

Peace and Conflict Resolution Education as a best way of breeding tolerance

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Armenia is one of the former Soviet Republics, which was one of the first ones to gain its independence in 1992. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in numerous social and economic problems, which built up on the issues of the war with Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabagh, the disastrous earthquake ruining the Northern part of the country, widespread unemployment, poverty (World Bank: poverty rate reaches 28.4% in Armenia in 2nd quarter 2009) and migration. The abovementioned problems in our country have created an atmosphere of tension and intolerance within the society, which, no doubt, has its negative impact on school life as well. A child from poor, unemployed family “brings” the inner conflict of his family to school. Automatically, polarization of the society also brings polarization to school. Conflict situations often arise among pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relations, and schoolchildren cannot resolve these conflicts on their own.

But sometimes teachers are the ones to trigger the conflicts, because the same social and economic problems exist in their families as well. This means that the teacher comes to school with some level of pre-existing inner tension, which, in turn, reflects on his/her relations with both colleagues and the schoolchildren. Despite having jobs, majority of the teachers are unable to secure adequate living conditions for their families and are in need to seek for other sources of income. To be more specific, I would like to bring an example, which is very common in Armenian schools and very often provokes conflicts between teachers and pupils.

Thus, in order to enter higher educational institutions, the knowledge given to the schoolchildren in frames of their school curriculum is insufficient and the parents have to send their children to attend additional classes for gaining the necessary knowledge on specific subjects. It is worth mentioning that, despite high unemployment rates, parents are doing their best to make sure their children are getting proper education. This is a purely Armenian phenomenon and is not subject for discussion. Naturally, the additional classes are also additional sources of income for the teachers. However, very often, when the teacher finds out that the pupil is taking additional classes on his/her subject with another teacher, it becomes a constant source of conflicts with that pupil – sometimes even resulting in lowering the grades and other ways of “punishment”.

The following is another issue, which is directly connected with the “enforced” collapse of the Soviet school and the entire system of Soviet education, which resulted in creation of objective and subjective preconditions for causing conflicts. For more than 70 years “totalitarian” pedagogy of totalitarian system was in place. It would be wrong to say that everything was bad back then, as far as the Soviet school ensured provision of deep and diversified knowledge to schoolchildren. Naturally, the regime enforced its totalitarian approaches in terms of educational administration as well. Despite the legislative changes, those approaches are mainly preserved up to date. Both the entire society and the school are presently in transition stage.

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There are schools, where the Soviet style of educational administration is fully maintained: where the principal's words are treated as laws both by teachers, pupils and their parents. In such schools there is a very strict discipline, which sometimes can be perceived as some form of violence. In such schools teacher-pupils relations are in the form of total compliance to the teacher, and the teachers, in turn, must obey the school principals. Possible conflicts are "reduced" to minimum. There are also schools, where there is total "democracy" in the negative sense of this word – where both principals and the teachers have difficulties with controlling children's behavior.

It is worth mentioning that in almost all cases the idea of teacher being right all the time is dominant among the teachers. The vast majority of the teachers is unable to listen to and, therefore, to try to understand the pupils and treat them equally instead of thinking of having advantage and dominance over them. Existence of such culture creates many difficulties in teacher-pupil relations and does not contribute to formation of safe and peaceful learning environments at schools. Such conflicts usually result visible problems for principals not being able to rule the school and the situation becomes uncontrollable. We faced a concrete problem in one of the schools, where a whole class made an agreement to fail the classes, make everything go out of order in the school and to create as many problems for teachers as possible. The senior class students wanted to "take vengeance" upon their teachers for being disrespectful, for the psychological violence and intolerance of many years. The situation was so tensed that the teachers were not able to find a solution and their efforts and will towards changing the situation were futile. The principal asked us for help and we carried out separate meetings with the students and teachers trying to find out the problem and offer a suitable solution. Of course, it was not possible to solve the conflict completely, because time was very limited and the students were about to graduate. However, it was a very valuable "lesson" for the teachers to be more respectful and tolerant towards the students.

The abovementioned issues became the main challenge for "Women for Development" NGO in response to which the organization initiated the implementation of "Peace and Conflict Resolution in Schools of Armenia" back in 2002 with the goal of formation of the ideas of Peace Culture and Conflict Resolution among teachers and schoolchildren. The project funding came from German EED and Dutch ICCO organizations. Everything began with the research of international experience, adapting it to the Armenian reality and piloting the program in one selected schools.

As the result of the activities implemented during past 9 years in the frames of the project "Peace Education and Conflict Resolution in Schools" Peace Education Centers were established in 10 schools and Gyumri State Pedagogical Institute; more than 450 schoolchildren, 280 in-service and 124 pre-service teachers were directly trained on the issues of peace and conflict resolution and acquired a solid base of knowledge and skills; more than 3500 pupils from 18 schools became involved in peer-to-peer education process; more than 3000 parents became aware of the main principles of the project. The organization established collaboration with the National Institute of Education of the Ministry of Education and Science of RA. With the goal of integrating Peace Education in the school curriculum "Peace and Conflict Resolution Education in Schools" handbook for teachers was published. The handbook is comprised of two parts: Conflict Management and Peace Lessons. During the process of the handbook development middle school educational materials of international organizations and institutes such as UNESCO, UNIFEM and USIP, as well as materials from Education Departments (mainly US Education Department) and research centers (Global Issues Recourse Center) were utilized.

At Peace Education Centers we strive to make children realize that peace can be achieved only when people treat wars, conflicts and fights in negative ways and when

people change their attitude towards each other. Our activities are targeted to making children understand that for example, peace culture at schools is a combination of relationships between teachers and schoolchildren during conflict situations, which allows for resolving them in a peaceful way through respecting each other's dignity and by keeping their interests and protecting human rights. This also related to the process of building peace all over the world.

We care not only about transferring the abovementioned skills to the pupils, but also formation of practical skills and insights which will be useful for them throughout entire lifetime. Like one of our pupils mentioned: "Peace Education Center's lessons are the ones that I always look forward to, because I know that I am always going to learn something interesting, and after the class I look forward to getting home quickly so that I can immediately share what I have learnt". Another pupil added: "These classes make me take a look at my own life in a new way and something changes in me as the result, I become better".

During the very first year Peace Education Centers' members come to the conclusion that if it is possible to create an environment in the classroom where everybody is satisfied with the existing relations, spreading Peace Culture all over the world is also realistic. In the end, children become convinced that Peace Culture depends on certain people comprising nations and civilizations. They must know that it is necessary to learn to respect each other and cooperate during their school years and that their classmates are the ones who they keep seeing everyday and interacting with them is both easy and difficult and that in order for them to become successful, it is necessary to treat classmates as friends.

Valuing the importance of teaching the main ideas of Peace and Conflict resolution in 2006-2007, as the result of cooperation between the RA Ministry of Education and Science and "Women for Development" NGO, initial/basic ideas of conflict resolution were integrated in the study curriculum and standards of Social Science subject. Certainly, this is not enough for creating the peace culture among the schoolchildren; however this is the first step of the process. From our experience we came into the conclusion that the establishment of peace and conflict resolution skills among the teachers is not less important in the process of creating tolerant environment in schools.

To achieve the goal in 2007 certain topics from "The Managing and Resolving Conflicts Effectively in Schools and Classrooms" on-line course developed by the National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Drug Prevention and School Safety Coordinators, through a contract with the US Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools Office were translated into Armenian. Based on these topics, one day seminars were conducted for approximately 220 teachers from 10 schools. All teachers who participated in those seminars highly valued and appreciated the idea of conducting such meetings.

With the goal of evaluating the "Peace and Conflict Resolution Education in Schools" project implemented by WFD NGO in 2002-2008, to make sure that "Peace and Conflict Resolution Education" is truly valuable in the process of creating peaceful and tolerant environment in schools in April-February, 2009 a survey was conducted among more than 180 in-service and 37 pre-service teachers, 10 school principals and approximately 120 parents, and the students had an assignment to write essays on the topic of "What Did I Gain at Peace Education Center?", etc. Results of the survey, the essays, parents' and pupils' opinions showed that the vast majority of the respondents

give high importance to peace and CRE among teachers and students with regard to creation of peaceful and tolerance atmosphere in schools.

Thus, after summarizing pupils' essays we can claim that they highly value the role of Peace Education in their lives and often mention that the classes helped them better understand their friends, teachers and parents, be more tolerant, clarify what they previously did not understand, build relationships without conflicts. Below are several extracts from pupils' essays:

"While attending Peace Education Center I have learnt that the best resolution for the conflict is win-win solution. I learnt to identify sides, benefits, opinions and actions. In my opinion, if all schoolchildren took peace lessons, Armenia would be more peaceful. If there were more centers like this, there would be less wars in the world".

"I think that Peace Education is a necessity for schoolchildren, because conflicts always arise between pupils. The pupils in our class are less engaged in the conflicts now and when we see that other pupils quarrel, we try to help them. After taking classes at the center I have been a mediator in conflict situations arising between my girlfriends very often".

"I became more peaceful as the result of attending the Center. I would like all the classes at school to be as interesting as this one and to see all the pupils becoming peaceful. I think that peace in the world also depends on me".

The fact that Peace Education Centers at schools contribute to creation of peaceful environment in schools and families is proven by the responses of parents, teachers and school principals to our surveys. Parents encourage their children's participation in this project by mentioning visible positive changes in their behavior, respect towards children and adults and recalling cases of expressing the tolerance and friendship.

Teachers mention that classes being conducted in the Centers are having positive impact on pupils' interpersonal relations, that they are becoming more tolerant towards each other and that children's horizon is being expanded through interesting learning methodologies, which helps them better understand the world and the people. Majority of teachers notice visible changes in pupils' behavior and their desire to apply acquired knowledge and skills in school.

The research which was conducted by the NGO "Women for Development" was essential because we were not only expecting to hear feedback about the Peace Education but also concrete suggestions which would enable us to develop the Peace Education and to broaden the impact on the schoolchildren as future citizens and spreaders of Peace Culture.

Here are some of the suggestions that parents, schoolchildren and teachers have made:

- The project should be continuous and be integrated in the study curriculum; the program should be taught for all schoolchildren including for Elementary school.
- The Peace Education classes should be more frequent: 2 or 3 times a week.
- There should be a Peace Education textbook for schoolchildren.
- All the parents should be involved in the project.
- Peace Education centers should institutionalize their work and provide the necessary consultancy for teachers and pupils to resolve the inner school conflicts, etc.

It is interesting that almost all of the former Peace Education center members mention that "it would have been very effective if more people have had Peace Education classes, because we usually face people who aim to violent conflict resolution".

Some of the former Peace Education center members mention that it was easier to use the knowledge at school and to solve the everyday conflicts. It is a little different in adult life; it is harder to find a peaceful solution. However, almost all the alumni mention that they use the skills and knowledge gained at the Peace Centers and always try to find the best solution for the conflict situations.

All the participants of the survey find the Peace Education very important especially among the younger schoolchildren, because the personality of children is being shaped at that age. Valuing the importance of taking part in the program, all the participants suggest to carry out the project for all schools: “the social and financial situation is very weak nowadays; people have become aggressive and intolerant, they need to learn how to overcome the difficulties, learn to be more benevolent”.

After all, we can surely conclude that Peace and Conflict Resolution Education among schoolchildren is one of the best and most effective ways of teaching tolerance. The experience that the NGO “Women for Development” has gained can be spread in Armenia and abroad as well.

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