Does Peace Education Really Make a Difference?

Gavriel Salomon

University of Haifa, Center for Research on Peace Education

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Running Head: Effects of Peace education in an intractable conflict


Address correspondence to: Gavriel Salomon, University of Haifa, Center for Research on Peace Education, Haifa, 31905, Israel.
Fax (972) 4 824-9372 ; Email: gsalomon@research.haifa.ac.il
Abstract

A discrepancy is pointed out between formidable and thus discouraging hurdles facing peace education in the context of intractable conflicts and actual, encouraging research findings of such programs. It is suggested that the hurdles pertain to the most deep-seated, and thus unchangeable convictions constituting the backbone of a group’s collective narrative. On the other hand, the change-objects affected by peace education programs pertain to more peripheral attitudes and beliefs which are more easily changeable, more weakly associated with behaviors and thus less consequential. This hypothetical possibility is briefly examined from both a theoretical and practical perspective, leading to three clusters of research questions: (a) Is the proposed distinction between central and peripheral attitudes and beliefs applicable to peace education programs? (b) How stable are changes of peripheral attitudes in the absence of changes of the more central ones? And (c) to what extent can only long-term, socialization-like programs affect core beliefs and attitudes?
While numerous programs of peace education take place all over the world, there is relatively little evidence to show that they succeed in attaining their goals or are effective in any measurable way. This paucity of research and evaluation should not come as a surprise, given the numerous political, financial and mainly psychological hurdles facing peace education. Salomon (in press-a) has recently outlined some of these hurdles such as conflicting collective narratives (Bar-Tal & Salomon, in press), mutually exclusive historical memories (Cairns & Roe, 2003), deeply rooted beliefs about the conflict and the adversary (Bar-Tal, 2000), grave inequalities and a belligerent social climate. Also, one of the major goals of peace education programs is to have its participants legitimize the collective narrative and experiences of the "other side" (Salomon, 2002), thus clearly contradicting the very mission of schools to cultivate youngsters’ adherence to a collective narrative (Vriens, 1997). How then can school-based peace education be expected to be effective?

However, recently, a set of studies has been published (Salomon, in press-a) designed to answer a number of questions about the effectiveness of peace education programs in the context of an intractable conflict – the one between Israelis and Palestinians. Thus, for example, in one study, youngsters learning about a foreign, remote conflict became better able to assume the perspective of their adversary in a fair and well balanced way (Lustig, 2003). In a second study it was found that participation in a year-long peace education program served, among other things, as a barrier against the deterioration of perceptions of the other side which afflicted non-participants (Biton, 2002). The conclusion was reached on the basis of these and other studies (e.g., Maoz, 1999), that even under the conditions of a violent conflict, peace education makes a difference. These findings clearly contradict the above list of
severe roadblocks and hurdles that peace education would need to overcome. Indeed, skepticism as to the chances of peace education programs to overcome such hurdles would be justified. And yet, the research reported by Salomon (in press-a) and by others (e.g., Maoz, 2002) appears to defy these gloomy predictions.

What may explain the contradiction between the list of hurdles and the research findings? It appears as if either the hurdles are not as serious as presented or that the validity of the findings should be questioned. Indeed, since the findings come from mainly questionnaires-based responses, the possibility of socially desirable influences comes readily to mind. Another explanation could be that while the findings appear to be valid, the measured and observed changes may well be short-lived. Thus, the studies should perhaps be taken to show what can be attained in principle, not necessarily what is attainable in actuality. The same criticism could and should be leveled at most other studies, few as they are, that show that peace education makes a difference. Thus, the question needs to be bravely asked: Does peace education really make a difference? It would not be difficult to dismiss the findings of studies of the kind mentioned here. But this would be too easy and unwarranted. After all, not all measures used are susceptible of bias and not all results are temporary. A deeper examination is needed.

There are at least two possible answers to the question of whether peace education programs "really make a difference". One answer pertains to the micro level, that is – to changes that are experienced and exhibited by the individual participants following (as contrasted with during) participation in a peace education program. What kind of changes do they exhibit and how generalizable and stable over time are these changes? A second answer pertains to the more macro level, that is – what difference does it make for the ongoing conflict if a number of individuals
participate in some peace education programs, measurably effective as these programs might possibly be? In this paper I will attempt to address the first of these questions as it is more suitable to a psychological examination, while the second question is better suited for a socio-political treatment.

What does it mean to "really make a difference"? We certainly do not mean by this that individuals who participate in peace education programs do not drop out, or even recommend them to their friends. We also do not mean satisfaction with the programs, expressed tolerance while carrying out program-related activities, or intensive interactions with "others" during dialogue group meetings (e.g., Maoz, in press). Such criteria are important as indicators of a successful process, or evidence of necessary intermediate steps on the way to some more lasting cognitive, affective or behavioral residue. But when we speak of really making a difference, we mean changes that can be widely applied outside the temporal and spatial confines of a peace education program, being worthwhile, lasting and somewhat generalizable.

How then can we explain non-trivially the gap between the list of hurdles facing peace education, and the changes attained by some studies? A relevant clue comes from the findings of Bar-Natan (2004). She found that interpersonal friendships between Israeli and Palestinian youth generalized to a greater acceptance of members of the other collective. However, among Palestinians, friendship with Israelis did not generalize to a greater acceptance of the Israeli collective narrative. This is quite logical for they would not be expected to legitimize the narrative of what they experience as their oppressors, thus turning their backs to some of their most central beliefs. It appears that not all beliefs and attitudes are born alike; some, it seems, are more susceptible to change than others. Could it then be that the roadblocks facing peace education, on the one hand, and programs’ actual
achievements on the other, address entirely different issues? May it be that the roadblocks pertain to the very core of the conflicting groups’ collective narratives – the issues closest to the collective heart, the backbone of a group’s identity, the highlights of its common history, and its most cherished belief systems? On the other hand, is it possible that observed changes of peace education programs of the kind mentioned above, tap far less central issues such as taking the others' perspective (Lustig, 2004), changed perceptions of "peace" (Biton, 2002), willingness to associate with members of the other group (Bar-Natan, 2004), decreased stereotypes (Maoz, 1999), and the like? In other words, the psychological aspect of a conflict may pertain to conflicting collective narratives that entail the very core of a group's sense of identity, history and its most cherished beliefs, thus facing peace education with formidable hurdles. On the other hand, the attainments of peace education programs pertain to attitudes, stereotypes, prejudices and perceptions – cognitions which are at the periphery of a narrative's core and are thus far more susceptible to change (Boninger, Krosnick, Beret, & Fabrigar, 1995).

This possible absence of correspondence between the challenges that peace education appears to face in times of intractable conflict and the issues it may affect in actuality deserves to be examined from at least two perspectives – theoretical and practical. A theoretical framework that comes readily to mind in the present context is the one pertaining to the centrality, importance, ego-involvement and strength of attitudes, beliefs and values (e.g., Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Certain issues emanate from this framework such as the unique nature of a collective narrative’s core and its stability over time, the similarity between the cores of narratives of conflicted collectives, or the dynamic relationships between core and so-called periphery. Of
particular interest is the question of how do changes in the peripheral attitudes and beliefs affect the so-called core, and vise versa.

As for the practical, other questions and issues come to mind. If indeed, as postulated here, peace education programs in contexts of intractable conflict touch upon only peripheral attitudes and beliefs, how stable would their changes be if the core of the belief system remains unaffected? Are the resources, good will, efforts and hopes invested in the design and implementation of peace education programs worth it if all they can attain is (fleeting?) changes of some peripheral cognitions? Alternatively, knowing the possible limits of what peace education can attain, may teach us to tame our expectations and be satisfied with what Mark Ross (2000) has called “good enough conflict management”.

The Centrality and Importance of Some Attitudes and Beliefs

From the early days of attitude research, followed by the study of values, the idea of a hierarchy was contemplated and then researched. Thus, Maslow (1954) developed his hierarchical theory of motivations and needs, Allport (1961) noted that attitudes dependent on pre-existing social values, and Rokeach (1973) spoke of higher and lower order values: “A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance” (p 5). Schwartz (1997), studying the structure of values in a variety of countries, found not only similar facets of values across societies, but also certain values that occupied a more central place in the overall structure of values.

Abelson (1988) pointed out three embarrassments for attitude research: Their poor predictive power of behavior, the fact that in research some individuals concoct superficial attitudes, and the ease with which they can be changed in the laboratory but not in field studies. According to Abelson, the common denominator is the
insufficient attention given to those attitudes that make a difference in a person’s and society’s life, attitudes that constitute convictions. A conviction, accordingly, is like a valued material possession which is “protected by its owner, will be displayed to sympathetic audiences, and will not be given up unless it loses its value – say, by going grossly out of fashion” (p. 267). Of greatest relevance here is the idea that convictions, unlike regular attitudes, are not easily changed; people are very certain about the appropriateness of these and are often willing to sacrifice a lot to hold on to them.

Others have studied the pecking order of attitudes and beliefs under such labels as importance and certainty. Thus, in a series of studies it was found that attitudes that are considered important are subject to frequent thoughts, are more extreme than less important ones, less susceptible to outside influences, are more stable over time, and are more strongly associated with behavior (see for summary: Krosnick & Schuman, 1988). Also, more important/central attitudes tend to show greater ego-involvement and thus a greater likelihood that they will be acted upon in an attitude-consistent manner and are more likely to influence other attitudes and judgments (see for summary: Thomsen, Borgida & Lavine, 1995).

It appears that attitudes or beliefs that are considered more important are like pillars of a complex system. They are strongly related to each other in consistent ways and have more and stronger links to other, more peripheral attitudes. As described by Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach & Grube (1984),

A change in any component of the belief system will lead to changes in related components. And the more central the component that undergoes change, the wider the repercussions on related beliefs and attitudes, as well as on related mental activities and behaviors (p. 27).
Moving or changing any one of these central pillars threatens the whole belief structure of the true believer – whether it is an attitude/conviction about feminism, animal rights, abortion or "our territorial rights". This would be even more challenging when those centrally located beliefs are reinforced and scaffolded by social agreement that treats them as unquestionable truths (e.g., Weick, 2001): Our rights to own this piece of land; we have been exploited; our security comes first; we are morally superior; and the like. Lustick (1993) argues in this respect that beliefs that have gained hegemonic status in a collective, akin to central beliefs of the individual, have also the status of truth and are not subject for examination.

“Everyone knows that they are out to get us…”

Eidelson & Eidelson (2003) see clear parallels between individual core beliefs and those of collectives (the latter they call “worldviews”); in both cases these beliefs can be destructive - for the paranoid individual who fears others or for the group whose fears propel it toward conflict. In both cases, information pick up and processing is strongly biased by these core beliefs, and in both cases judgments and actions are determined by them. Eidelson & Eidelson (2003) enumerate five such core beliefs and worldviews: Superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. Bar-Tal (2000), provides a list of conflict-related core beliefs, and Salomon (2002) suggests on that basis that the very core of the psychological aspect of intractable conflicts is the deligitimization of the other side’s collective narrative, beliefs and experience. Bar-Tal & Salomon (in press) provide another, longer, more elaborate and less clinically-oriented list of beliefs such as beliefs about security, in-group images, victimization and the deligitimization of the out-group. Some of these may indeed constitute the unwavering core of collective beliefs of a group involved in an intractable conflict. However, it may well be the case that each group in a conflict will
have a somewhat different list of core beliefs and convictions and that this list may change as a function of changing events and times. The point is not to construct a fixed, universal list of core beliefs but rather to identify the core for each case and to study the relationships between the cores and their respective peripheries as well as the way attempts to change one of them affect the other.

Researchable Questions

This theoretical background leads to a host of open-ended questions that pertain in particular to peace education and similar undertakings. The first question is, of course, whether peace education programs, in actuality, affect mainly beliefs and attitudes that are on the relative periphery of a group’s collective narrative and conflict-related list of beliefs. In light of the above, it is possible to hypothesize that the difficulties faced by peace education programs pertain mainly to beliefs and attitudes that are more central but also more consequential in a groups’ collective narrative. On the other hand, peace education programs succeed to affect mainly more peripheral beliefs which are more easily changeable, less consequential and have a far weaker connection to actual behavior. In other words, peace education programs, while not necessarily failures, do not, and possibly cannot effectively change more central beliefs, the ones that serve as the backbone of a group’s collective narrative. Relatedly, to what extent is it the case that program participants succeed to legitimate the less central claims of the other side while continuing to deligitimize the more central/hegemonic ones?

A second set of questions pertains to the stability over time of the changes brought about by participation in peace education programs: How stable overtime are changes of peripheral beliefs in the presence or in the absence of changes of more central ones? One possibility is that, assuming that peripheral attitudes and beliefs
emanate from the core (Rokeach, 1973), changes in peripheral ones are bound to be
temporal if no changes of the core accompany them. Alternatively, if changes in
peripheral beliefs and attitudes become disconnected from their more central origins,
they may become better sustained. One may ask whether, and if so how, do changes
of peripheral attitudes and beliefs affect the more central ones, something akin to the
“foot in the door” phenomenon (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) according to which small
and often not particularly significant changes pave the way for larger ones. This, for
example, is often the case with cultural changes: Small, seemingly peripheral
technological changes (e.g., the introduction of shoes) gradually upset the whole
social structure (the tribe’s elders cannot afford shoes, thus losing status; Hall, 1973).

A third set of questions deals with a rather fundamental issue in educational
and psychological interventions and is of prime importance for peace education: To
what extent are short-term, intensive peace education interventions, by their very
nature, bound to be limited to affecting peripheral beliefs and attitudes while only
long-term, extensive interventions are capable, if at all, to affect the more central
ones? This would be the difference between a shot-in-the-arm kind of intervention as
contrasted with a gradual and slow “drip effect”. Whereas the former may lead to a
rapid and perhaps dramatic change, the latter allows deeper, and thus more lasting
changes.

A case in point is research on educational and psychological interventions. For
example, Groves & Pugh (2002), studying the effects of short-term attempts to
educate teachers about complex environmental issues, concluded that –

[G]ains in factual knowledge can be produced through innovative
instructional interventions; but the ability to move deep-seated beliefs to
closer congruence with current scientific understanding is still problematic (p. 387).

Similar observations were made by Dakof, et. al. (2003) who studied the effects of an anti-drug abuse treatment and retention intervention on Black mothers of substance-exposed infants. They found that their one month long treatment, while effective for a short while, ceased to have an effect a month later. They concluded that the desired change is deep enough to require a much longer treatment.

Smith (1993) offered the distinction between “technological” and “natural” science, a distinction made “…to clarify the differences between the relatively stable natural systems produced by the long, slow co-evolution of organic and inorganic forces and the dangerously unstable systems produced by the perturbations of large-scale human technologies” (p. 588). Thus, “Attempted behavioral solutions to serious problems … will be safer, and ultimately more effective, if they are based on a theoretical understanding of the complexities of human interaction than if they rely solely on the engineering, however precise, of immediate behavioral effects” (p. 589).

We need to ask whether short-term peace education interventions, by virtue of being short-term, highly focused interventions, can not possibly affect deep-seated convictions. The change of these, like cognitive-developmental changes, may require something more widely focused, thus more akin to gradual socialization (Gallagher, 1991) than to “technological” engineering (Smith, 1993). This hypothesis is further justified in light of the fact that the changes desired by peace education depend not only on the qualities of the programs but also, and even more so, on the whole social context in which they take place. Central beliefs and deep-seated convictions are cultivated and sustained by wider social and political contexts. As pointed out by Bar-Tal (2002), for peace education to be effective, the overall ethos of culture of conflict
needs to change to a peace-oriented one, including the media, politicians, and the education system.

Studies comparing the effects of short-term vs. long-term peace education programs are difficult to conduct. However, the possibility that addressing the core of a group’s collective narrative requires long-term intervention cannot be easily dismissed. It needs to be empirically tested under real-life conditions.

In conclusion, does peace education make a real difference? As I tried to suggest, a lot may depend on what we consider a genuine change to be. The list of hurdles facing peace education in regions of conflict suggests that change should pertain to the core of a group’s collective narrative, that narrative that stands in the way of conflict settlement (Salomon, in press-b; West, 2003). But this core of the belief system, the hardened set of convictions about one’s identity, righteous beliefs and historical moral superiority, is apparently not very susceptible to change (Krosnick & Petty, 1995), particularly in light of its socially consensual nature (Weick, 2001). Thus, although changes of the so-called core of convictions would constitute real change, they may not be attainable by common peace education programs. On the other hand, it is hypothesized that peace education programs can affect more peripheral attitudes and beliefs which may not be as deep as one would want, but may be “good enough” changes (M. Ross, 2000). If well done, and given the severity of conflicts, this may indeed be quite sufficient.

A number of research questions comes to mind in this respect. Some of them – such as the difficulty of changing central beliefs, have already been studied by social psychologist. However, much of the relevant research has been carried out under laboratory, but not under real life conditions of real conflicts. Other questions – such as the extent to which changes of peripheral beliefs can affect more central ones, or
the difference between the effects of short- vs. long-term peace education programs on core convictions - have yet to be addressed. Still, one conclusion seems to be clear already, namely, that not all change-objects are born alike, and that some are more responsive to what peace education can do than others.
References


