scaffolding

The use of dialogue or encounter groups is typical of peace education programs in the context of

interethnic, national, or religious conflict. Youngsters of both sides meet for weekend seminars, concentrated workshops, theater groups, summer camps, and other forms of face-to-face encounters. These encounters are often based on the contact hypothesis—actual face-to-face meeting and the attempt to attain a common goal can challenge and change participants' hostile views of each other. Much research has been carried out on such groups and lists of conditions to be met have been formulated (Pettigrew, 1998). When the conditions are met, friendships between members of the two groups often emerge during participation in the structured encounter activities. But do they generalize to other members of the groups who are not present at the encounters? Research conducted in relatively peaceful contexts appears to provide a positive answer (Pettigrew, 1997). However, research in Cyprus with groups of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, based on the Fulbright Training Program, failed to find a pattern of friendship generalization (Angelica, 1999).

Bar-Natan (2005) conducted a study with 172 Jewish Israeli and Palestinian youngsters who participated in a 3-day intensive encounter group in the village-like retreat of Givat Haviva. She gathered reports of evolving friendships and measured changes in willingness to associate with other members of the opposite group (Social Distance) and willingness to legitimate the collective narrative of the other side. Positive changes were observed at the end of the workshop on both measures, statistically associated with the emergence of friendships between Jews and Palestinians. The results lend limited support to the hypothesis that interpersonal friendships generalize, at least as reflected in a reduction of declared social distance between the groups. It appears that evolving friendships can facilitate a more general acceptance of the other side and its collective narrative. But when the same measures were taken 6 months later, all of the positive changes appeared to have vanished. Levels of social distance and acceptance retreated to where they were before the workshop started; moreover, no associations with the friendships that emerged 6 months earlier were found. In other words, the workshop appears to have left no trace 6 months after it was completed.

Though errors of measurement and poor validity of the measures might account for some of the disappointing results, it is reasonable to hypothesize that changes in perceptions and attitudes attained following a short peace education intervention cannot remain intact over time without consistent and repeated scaffolding. Two factors play an important role here: time and adverse political events. Though still-unstable friendships between members of the adversary groups may have evolved during the workshop, they could not have been sustained without continued contact and maintenance. The attraction of continued contact, in the absence of face-to-face meetings, has a tendency to erode (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). In addition, the ongoing violence on both sides of the divide can easily and adversely affect one's willingness to remain in contact with a member of the enemy group even through remote means such as e-mail or phone calls.

It follows quite clearly that if positive effects are to be attained and sustained over time, and in the face of eroding forces, hit-and-run, shot-in-the-arm-like interventions cannot suffice. Repeating face-to-face meetings or, in other cases, repeatedly reinforcing other critical program elements becomes a necessity. A similar conclusion has been reached regarding Northern Ireland's curricula of mutual understanding (Kilpatrick & Leitch, 2004). Such a conclusion is not unique to peace education in contexts of intractable conflicts, as research on conflict resolution in the schools demonstrates (Sandy et al., 2000). However, the need for continuous intervention, with ongoing reinforcements of the changes attained, is particularly important where those changes are under constant threat of being nullified by ongoing violence and the hatred that accompanies it, as well as by the general belligerent social atmosphere that opposes such changes (Bar-Tal, 2002).

In light of the aforementioned, one may question the validity of attitudinal or behavioral changes recorded *only* at the immediate conclusion of a program, as is often the case. For example, Liebkind and McAlister (1999) introduced high school students to texts and peers modeling tolerance towards foreigners. Though the two-session class intervention had the desired effect on

tolerance, as measured by self-reports, there is reason to suspect that the recorded changes may have been short lived. Such changes are in danger of disappearing in the absence of a continued intervention.

The Value of Studying a Distant Conflict

One of the goals often formulated for peace education is to study the conflict and the positions of the other side. Indeed, coming to grips with the adversary's perspective, trying to step into its shoes, legitimizing its narrative and identity (Salomon, 2002), and developing some empathy for its plight (e.g., Bar-On, 2000) are important goals for peace education. However, intuition and experience suggest that, in the context of an intractable conflict, presenting the other side's perspective is most likely to arouse strong resistance. This is the case because one of the effects of an intractable conflict is the development of a tunnel vision (Rapoport, 1974), resulting in what Kruglanski (2004) labeled *epistemic rigidity*: strong adherence to one's narrative and position, and rejection of information that threatens collectively held beliefs. How can such rigidity and resistance be overcome?

Lustig (2002) studied the effects of a program that included the study of a totally foreign conflict. Sixty-eight 12th-grade Israeli-Jewish students studied the Northern Ireland conflict for a few weeks. Not a word was said about the local Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although it is very likely that the analogy between the two conflicts did not escape students' attention. Indeed, this is precisely what Lustig set out to study: To what extent did the program participants transfer their conclusions about the Northern Ireland conflict to their local context of conflict? To what extent were they able to take their adversary's perspective once they came to understand the two-sidedness of the remote conflict they had studied?

Findings were surprising. When asked to write an essay explaining the conflict from the Jewish point of view, program participants and nonparticipants (control group) had no difficulty showing that their own group's collective narrative of the conflict is familiar to them. However, when then

asked to write about the conflict from the Palestinian point of view, most of the program participants wrote well-balanced and impartial essays but only a handful of the nonparticipants wrote anything at all. Moreover, analyses of the essays in terms of first and third figure writing, proportion of negative to positive expressions, length, and so on, showed that the Palestinian essays written by program participants did not differ from their Israeli essays. Not so with the few and very short Palestinian essays written by the nonparticipants, which were filled with negative expressions using mainly the third figure when describing the Palestinian perspective. It became evident that where the program participants appeared to be able to step into the Palestinian shoes, those who did not participate in the program were unable to do the same.

This is where theory and research pertaining to transfer of learning becomes applicable: Something learned in an emotionally neutral context was spontaneously transferred to another, emotionally loaded, context. A new understanding of the adversary's perspective emerged, as manifested in the participants' ability to assume the *other's* point of view and present it in a nondefensive and balanced manner. It appears that the study of the foreign conflict afforded the opportunity to engage in a process of rising to a bird's eye view of the two-sidedness of a conflict, then applying the constructed abstraction to the local conflict. The feared resistance was thus circumvented by allowing the students to approach the emotionally loaded local conflict from a more universal, possibly more abstract perspective (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Strong Negative Emotions Can Undermine the Best of Intentions

Another suggestion to acquaint students with the collective narrative of an adversary is through induced compliance, that is, inducing each side to present the narrative of the *other* side. This approach is based on the veteran social psychological theory of dissonance reduction, in which a discrepancy is created between the presentation of the other side's perspective and one's (less than

positive) attitude toward it. To make the presentation and attitude congruent, people tend to change their attitudes to become more in line with the narrative as they have just presented it. That change is also assumed to be reinforced by the new information that one discovers while presenting the other side's narrative. It would seem that designing a program in which each side prepares and presents in as honest, balanced, and fair a way as possible the point of view of the other side, should lead to desirable changes. The narrative of the other side would now seem less rejectable to those who presented it. Indeed, research inspired by this idea tends to support the feasibility of the approach (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994). However, the research so far has not been carried out in the context of a severe, intractable conflict. Would it work also in such a context?

Ayelet Roth (2005) involved two pairs of Jewish-Israeli and two pairs of Israeli-Palestinian teachers in an Internet-based exchange of perspectives. Jewish teachers were to write the Palestinian narrative and the Palestinian teachers the Israeli one. The participating teachers were volunteers who were strongly motivated to cooperate with the other side. They were also knowledgeable of the narratives as construed by each side, so absence of relevant knowledge was not an obstacle.

Roth's study took place during a very difficult time. The days were filled with intensive acts of aggression—the height of the Palestinian uprising and the peak of the Israeli military incursion into Palestinian towns. Numerous individuals were hurt and a general atmosphere of uncompromising belligerence and hatred dominated the media and the political arena. Feelings were raw and very intense. Israeli-Palestinians felt that their brethren in the Palestinian Authority were viciously attacked whereas the Israeli-Jews felt threatened by terror attacks.

The study participants expressed similar feelings in no uncertain terms in their Internet exchanges and during interviews that followed. Little wonder, therefore, that the process of induced compliance never got off the ground. Neither side succeeded in writing the narrative from the other's point of view. Instead, Internet messages, decreasing in numbers as time passed, included expres-

sions of anger, frustration, despair, and defensive expositions of one's own opinion on the ongoing events. Expressing strong views of the violent situation and blaming the other side for its actions dominated the exchanges.

Does this mean that induced compliance cannot serve peace education? Not necessarily. It appears that one's ability to change perspectives and examine the conflict from the opponent's point of view depends on a willingness to step out of one's own traditional role and assume the opponent's position (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994). It also depends on confidence of the individual that, in assuming the other's position, one's own stance or identity does not become threatened. However, the presence of an ongoing, violent conflict heightens negative emotions and makes people stick more stubbornly and defensively to their shared perspectives (Bar-Tal & Salomon, in press; Coleman, 2003; Rapoport, 1974), preventing them from engaging in the delicate process of induced compliance. As the study participants reported during interviews, they felt they needed to defend their position and found it impossible to abandon it and role-play that of their opponent.

Heightened emotionality interferes with the more rational process of assuming the other's position. Furthermore, strong negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, interfere with cognitive performance in general (Mikulincer & Nizan, 1988; Sarason, 1975), and with attempts to change attitudes in particular (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Intervention methods that may be relatively effective in unemotional situations and with emotionally neutral targets of change may not be effective with heightened emotionality. It follows that, before any steps are taken to change attitudes or behaviors related to the other side of a conflict, neutralizing negative feelings as much as possible would be helpful.

How can this be attained? Based on the accumulation of experience and research, Maoz and Bar-On (2002) recommend the *To Reflect and Trust* (TRT) approach, where participants share their personal stories and experiences. Given two approaches to dialogue and encounter groups—the interpersonal where the conflict is disregarded in favor of promoting a warm interpersonal atmosphere, and the collective identity approach of

confrontation and identity building (Suleiman, 2004)—the TRT takes the middle road. It allows participants to share and reflect on their personal experiences, rooted as they are in the collective narrative, while at the same time promoting interpersonal relations, empathy, and trust (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004). It appears that this approach has the potential to take the sting out of the heightened negative feelings and allow processes such as perspective taking and induced compliance to take place.

Asymmetry of Needs, Perceptions, and Outcomes

Intractable conflicts are marked by sharp asymmetries of power and status between the rivaling parties. The dimensions of inequality can encompass access, opportunities, and mobility to economic, military, civic, and cultural resources. Moreover, in many intractable conflicts the two parties are at different stages of their ethnic, national, political, or cultural growth trajectories; it is common to find an emerging national entity that struggles for independence against a well-established nation-state (as are the cases of the Israeli–Palestinian, the Turkish–Kurdish, or the Spanish–Basque conflicts). Consequently, the material and psychological needs and expectations of the two sides are unique and distinct, and the socially constructed meaning of key concepts of justice, responsibility, or reconciliation would be expected to reflect such asymmetries. These concepts are, in turn, interwoven into the fabric of collective narratives (Bruner, 1990) that embody each community’s shared identity and provide a sense of meaning and coherence to the community. Peace education programs that seek to promote contact and dialogue between members of the adversary societies must negotiate powerful and robust differences in core identity elements that may prohibit establishing even a tentative mutual understanding of key concepts that serve as a common ground for constructive interaction.

Biton (2002) studied the differences in Israeli and Palestinian youth’s perceptions of the concept of peace and the impact of peace education on these perceptions. The study employed Galtung’s (1969) conceptual distinctions among *negative* peace (the absence of violence), *positive* peace (cooperation, harmony, commerce, and mutual-ity), and *structural* peace (equality, independence, and sovereignty).

About 300 Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian youth (aged 15–16) participated in a year-long in-school educational program, designed by the Israel–Palestinian Center for Research and Information (IPCRI). The program seeks to promote self-awareness, understanding, and tolerance for others in one’s immediate surrounding, and to cultivate acceptance of the *distant others*—members of the adversary society. Before participation in the program, 87% of the Jewish-Israeli students stressed the negative aspects of peace whereas 89% Palestinians stressed its structural aspects, as reflected in responses to structured questionnaires, free associations, explanations, perceived utility, and suggested strategies to attain peace.

Such different conceptions reflect the discrepancies in both side’s needs, aspirations, and basic interpretations of events and issues. Moreover, these differences show the lack of agreement on the seemingly mutually desirable outcome of peace. The Jewish-Israeli concern with security and the Palestinian desire for independence are incompatible aspirations. Any attempt to reconcile these two competing demands through education must first bring them to light and weigh their importance for understanding participants’ attitudes, expectations, and goals. Anticipating a generalized perceptual or attitudinal change in response to a peace education program runs the risk of neglecting the necessary adjustments needed to optimize the program to its participants.

When prompted again at the end of the peace education program, 37% (up from about 10%) of the Jewish-Israeli group and 26% (up from 5%) of the Palestinian group stressed the positive aspects of peace, compared with a control group which did not show any change over time. Still, Jewish-Israeli students continued to put more empha-

sis on the negative meaning of peace, but at the same time showed a dramatic increase in their perceptions of the structural elements of peace.

The role of competing agendas in shaping processes and outcomes of structured intergroup encounters in educational settings is exemplified in a study of curricular cooperation of Jewish and Palestinian teachers in Israel (Maoz, 2000). Inspired by Sherif's (1966) Robber's Cave experimental demonstration of the potential of joint activities to help improve intergroup relations, peace education programs sought to incorporate structured encounters where members of adversary societies engaged in joint projects. Typically, these encounters were studied from a perspective of attitude change but less attention was devoted to the intergroup processes during the encounters. Some researchers forcefully argued that, in a context of intractable ethnonational conflict, the power and status asymmetries between the sides inevitably penetrate the dynamics of encounters (Rouhana, 1997; Suleiman, 2004).

In Maoz's study, teams of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian teachers were convened to work together over 1 school year and create study units on Jewish and Arab affairs to be implemented later in their respective schools. Only 6 of the 15 teams managed to produce a study unit, and of these only two teams got to teach the units in their classrooms. The analysis of the group dynamics during work sessions revealed that the seemingly neutral, equal-status setting became a stage where the intricacies of the external intergroup conflict were played out vigorously. The joint pedagogical work was often devalued in favor of discussing the Jewish-Arab conflict, although such discussions were officially restricted by program organizers. In particular, the Palestinian teachers wanted to discuss the past and the harm which, in their eyes, was done to them by the Israelis. The Israeli teachers tried their best to avoid such discussions and wanted, instead, to concentrate on the meetings' tasks—to write curricular units. There was hardly a common agenda for the meetings.

These patterns of incongruent, even conflicting agendas underscore the need for a better understanding of the set of expectations, aspirations,

and interpretations with which peace education participants enter the educational experience. Theory and practice of instructional design have long acknowledged the importance of recognizing and incorporating individual and group differences in planning and implementing learning experiences. Peace education will be well advised to adopt a similar view. We wish to argue that programs that are better attuned to the unique sensitivities each party brings to the learning situation stand a better chance of clarifying important concerns and familiarizing each side with the perspectives of the other, hence affording a less monolithic outlook on the conflict.

But this is not the only lesson to be learned from the Maoz study. A second lesson pertains to the possibility of unexpected outcomes of intergroup encounters. Group dynamics in that study were characterized by the formation of subgroups and collations—crossing national lines and splintering the group of impartial third-party organizers and facilitators—around particular disputes that arose over the issue of setting the agenda for the task-team encounters. The legitimacy of exposing the political conflict during the meetings became a topic around which participants formed a microcosm of the larger conflict.

The ability to experience and work through painful issues during their joint work led many teachers to express satisfaction with the encounters, although most of them failed to achieve the prescribed goal. It appears that learning the perspectives of the other side was a major, although not anticipated, outcome of a type of cooperation between participants that arose naturally in the groups. The product of this cooperation was not the official task designated by the organizers, but rather the processing of pressing issues that reflected the different needs and aspirations of the two groups. The conflict was not pacified by the joint work on the pedagogical project; however, the experience of cooperation did provide a framework in which key issues of national identity and the demand for recognition could be negotiated, if not resolved. It might well be that the unanticipated encounter with conflict-related issues, previously avoided, was a goal worth attaining.

Summary

Our purpose in this article was to draw a number of lessons from recent research on peace education in a region of intractable and violent conflict with the hope that these lessons could inform program designers and evaluators. We drew five lessons, as follows:

1. The kinds of changes desired by peace educators cannot be sustained in the face of adverse political events, belligerent environments, and the eroding forces of time in the absence of continued scaffolding and reinforcement of the changes.

2. A direct approach to help program participants step into their adversary's shoes and legitimize its perspective may arouse strong resistance during conflict as it may threaten participants' sense of righteousness. On the other hand, learning about another remote conflict may circumvent that obstacle. It paves the way for what Perkins and Salomon (1992) have called *high-road transfer*, which affords the opportunity for mindful abstraction—the creation of a bird's eye view of conflicts. Such a view enables the application of conclusions reached regarding the remote conflict to the proximal one. The indirect way appears to be an effective one.

3. Strong negative emotions interfere with the ability to examine and adopt the other side's perspective or show much empathy with it as such experiences (particularly during intractable conflict) often threaten one's sense of identity vis-à-vis that of the adversary. The gradual establishment of strong and empathic interpersonal relations may be a necessary precondition.

4. Adversaries come to joint peace education programs with incompatible, even opposing agendas and perceptions that need to be taken into consideration. It may well be the case that working through these differences, using group processes, can establish some common ground.

5. In turn, the establishment of common ground may lead to unanticipated and serendipitous worthwhile goals such as a deeper understanding of one's self and that of the other side.

These lessons may seem quite trivial in hindsight. Didn't we all know them without having to engage in costly research? Not really. Findings that lead to alternative lessons would have sounded equally reasonable and trivial in hindsight: Once minds have changed nothing will reverse the transformation, there is nothing as effective as a direct assault on one's stubborn beliefs, negative feelings pave the way for change, and so on. Much can be learned from good theorizing and thorough research that is applicable to the design and implementation of peace education programs, even if the research was carried out in the context of an intractable context. Lessons learned from research in such a context, while dealing with unique challenges, are likely to be applicable to peace education in other contexts.

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