Peace Education: Community Development and National Prosperity

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Abstract

In light of the current political dynamics and transformations that engulf the MENA region and especially Lebanon, Higher Education Institutions need to assist the youth in developing new values such as democracy and acceptance of the different other in order to maximize community development and consequently, national prosperity on the social and economic levels. This paper describes the process of reforming the Student Life Bylaws at Notre Dame University after integrating new civic engagement programs, democratic electoral system and conflict transformation workshops. This paper also demonstrates that the participating students in the reform decision making process might portray future engaged Lebanese leaders. In addition, it depicts the changes that resulted from their intensive work and engagement on the personal level in terms of democracy and acceptance of the different other.

Keywords: Peace Education, Democracy, Community Service, Civic Engagement, National Prosperity, Conflict Transformation.

Introduction

Universal values such as peace, democracy, pacific conflict resolution and freedom became crucial for the survival of any society. Consequently, nations rely on their educational systems, notably schools and later on higher education institutions, to instill those values in their youth.
Situated in the boiling and controversial Middle East, Lebanon survived a thirty year civil war but its different societal constituents are still divided due to the absence of reconciliation and forgiveness necessary to overcome any war and achieve social cohesion. Furthermore, the youths' sense of belonging to the nation is practically nonexistent due to the lack of proper civic education programs at both the school and the university levels. Lebanese youths are struggling with their affiliations, namely religious and political. They were not trained to accept the different other and to adapt to new diversified environments. They witnessed verbal and physical violence that led them to reproduce the same model in their own distinct environments.

Case study background

Notre Dame University (NDU) is a Lebanese private, non-profit, Catholic institution of higher education which adopts the American model of liberal arts education. NDU offers quality instruction at a variety of degree levels and offers opportunities for research in various fields of interest for Lebanese and foreign students alike in a spirit of openness that embraces all cultures, regardless of race, gender, color, religion, or sect. As a Catholic institution inspired by the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Maronite Order of the Holy Virgin Mary, NDU seeks to provide comprehensive quality education that fosters excellence in scholarship, lifelong learning, enlightened citizenship, human solidarity, moral integrity and belief in God. In designing its curricula, NDU is committed to the philosophy and standards of the American model of liberal arts education. Conceiving itself as an authentic academic community, NDU promotes diversity, respect for human dignity and rights, and concern for the common good. Its profound aspiration is to prepare its students to be future leaders who can exercise reason upon knowledge and shape a world of truth, justice, love and freedom. Since universities mirror their societies, conflicts arose between students in line with the country's continuous inter-religious and inter-sectarian conflicts. Tension on campus escalated between different political parties as in other universities' campuses across the nation. Since peace education is always bound to the problems prevailing in societies, and since there is a dire need for NDU students to acquire peaceful behavioral patterns, NDU launched a total reform program for its Student Union (SU) electoral law and by-laws. A task force was created for that purpose that comprises representatives from different faculties along with representatives of different political clubs in the University. The aim of the project was to bring together students from different social and political backgrounds in order to find common grounds and values to overcome preconceived ideas that hinder their coexistence. Twenty three meetings were held during the 2012 - 2013 academic year, three conflict resolution workshops were conducted with all members and the students presented six different electoral law proposals. Students worked hand in hand with the administration towards achieving their target. The new electoral law will be decided upon by the University authorities during the current year so all relative logistics will be implemented by the end of the current academic year. This new law should be approved by the current SU along with the University authorities in line with the

shared governance policy of NDU. Prior to relating the outcomes of this case study, a review of peace education and conflict resolution principles should be elucidated.
A review of Peace Education through Conflict Transformation

Peace education is currently considered to be both a philosophy and a process involving skills, including listening, reflection, problem-solving, cooperation and conflict resolution (Harris, 1996). The process involves empowering people with the skills, attitudes and knowledge to create a safe world and build a sustainable environment. The philosophy teaches nonviolence, love, compassion and reverence for all life. Peace education confronts indirectly the forms of violence that determinates society by teaching about its causes and providing knowledge of alternatives. Peace education also seeks to transform the present human condition by, as noted educator Betty Reardon states, "changing social structures and patterns of thought that have created it" (Reardon, 1988). Peace education is taught in many different settings, from nursery school to college and beyond. Community groups teach peace education to adults and children (Harris & Morrison, 2003).

Conflict resolution or transformation consists of training people to find peaceful solutions to conflicts and to practice win-win situations for all parties. Skills used in conflict resolution are similar to those used in innovative instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning. When students work together on academic exercises, they learn to use the positive interpersonal skills
of caring, leadership, trust and conflict management. The ability to employ these skills in one facet of daily interaction will enhance the ability to use them in others. Indirectly, there is a compound effect on these instructional and conflict resolution strategies used across academic
and interpersonal dimensions in the learning environment (Adler, 1993).
The advantages of acquiring conflict resolution skills through education are well documented in the literature. While skills of conflict resolution are molded in educational institutions, they tend to be not followed up at home and in societies. Increasing pro-social actions, which reflect competence in peer interactions, friendships, and conflict resolution skills, can bring about the prevention of aggression (Grossman, Neekerman, Koepsell, Liu, Asher, Beland, Frey, & Rivara, 1997). Educators agree that problem solving, communication and nonviolent conflict resolution must be taught to address the problem of youth violence (DeJong, 1994). Researchers agree that interventions must stress nonviolent problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Educational administrators and policy makers insist that any solution must emphasize prevention (Giuliano, 1994). Peer mediation allows educators to create safe school communities and combine "teachable moments" with experiential
learning strategies to encourage students to find peaceful ways to resolve conflict (DeJong, 1994). Peer mediators then reinforce the skills that teachers instill through use of the peer group. In this way, peers act as a protective factor, rather than a risk (Barnett, Adler, Easton, & Howard, 2001). David Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Corporation, stated that "the reversal of the trend of violence among the young depends on teaching students how to work cooperatively with others" (Hamburg, 1992). Protective factors, such as a positive orientation to school, positive relations with adults, awareness of friends who model conventional behavior, involvement in pro-social behavior and a perception of strong sanctions for transgressions, all lessen problem behavior and moderate risk factors (Jessor , Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa,

& Turbin, 1995). Conflict resolution and peer mediation provide all of these protective factors. Involvement in peer mediation strengthens a student's positive orientation to school by providing a caring environment that is free from violence and encourages working together. Positive relations with adults are fostered through the interactions of peer mediators and teachers who train and supervise. The peer mediators that serve as the peer group also serve as the friends who model conventional behavior (Barnett, Adler, Easton, & Howard, 2001). Successful peer mediation programs recognize that conflict can be positive; it increases achievement, motivation, and reasoning, as well as social and cognitive development. Relationships are enriched and resilience is promoted through conflict. It is important to note that attempts to deny or suppress conflicts may actually contribute to violence (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). If conflict is not tackled, it is not solved, so it may grow into violent behavior and hostility. Educators must rely on the "teachable moments" that come with academic controversies, or when ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions of one student differ from another (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). According to Johnson and Johnson (1996, p11), "Training every student how to negotiate and mediate will ensure that future generations are prepared to manage conflicts constructively in career, family, community, and national and international settings." This will result in a positive learning environment. The learned pro-social behavior is fundamental to successful functioning in society (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Case Study Findings

Following the workshops, meetings and presentations, the participating students reported the following ten most important learning outcomes in their testimonies:
1. Developing social interaction on deeper levels, freedom of speech, no prejudices
2. Building bridges and capacities with others based on common points
3. Respecting the others even when disagreeing with them or misunderstanding them
4. Enjoying living together not only "tolerating" but fully embracing the others
5. Widening knowledge about other religions and accepting different ideas and perspectives
6. Appreciating diversity, human rights and women's rights
7. Importance of dialogue for solving problems
8. There is a dire need to communicate even if we are different. Difference doesn't mean conflict.
9. Diversity does not have to lead to dispute but to coexistence and respect.
10. What matters is our knowledge and behavior regardless what we believe in.

Furthermore, samples of their testimonies related reflections such as "I've rated the experience as high to encourage such intuitions. I think that support has been offered to students where a meaningful dialogue developed. The activities have improved our ability to communicate by offering us some ground rules for discussion and engaging us with comfortable simple discussion topics"– F.M, BA Mass Communication. "The experience was excellent, beautiful interaction, plus the discovery of a new club. I learned to forget political opinions, be easy going, common living, interactive and forget cultural and political differences" – E.W., BA International Affairs and Diplomacy.

The faculty members representing their respective faculties on the task force reported less tension between students, increased trust and positive attitude among students during and after the activities.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The NDU task force activities aiming at developing peace building and peaceful conflict resolution skills seem to have impacted positively the university environment based on participating students and faculty members' testimonies. Tackling the different conflicts from a peaceful perspective induced tolerance, respect and acceptance attitudes. Reported violent incidents decreased and a climate of open communication was present. Tensions among different political parties did not escalate into fights and confrontations.

Further research on integrating conflict transformation and peace building values across the curriculum might expand the results of this case study to a larger scale. Embedding those values will enhance democratic practices and contribute to building a more humane, open, free and responsible society. Furthermore, it will help in shaping generations that will overcome clashes based on extremism, religion and culture. Our role as educators is to bridge the gaps among divided communities and engage our students in promoting the general welfare rather than individual acquisitions.

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