

**Does Peace Education Really Make a Difference?**

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## **Abstract**

An inconsistency 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?

## Peace education in the context of intractable contexts

Peace education in contexts of intractable conflict faces formidable challenges that are unique to such contexts (Bar-Tal, 2004; Salomon, 2004a) and thus raise questions about its possible effectiveness. In this paper I wish to discuss one such question and formulate researchable hypotheses that might provide explanations for some of the perplexing issues facing peace education. The kinds of peace education programs referred to here are the ones deliberately designed as relatively structured in- or out of school programs with specific goals such as changed attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices, increased tolerance and understanding of the "other side" (e.g., Burns, & Aspeslagh, 1996).

The context of intractable conflicts, was described by Azar (1990), as conflicts based on "ethnic, hostilities crossed with developmental inequalities that have a long history and a bleak future" ( p.127). Rouhana and Bar-Tal (1998) detailed the main characteristics of this kind of conflict as being violent, perceived as a zero sum game, central in a society's life and total. Of great importance is the observation that the psychological aspect of intractable conflicts consists of a collision of collective narratives that entail each side's collective memories, collective identities and shared beliefs (e.g., Coleman, 2003; Foster, 1999; Salomon, 2004b). These, in turn, might be said to constitute the collective narrative's back bone, its most cherished beliefs and convictions pertaining to its history, identity and to the conflict (Bar-Tal & Salomon, in press). Thus, for example, while the Israeli-Jewish narrative emphasizes the right of the Jewish people to return to their ancestral homeland after having experienced the holocaust, that of the Palestinians stresses their right to the (same) land from which they have been expelled by the Jewish immigration (e.g., Roundtable Discussion, 2002).

In light of the above it becomes reasonable to assume that peace education in such contexts of intractable conflict is quite different from other peace education activities and programs that are carried out in less conflictual contexts or with participants who are not engaged in collective conflicts (Salomon, 2002). For example, whereas peace education in Northern Ireland carries the heavy yoke of painful historical memories (e.g., Devine-Wright, 2001), peace education in Sweden does not (Brock-Utne, 1995), and whereas peace education in Northern Ireland (Cairns & Darby, 1998) or Sri-Lanka (Gunawardana, 2003) faces collectively held and deeply entrenched beliefs about the "other side", conflict resolution educational programs in the schools most often do not. Although the latter are relatively well studied and evaluated, the fact that they focus mainly (though not exclusively) on individuals' acquisition of conflict resolution skills and on the resolution of a-historical interpersonal rather than historically-rooted collective conflicts (e.g., Deutsch, 1993; Sandy, Bailey, & Sloane-Akwara, 2000) differentiates their findings, important as they are, from those most relevant to peace education in the context of intractable conflict. The present paper focuses on in- and out of school specially designed peace education programs in the context of intractable conflicts.

#### Inconsistency between hurdles facing peace education and research findings

There are numerous hurdles that the context of intractable conflict faces peace education with. Salomon (2004a) 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 (Comas-Diaz, Lykes & Alacon, 1998) and a belligerent social climate (Bar-Tal, 2004). These can be seen as hurdles facing peace education because they would tend to limit one's ability to legitimize the

other side's point of view, acknowledge the contribution of one's own side to the conflict, or pave the way for some empathy for the other side's suffering. In fact, one could say that the adversaries' collective narratives, historical memories and beliefs contradict each other: It is either that my side are the victims or it is yours, and it is either my take on the history of the conflict that is the correct one or yours.

However, recently, a set of studies has been published (Salomon, 2004a) 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 local adversary in a fair and well balanced way (Lustig, 2002). 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). In another study carried out by UNICEF-Croatia (1997), a school-based trauma healing and peaceful problem solving program was found to decrease post-traumatic stress symptoms, improve self-esteem and reduce negative attitudes toward Serbs. The conclusion can be reached on the basis of these and other studies (e.g., Kovac-Cerovic, et. al., 1996; Maoz, 1999), that even under the conditions of a violent conflict, peace education **can** make a difference. These findings appear to be inconsistent with 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 (2004a) and by others (e.g., Maoz, 2002; see for summary of studies: Spencer, 1998) appears to defy these gloomy predictions.

What may explain the inconsistency between hurdles facing peace education in the context of intractable conflict 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. Since the findings come from mainly questionnaires-based responses, the possibility of socially desirable influences comes readily to mind. So does the possibility of self selected participation in peace education programs. 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 participants are self-selected. A deeper examination is needed.

We certainly do not mean by a "real change" 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, 2004). 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.

#### Hurdles and findings may address different issues

How then can we explain non-trivially the inconsistency between the list of hurdles facing peace education, and the changes attained by the kind of studies

mentioned above? Ostensibly, a large body of empirical studies of the effectiveness of peace education programs in the context of intractable conflicts could have served as a rich source to draw relevant hypotheses from. Unfortunately, there is a great paucity of empirical studies of peace education programs in such a context, as contrasted with the many studies of conflict resolution in the schools. We have carried out a number of thorough literature searches through ERIC, APA, Social Science Citation, Dissertation Abstracts and Proquest and found no more than a handful of studies that were carried out in contexts of actual conflict and which met basic methodological such as random assignment, pre- and posttesting and control groups. Thus, we are left with the need to generate hypotheses on the basis of the little available research, general social psychological theories and educated hunches.

A clue that might help us understand the inconsistency comes from the findings of Bar-Natan (2005). 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 reasonable 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 program effects are born alike; some, it seems, are easier to attain 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 hurdles 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 such as its belief in its basic right to exist or the legitimacy of its major

political claims? 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, 2002), changed perceptions of "peace" (Biton, 2002), willingness to associate with members of the other group (Bar-Natan, 2005), decreased stereotypes (Maoz, 1999), and the like? The latter, unlike the former, are at the relative periphery of a narrative's core and are thus far more amenable to change (Boninger, Krosnick, Beret, & Fabrigar, 1995).

#### Theoretical and practical considerations

This possible absence of correspondence between the hurdles 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, 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 over time the so-called core, and vice 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”. We have recently studied what Jewish and Palestinian university students consider as their more and less central beliefs concerning the conflict. In light of this, it might well be that while such central beliefs as the Jewish right to have their own state, or the Palestinian's belief in their own independence are less likely to change relative to beliefs such as the humanity of the other side or its right to water sources.

### 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 such as self-control that were rated as more important (more central) in the overall structure of values relative to, for example, obedience.

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 their appropriateness 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 more detailed 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 in the context of intractable conflict. The first question is, of course, what kind of attitudes and beliefs can typical peace education programs in contexts of intractable conflict actually affect? Do such programs affect mainly or even exclusively, beliefs and attitudes that are on the relative periphery of a group's collective narrative and conflict-related list of beliefs? Are the programs, by their very nature, capable of affecting also more deeply seated convictions? The available research, focusing mainly on less than central attitudes and beliefs, cannot offer an answer. But in light of the theoretical considerations discussed above, it is possible to hypothesize that the hurdles faced by peace education programs pertain mainly to beliefs and attitudes that are more central but also more consequential in a group's collective narrative. On the other hand, it is possible to hypothesize that peace education programs in the context of intractable contexts succeed to affect mainly more peripheral beliefs which are more easily changeable, less consequential and have a far weaker connection to actual behaviors. Whether changing relatively more peripheral attitudes and beliefs, such as reduced stereotypes, serves as a step toward more general strategies that address social inequities, as suggested for example by Reardon (1988), is an important but still an open question.

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 in the context of intractable conflict: 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.

We need to ask whether short-term deliberately designed peace education interventions, by virtue of being short-term, highly focused interventions, can 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 in the context of intractable contexts 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 2004b; 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.

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