

The Israeli-Palestinian School for Peace

Overview

In 1972, a group of Arabs and Israelis came together to create a village where they would live together voluntarily. They called this village “Neve Shalom” / “Wahat El Salam”, which means “Oasis of Peace” in Hebrew and Arabic. In 1976, the community founded a School for Peace which was to create encounter programmes for Jews and Arabs, drawing on the community’s rich experience of living together. They believed that if they could just bring Jews and Arabs together in a real personal encounter, the dominant stereotypes would be reduced, and peace would become possible.

Today, the founders recognise that they began with a naïve outlook. They soon discovered that the “contact hypothesis” – the idea that all you need to do is to meet and get to know the other - doesn’t actually fare well empirically. If you just bring people together and enable them to become friends, what happens is that they simply manage in their mind to separate their new friend from his/ her group. The attitude is essentially, “You are ok, you can be my friend, but you’re not typical, you’re not like all the other Jews/ Arabs/ black people/ white people...” This mental rationalisation is called “sub-typing”.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a conflict between two *peoples*, rather than between individuals. The School for Peace team realised that stereotypes are just a symptom, revealing deeper conceptions that are hard to eradicate. Collective identities are real, and constructed by stable and deep-rooted beliefs. Contrary to some theories, they are not easy to educate away, or to buy off with economic development.

Based on this reality, the School developed a more sophisticated and critical approach to encounter programmes. They set it up as an encounter between two national identities, and started encouraging participants to identify with their *group*. Today’s approach was developed through trial and error, and only gradually and in hindsight did they find more and more social science theories supporting it.

The Process

The intention with the programmes is to allow participants to examine their own identity through the encounter with the other group in authentic and direct dialogue. It is really around creating awareness and understanding, enabling participants to comprehend the turbulent and violent processes taking place all around them in Israel, and their own role in the conflict. The School creates a safe space that allows participants to examine their feelings and thoughts in a group. They critically examine things ordinarily taken for granted, challenge the existing reality, and pose new possibilities. According to Rabah Halabi, *“In awareness, however painful, is embodied one of the most human values: the right to have a choice, and the option to change and be changed.”*

Each of the programmes involves equal numbers of Arabs and Jews as participants, and equal numbers of Arab and Jewish facilitators as well. The groups are usually divided into small groups of approximately 16 participants – 8 Arabs and 8 Jews, with one Arab and one Jewish facilitator assigned to each group. Both Arabic and Hebrew are official languages and participants are encouraged to speak in their mother tongue with translation. The facilitators’ role is to clarify the processes, to analyze and mirror back to the group what is going on, and to create links to the external reality in ongoing dialogue with the participants.

The groups meet in two fora: the binational encounter group (Arabs and Jews together), and the uninational group (Arabs and Jews meeting separately). The participants usually spend about 3/4 of the time in the encounter group and 1/4 of the time in their uninational group. At first, participants tend to criticise the introduction of the uninational group. They don’t see its value given that they have come together in order to meet across cultures. But as the

conversations become more conflictual, the uninational group becomes a safer place where they can feel free to be vulnerable, to examine their own identity, to share deep realisations, and also to explore sub-identities within their group. These sub-identities include for example the difference between Muslim, Christian and Druze Arabs, and between Ashkenazi (European) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jews or liberal and nationalist Jews. It is harder to examine these differences in the bi-national encounter group because the Jewish-Arab line of identity is what is prominent there.

The topics that are central to the intergroup dialogues are around *inequities, Israeli politics, cultural dynamics, and the experience of being Jews and Arabs in Israel*. The participants are invited to bring up topics that they find interesting or troublesome. The idea is that for social change to happen, a dialogue needs to happen between these two groups that is real, genuine, and eye-to-eye. In order for the two groups to come together at an equal and authentic level though, the facilitators have found that the Arab group in every process has to first become strong, to shake off their inferiority, and uproot their internalised oppression. If they can build a clear, confident, aware, and demarcated in-group identity, they are better equipped to conduct intergroup dialogue.

The groups at the School for Peace are assumed to be a “microcosm”. This means that even though they are not demographically representative, all the elements of the larger society may be found in some form in each person and each group. The facilitators at the School believe that the process that unfolds over and over again in these groups reflects the path the overall society is on, and the journey Israel as a country needs to go through.

The actual process may differ depending on the programme. We provide two examples below – a university programme and a youth programme.

Applications

So far, the School’s programmes have been attended by 35000 people from different walks of life – from attorneys to activists, schoolchildren to teachers. Through these programmes, they have not only impacted the individuals participating but also their friends, colleagues, and families. They also teach courses at Israel’s main universities.

We are not aware of the extent to which the approach has spread and been replicated in other countries. The situation in Israel and Palestine is of course extreme, but many of the dynamics that show up sharply in this process are archetypal dynamics common between minority groups and powerful majority groups. We feel that the process is highly relevant to racial, ethnic, or other minority-majority dynamics in different contexts, and aspects of it even to dialogues between sectors, generations, or other kinds of groupings.

Case Examples – Adult and Youth Programmes

Adult Programmes

The university programme described here took place at Tel-Aviv University in 1996-97. A group of 16 students, half Arab half Jewish, met over 22 sessions of 3 hours each. The group went through five phases, typical of these programmes:

1. **Initial explorations and declarations of intent:** In this first phase, the participants were being polite and cautious and the group boundaries were unclear. Each group was identifying with members of the other group, and the discussion was focused on the nature of the encounter. The Jews were trying to focus on the individual level, to avoid political discussions, and to separate this experience from reality, and were more vocal. The Arabs were criticising the process for being unreal because it wasn’t representative.
2. **Strengthening the Arab group:** Now, the Arab group started to solidify and unite, showing courage, and drawing strength from each other through the uninational

meetings. They would express differences in the uninational meetings but not in front of the Jewish group. The groups started sitting separately and expressing their identity more clearly. The Arabs started dominating, focusing on demanding rights, and criticising the Jews as oppressors. The Jews, as liberal university students would support their cause, but start to feel hurt and distressed.

3. **Resumption of power by Jewish group:** The Jews experienced a loss of control and power, and hence an eradication of their identity. They didn't know how to cope with the unfamiliar, strong Arab identity. They expressed frustration and despair and considered leaving the programme. They started now joining the victim position, pointing out how the Arabs were reversing the roles, and alluding to the Arabs' lack of sensitivity and humanity. "We understand you, but you don't understand us." A struggle ensued over who is more humane. The Jews regained control by targeting the Arabs at their weak spot. The Arabs now felt distressed, and the Jews felt they were back in control.
4. **Impasse:** Both sides were exhausted and despairing. The dialogue felt as if it had been wrung dry. Then, one person started speaking to the choices facing them. Despair shifted to action, and out of a sense of lost cause emerged a different depth of dialogue. The Jews accepted the balance of power and met the Arabs "eye to eye".
5. **A different dialogue:** The Jews owned up to their own sense of superiority and became willing to talk about themselves as rulers and the strong group. There was a sense of breakthrough and mutual respect. The humanity of both sides was restored as both the "oppressed" and the "oppressors" were liberated within this microcosm. The group identity became less central again and participants returned to being individuals. The dialogue returned to practical questions around how to live together and how to return to reality.

Youth Programmes

The Youth Programmes are the most common programmes at the School for Peace. These are four-day programmes, more structured than the adult programmes, and not quite as psychologically intense as what is described above. In the youth programmes, usually about 60 eleventh-grade students aged 16-17 come together and divide into four groups of 14-16 people who work in parallel through the four days.

The first day is focused on getting acquainted personally and easing anxieties. A comfortable and optimistic atmosphere is created. Participants introduce themselves, learn each other's names and the significance of their names, talk about familiar topics such as school, home, and future plans, and share personal stories in pairs. The focus is on what they have in common. Games and activities help to break the ice, and an exercise is introduced that can only be solved through collaboration across cultures. Political discussions are avoided. The power relations are still present however, in that the Jews will tend to be most vocal and everyone is speaking Hebrew.

The second day they start getting to know each other's cultures. In mixed groups of 4, they are given cards with discussion topics about cultural differences. The conversation starts being about "the way we do..." and "the way they do...". Here the dialogue transitions from interpersonal to intergroup dialogue, and the youth start coming face-to-face with their feelings of superiority and inferiority. After a uninational meeting, they come back into an encounter session that now starts to broach politics through a "photolanguage" exercise. Participants are asked to select a photo from a collection, and use it to describe how they feel as an Arab/Jew in Israel. The Jews tend to pick photos that reflect peace, comradeship, complexity, and possibility while the Arabs tend to pick photos that reflect destruction, despair, and grief. The Arabs become strong and start talking about rights and discrimination. The Jews challenge them on their humanity. Each side is struggling to justify its own narrative. The day ends in uninational meetings. Here, the Arabs oscillate between actively demanding unity and feeling disappointed and hopeless. The Jews oscillate between

their desire for equity and friendship and their need to protect the status quo. This is the first time many of them have been required to really engage and argue with a group of Arabs.

The third day is run as a simulation game. The youth are asked to imagine that 50 years into the future there is a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab states but the status of the Arab minority within Israel hasn't changed. Demonstrations happen, and the Israeli government opens up negotiations with the minority around: security, education, symbols and representation, and the character of the state. The youth now have to create negotiating teams for each of these four topics and imagine that they are in this political process. They struggle with whether it is just a game, or whether it is for real. They are challenged to really figure out what they stand for and what kind of society they want.

The fourth day, they have a closing dialogue and talk about how to take their lessons home. Each participant writes a letter to be copied for all the others in an album to remember the experience, and each is given a certificate of attendance in a celebratory ceremony.

Commentary

The School for Peace approach is surprising and contrary to much of what we have been taught about dialogue. What attracts us to it is its emphasis on authenticity and facing up to reality, and developing a process that is not imported from a different context, but truly applicable to Israel.

Most, if not all, of the other methods in this collection emphasise strongly that individuals have to speak for themselves, and that being a representative of a group or organisation inhibits dialogue. Here, the centrality of collective identity is not ignored but incorporated. It is interesting that the Jewish participants at the School for Peace often initially want to emphasise the individual, develop friendships, create sub-categories, divide the Arabs into different types of individuals, and generally separate people from politics. The Arabs in turn emphasise unity and group affiliation. We feel that it's important to understand this perspective of minority and disempowered groups, and we are aware that many of the other tools profiled here have been developed by people of more privileged backgrounds.

That said, the School for Peace approach is difficult and complex, and participants can feel it is not respectful of individual differences and allowing personal expression. To us, including this approach is not so much a suggestion of replicating it as a whole, but more to consider the questions it raises about the difference between individual and group encounters, and to incorporate aspects of it in other processes where groups are coming together and power differences are present.

Resources

Rabah Halabi, Ed. *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in Dialogue: The School for Peace Approach*

<http://sfpeace.org>