Peace Education in the Context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Introduction

Peace and human rights education has been defined differently around the world. In many Western countries including Canada, it is about the challenge of ethnocentrism and the promotion of cultural diversity. In Northern Ireland, it is about education for mutual understanding between Catholics and Protestants. In African and Middle Eastern countries, it is about disarmament, anti-militarism, and the promotion of human rights and conflict resolution programs (Salomon, 2002). Gabi Salomon (2002), as one of the leading scholars on peace education research, argues that although peace education has been interpreted differently around the world and uses a variety of activities to achieve its goal of dealing with relations between groups or individuals, almost all of these programs in polarized societies focus mainly on the interpersonal aspect of conflicts that aim to change behaviours, perceptions, prejudicial attitudes and feelings, while fostering certain social skills that include listening, mediation, and negotiation techniques. As emphasized by Salomon, an important aspect of peace and human rights education in societies affected by conflict is in the context of promoting dialogue between ethno-national groups and individuals. In this regard, peace and human rights educators play significant roles in the creation and implementation of programs leading to dialogical interaction between people in conflict.

My research in Palestine and Israeli

Peace scholars, Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey (1996), who are credited for developing human rights curricula for different groups of people living in Western European countries, argue that today’s complex societies demand educated citizens actively participating in making their communities safer, and that these active community members encourage the younger generations to think critically and make decisions for themselves while also actively participating in the social and political affairs of their communities.

When I read Osler and Starkey’s book during one of my PhD comprehensive exams, I was motivated to focus my PhD research on the narratives of Israeli and Palestinian educators whose goals were to build peace, security and coexistence between their two conflicting nations. Therefore, I based my field work in Jerusalem and Bethlehem and interviewed several Israeli and Palestinian educators. I called these individuals peace educators, because by adopting the power of dialogue, they went beyond their daily work responsibilities to build trust, tolerance and understanding between their community members.
This research was not an evidence-based study (i.e., what impact do these peace educators make?). Rather, its purpose was exploratory in nature and told the educators’ stories based on their own perspectives and lived experiences as peace educators and the challenges they encountered in implementing dialogue and understanding the other, both inside and outside their communities.

**Research Methodology**

I adopted narrative inquiry to examine deeper understandings of peace educators’ engagement with their community members. Narrative research refers to any study using narrative materials in which data can be collected through interviews, observations and researcher’s field notes (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). One of the primary advantages of adopting a narrative research is the resulting relationship between the researcher and the participants, where the researcher listens to the participants’ narratives and is able to present their stories to a wide range of audiences within various discourses (Chase, 2003). In particular, I find narrative inquiry important within the context of education, when the emphasis is on transforming society through raising awareness and empowering the participants. An aspect of narrative research even more interesting to me is the use of the personal pronoun “I” when the researcher and the participants engage in a storytelling form of narration (Creswell, 1998). In my perspective, the use of “I” highlights the emotions and feelings of the narrators, enabling the researcher to show their action and social interactions to a wide range of audiences.

Acceptance of reflexivity or self-awareness can also be considered a strength of this approach because the researcher actively learns from the participants’ experiences and perspectives rather than being an “expert” who analyses their stories. In this regard, the researcher’s reflexive role can contribute to a better understanding of the cultural and political issues in communicative dialogues between ethnic groups in conflict, as well as it can improve educational strategies for the planning and implementation of dialogue-based encounters during ongoing conflict (Swanson, 2004).

**Critical Pedagogy**

I used critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1995) as the theoretical framework for this research because:

1. It demands that the researcher critically examine historic elements responsible for the context of the study (in my study, the centuries-old conflict in Palestine and Israel).
2. It directly reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (peace educators in Palestine and Israel).
3. It views knowledge as transforming social life through dialogical interactions (Giroux, 1995).

Critical pedagogy bases its knowledge on transforming the cultural and social conditions of individual lives through educating the community members. This approach entails a condition that involves both the educators and the students to challenge the dominant ideological assumptions (McLaren, 1995).
this reason, critical thinking becomes a key component whereby the students are encouraged to challenge oppressive aspects of their cultural norms. Critical pedagogy therefore encourages the deconstruction of historical assumptions conveying unequal relations and prejudicial behaviour/attitudes against the other.

In linking critical pedagogy to the work of peace educators in Palestine and Israel, the topic of empowerment becomes highlighted in my thesis. The goal in empowering the younger generation of Israeli and Palestinian is to provide them with the freedom of choice to decide for themselves without being manipulated by political ideologies that encourages the use of violence and allow the demonization of the other. This goal requires that one of the foci of the educators be the encouragement of their students/participants to view problems as social rather than personal, and express their needs and aspirations through the active use of critical thinking, dialogue and communication.

**Critical Pedagogy**

I presented the full narratives of five Israeli and Palestinian peace educators in my research, and discussed several themes that emerged to span these interviews, including self and other, occupier and occupied, the impact of suicide missions on the Israeli public, reconstructing of textbooks and support for a two-state solution. I further analyzed dichotomized relationships between the two highly polarized nations, as analyzed how peace educators challenged the conflict situation in ways that shaped/transformed the recognition of the other in light of the existence of the separation wall, and Israel’s “no return policy.”

The Palestinian and Israeli peace educators who contributed to data collection for this research understood the importance of teaching historical narratives from both sides of the conflict to foster mutual respect and understanding among Israelis and Palestinians without weakening their national/cultural identities. In this context, they asked their authorities to include history from the Israeli and Palestinian points of view in their curricula and also demanded their ministries of education make peace education curricula mandatory in their formal school systems, rather than focusing entirely on the obstacles caused by Israeli occupation, historical differences, societal mistrust, and many other logistical barriers.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study strongly suggest that the Israeli and Palestinian peace educators understand the importance of focusing their central efforts on collaborative and shared activities between the two conflicting nations despite asymmetrical relations in their societies. In this regard, they recognize the urgent need to have on-going face-to-face dialogical encounters to implement change in their societies. Despite the efforts of peace educators to create direct dialogical interactions between their community members, they often have limited possibilities for such interactions due to travel obstacles restricting such engagement. Salomon and Nevo (2002) argue the importance of engaging with the self/other prior to engaging in peace negotiation with the other side only. Moreover, these scholars argue that peace
education workshops and seminars will not be successful unless peace educators and peace researchers from both sides work together in the design and implementation of these types of curricula.

Overall, my understanding of dialogue in the context of peace education from the perspectives of the research participants is based on mutual recognition of each other’s history, deconstructing stereotypes and transforming the hatred toward the other, as well as building trust, and sharing narratives with one another. As discussed, bringing about change through implementation of peace and human rights education in societies deeply shattered by hate and violence is difficult, and requires a long-term process incorporating effort and patience, as well as it requires interaction with all sectors of civil society including the military, government agencies and NGOs.

While the narratives represented in this research are limited to five individuals, their voices capture the “lived reality” of dedicated educators directly engaged in transforming their communities towards a culture of peace. Although these peace educators are ordinary citizens living in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, their work is extraordinary, mainly because they are engaged in dialogical encounters based on a people to people process, despite facing negative stereotypes and deep historical division between communities.

References


