

Children as Peacebuilders: Transforming Conflict by Restoring the Potential of Youth

Ed Gillis, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs

War had not only stolen our loved ones, but the optimism of youth that generates hope.

Sally Trench, *Fran's War*¹

Children have received increasing attention in international affairs over the dozen years since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The rhetorical recognition of children as humanity's key resource for the future has led to awareness and action regarding the plight of the world's young people – from exploitative child labour to hunger and poverty, from AIDS to the nefarious effects of war. The focus on the victimization of children around the world is welcome and valuable. Yet, it has so far fallen short on a critical component of children's rights: empowerment, stemming from an appreciation of children's potential to have an impact on their world. To paraphrase reputed child rights advocate Craig Kielburger, children are not merely the passive recipients of random acts of kindness. They are not only the leaders of this world for tomorrow. They are the leaders of today.²

Armed conflict devastates people, families, communities, and nations. It not only obliterates the present, but it also mutilates the future. It shatters the lives of the current generation, and the dreams of the next. In the prevalent form of modern armed conflict – intra-state and targeted overwhelmingly at civilians – children are exposed to horrific abuses and violations, and left with severe physical and psychological trauma from which they may never fully recover. In contrast to the professional, adult armies of the World Wars and before, today's loosely organized militias and guerrilla groups recruit, coerce, and abduct children as cannon fodder, advance reconnaissance, spies, cooks, and sex slaves. UNICEF and children's rights groups commonly estimate that 300,000 children under the age of 18 are actively engaged in armed conflicts around the world (UNICEF, 2000: 1). War's other nefarious effects on children are well documented in a UN-commissioned study by Graça Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. It found that over two million children were killed in war in the 1990s, and that if war did not take a child's life, it took a child's family, his security, or his future.

War's most vulnerable and widely affected casualties must be protected from the numerous devastating ways in which war can impair their physical, social, and psychological development. However, the impact that armed conflict has on the future of children may be equalled in significance by the impact that children can have on the future of a protracted armed conflict. If social constructivists and others like the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict are correct in asserting that violent

¹ *Fran's War* is a 1999 novel by a British aid worker about a fictional twelve-year-old girl who lives through the horrors and tribulations of a genocidal civil war in the Balkans (Trench, 1999)

² Based on personal conversations between the author and Craig Kielburger.

conflict is not inherent and that the cycle of violent conflict that fuels protracted wars can be broken, then surely the ideal place for intervention is between generations: the reconstruction of long-term conflict in the minds of children. Further, the inherent idealism and hope of the child can be harnessed and empowered by equipping children with the self-confidence and skills they need to make a positive, sustained impact on the present and future of their communities.

Children used in or exposed to armed conflict are taught conflict, enmity and war by their parents, their warlords, or their communities from a young age. Knowing nothing but war and hatred, they grow up to become adults with the same prejudices and historical enmity of their ancestors, often without having ever met their 'enemy' in person. Long-term conflicts cannot subsist without this intergenerational cycle. Conversely, children who are exposed to the idea and example of peace grow to practice tolerance, empathy, and non-violent ways of dealing with conflict. They contribute positively to their communities and believe in cooperative approaches to inter-group relations. To them, the 'peace dividend' is clear and attractive. The intergenerational cycle is one of mutual understanding and positive co-existence.

Scores of initiatives have been launched over the last few decades with the aim of deconstructing ethnic and other sources of long-time conflict through youth exchanges and peace centres. Maine-based *Seeds of Peace* has held several international programmes for conflict resolution among the youth of war-torn societies, including an annual camp for Arab and Israeli teens and a Peace Initiative summit of youth from eight Balkan nations in Greece. The United Nations' War-Affected Children project includes plans for peace academies in war-torn areas in conjunction with *Kids Can Free The Children* and other organizations that specialize in youth education, activism and leadership.

Children as peacebuilders initiatives (CPBIs) are founded upon an idealism that aims to replace the world's conflict, war, and enmity with a global culture of cooperation, peace, and camaraderie. Dr. Doris Allen founded the *Children's International Summer Villages* in 1951 on the premise that 'teaching children to live together as friends could create true and lasting global peace' (CISVb). CPBIs have gained momentum over the past ten years as a growing international phenomenon and a burgeoning industry. They have garnered applause and support from world leaders, government agencies, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, academics, the media, and, evidently, the participants and their societies. Their motivation and rationale flow logically from their common underlying premise: that deep-seated inter-group conflict can be alleviated, and a global culture of peace and cooperation can be achieved, by teaching young people to live together and resolve their disputes peacefully – in essence, that intergenerational cycles of war and conflict can be broken through children.

Like the daily idioms upon which political actions, decisions, and programmes are based, the rhetorical foundation of CPBIs appears straightforward and indisputable: teach peace to children now, and in future generations a completely new, peaceful world can be realized. Yet such logic may not satisfy the critical mind. To more adequately legitimize

this premise, a step-by-step theoretical path is required to delineate how first, such initiatives work to change the attitudes of its young participants, and second, how the peaceful attitudes adopted by their alumni lead to the achievement of real peace in the real world.

This paper attempts to fulfil the latter requirement, namely a rigorous framework linking peace initiatives to peace achievement, by integrating theoretical approaches from international relations, child socio-psychology and peace education with a practical strategies used in leadership and social advocacy training for North American youth. I aim to demonstrate that the rhetoric of peace education is neither simple nor empty. Rather, I argue that teaching peace to today's children will lead to greater peace in future generations is legitimately founded on a well-established, thorough theoretical and strategic framework, and merits the continued attention and support of local and international actors.

The paper will first explore the approaches and premises of children as peacebuilders initiatives, to clarify the movement's rhetoric before embarking on a more thorough analysis of its merits. Second, a rigorous, four-part theoretical framework, drawing from various fields of research, will be elaborated in order to create legitimacy for the vague flow of logic upon which CPBIs are founded. Third, a brief look at curricular approaches that have been and could be tried attempts to provoke some thought on a practical approach to realizing the theory. Finally, a set of barriers and conditions will be examined, with the objective of revealing the adaptability and potential of CPBIs in a range of conflicts with their varying conditions and circumstances.

Children as peacebuilders: Approaches, Premises, and Concepts

'Children as peacebuilders' is a blanket term for the wide range of initiatives aimed at children, of which the objective is to construct or reconstruct a culture of peace and cooperation among its participants and their societies. Its wide range of approaches can generally be divided into two broad categories: peacebuilding education and youth peace initiatives.

First, *peacebuilding education* (PBE) consists of individual and group conflict resolution curricula in primary and secondary schools, and school curriculum reformulation towards the better promotion of tolerance, understanding, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. In analysing the *Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict* (2000), Kenneth Bush and Diana Saltarelli recognize that education has the potential to create and exacerbate ethnic division, and conversely to promote and foster cooperation. They advocate a peacebuilding education regime that:

seeks to build bridges between groups and communities that have been separated and polarized by violent conflict. The guiding logic of interaction would shift from intolerance, suspicion and hopelessness to tolerance, trust, and hope. So too would it seek to re-humanize those who have been de-humanized. (Bush and

Saltarelli, 2000: 30).

Second, *youth peace initiatives* (YPIs) generally occur outside the classroom, and include international peace and leadership camps and institutes, inter-ethnic or inter-group exchange programmes or camps, inter-group mixing initiatives linking youth groups across group divides, and rehabilitation centres and programmes for child soldiers and war-affected children. Unlike the direct grassroots approach of in-class peacebuilding education, most youth peace initiatives are voluntary, and aim to empower and equip future leaders with peacebuilding skills and a sense of mutual understanding and empathy that they, in turn, bring back, promote and foster within their home communities.

Maine-based *Seeds of Peace* is among the best-known youth peace initiatives that work directly with youth from war-torn societies and aims to foster a culture of peace, mutual empathy, friendship, and cooperation through interaction and peace and leadership training. Founded in 1993 with a series of summer camp and other programmes for Arab and Jewish teenagers, the initiative has grown to include a lifetime support network in the U.S. and the Middle East for its over 1,500 alumni, and new, similar initiatives involving youth in the Balkans, Cyprus, and South Asia. The underlying premise of their programmes – and of YPIs in general – is briefly and well elaborated in their material:

[By] bringing Arab and Israeli teenagers together before fear, mistrust and prejudice blind them from seeing the human face of their enemy, [... *Seeds of Peace*] reverses the legacy of hatred by nurturing lasting friendships that become the basis for mutual understanding and respect. By training these young leaders in conflict resolution skills, *Seeds of Peace* helps them become the seeds from which an enduring peace will grow (*Seeds of Peace*).

In short, *Seeds of Peace* ‘equips the next generation with the leadership capabilities required to end the cycles of violence’ (ibid).

There is a virtual cornucopia of youth peace initiatives engaged in numerous conflicts around the world, employing dozens of various approaches and with drastically differing levels of support, official legitimacy, and success. Many, like *Seeds of Peace*, engage children from specific conflicts with specific experiences or criteria. Programmes abound in peaceful countries, often as part of the greater project of making the children of the developed world more culturally sensitive and aware of social issues and the world around them. Other organizations, such as the *Children’s International Summer Villages* and *Kids Can Free The Children*, are international networks of children from dozens of countries, who share their experiences, plan collective action, and create awareness about conflict, war, and peace among their local peer groups. Still other initiatives, such as CARE Canada’s Civil Society Development Project in Bosnia, establish and support partnerships between youth organizations across ethnic divides to foster a greater sense of commonality. The variety of modes of learning is as significant as the number of different approaches: theatre, sport, summer camp, leadership conferences, and art are among the most popular ways to access the learning and socialization process in children.

What all youth peace initiatives share, in the end, is the founding notion that cycles of violent conflict can be broken, and a more peaceful, cooperative culture can be constructed through children. As the following theoretical framework is developed and a practical, curricular strategy is devised, it becomes possible to look toward greater cooperation between extracurricular youth peace initiatives and in-school peace education.

On a conceptual note, it should be noted that the term 'children' is in itself a social construct, and its meaning differs substantially across cultures and other groups. The age or event of passage from childhood to adulthood, the connotation of a 'child' as innocent and vulnerable or informed and responsible, and even the very notion and content of children's rights all make any attempt at generalizing the world's children under one set of assumptions highly problematic. 'Youth', on the other hand, is generally used to correspond to an age group of 15 to 25 years, representing the near future and the potential of a people. Minding this delicate issue, this paper will not attempt to define children or youth as an age or a connotation. For our purposes, 'children' and 'youth' will be context- rather than age-specific, and will both refer to young people in general who are targeted by and participate in peace education initiatives.

The Theoretical Framework

If [...] educational initiatives are to have a positive peacebuilding impact, then they must seek to *deconstruct structures of violence and construct structures of peace*. (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000: vii; italics in original)

The primary theoretical assumption underlying children as peacebuilders initiatives is that the social constructs that lead to violent conflict may be de-constructed and re-constructed so as to offer peaceful alternatives to resolving conflicts. This assumption finds backing in social constructivist international relations theory, in various streams of child development psychology, and in peace education theory as expressed in the above citation. Children as peacebuilders initiatives have long employed this theoretical framework without expressing it in long form.

The theoretical chain connecting CPBIs and the creation of a lasting peace has four major links. In four sentences, the reasoning goes as follows. Conflict between groups, and the resultant use of violence to resolve such conflict, is socially constructed and therefore capable of being transformed from conflict and war into conciliation and peace. Because social constructs are passed between generations, the optimum point of entry into the spiral of inter-group conflict and violence is the socialization period of children's lives, before their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours are cemented in long-standing fear, enmity, and aggression. At this stage, alternatives to conflict and violence can be introduced to children: through school curricula and inter-group exchange and interaction, their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours can instead be rooted in confidence, conciliation, and compassion. Presenting children with concrete alternatives to conflict and hard skills in peace advocacy and leadership will set off a chain reaction –

through their peers, their families, their communities, and their leaders; in childhood and adulthood – that effectively reverses the spiral of inter-group conflict and violence, and forges an enduring peace.

War is not inevitable – social constructivism

In international relations theory, social constructivism challenges the traditional realist notion that conflict and, in turn, war are inevitable. Rejecting the view that war emerges necessarily from the conflicting objective interests of states or groups, constructivism argues that conflict occurs as a matter of process, not of structure. War as an outcome is never predetermined, but is rather a result of a series of social constructs – perceptions and subjective meanings fostered in social interaction – that lead states or groups to *perceive* a conflict in interests, and to *choose* to use armed force to resolve that conflict. The social construction of violent conflict feeds upon itself and spirals deeper and more irreversibly into enmity, fear, and aggression.

Realism, long (and still) the dominant stream of international relations theory, submits that war is the natural progression of conflict, which in turn emerges from the natural progression of interests of two or more groups becoming mutually exclusive. Of course, it is difficult to deny that group interests often conflict. In fact, many theorists from various fields argue that conflict is a ‘natural, common experience present in all relationships and cultures’ (Lederach, 1995: 9). However, it is equally arguable that both a group’s interests and, indeed, the group itself are founded upon a series of social constructs.

First, group identities are based on subjective meanings attached to an emphasized set of commonalities shared by the group’s members, often religion, language, nationality, ethnicity, or other socially relevant factors. The specific ‘in-group’ to which any individual adheres is highly dependent on one’s own perceptions and the meanings one attributes to oneself, to other people, and to the relationship between the two (Fisher, 1991: 5; Wendt, 1992: 396). Just as conflict is rooted in a person’s perceptions, interpretation, expression, and action, so too is a group identity rooted in its members’ perceptions, interpretations, expressions, and actions (Lederach, 1995: 9). Both are created and expressed from a group’s constructed, common knowledge that, as discussed later, is embedded through a process of socialization and the subjective interpretation of personal experiences.

A human being’s needs and interests are different. The interests of the in-group are determined subjectively as the most effective means of securing the group’s needs. A variety of interests, such as land, wealth, and power, are sought by the group as a whole to ensure basic needs and security for its members. Interests, then, are flexible – not exogenously fixed or absolute. Further, they are frequently determined in relation to a specific ‘out-group’, whose members are excluded from the former group and form their own in-group based on their own perceptions and meanings. Conflicts of group interests, then, are also based on perception, and are therefore highly transformable.

Even before there is perceived a mutual exclusivity of interests between two or more groups, the 'us-them' dyad created through group identities often mutates into a 'friend-enemy' dyad for the political benefit of leaders or regimes bent on exploiting conflict. In essence, groups 'act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not' (Wendt, 1992: 397). The perceived conflict of group interests exacerbates the pre-constructed, self-perpetuating enemy biases (Silverstein and Flamenbaum, 1989), and opportunists seeking violent conflict easily exploit heightened inter-group tensions, often as a means to power or leadership in specific group. Examples abound – from Alexander the Great to Napoleon to Adolf Hitler to Slobodan Milosevic – of leaders whose leadership was forged and rested on continued hatred of and conflict with a given enemy.

In its *Final Report* (1997), the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict asserted that '[w]arfare does not simply or naturally emerge out of contentious human interaction'. Given the process of social construction that leads two or more groups or states to perceive the mutual exclusivity of their interests, the recourse to war to resolve the conflict is certainly not inescapable. Rather, the range of political, peaceful means to resolve perceived conflict is more than sufficient to avoid the recourse to war.

This series of constructs is often deeply embedded in individual and group psyches, and largely based on real experiences that are attributed certain meanings throughout one's life or even over numerous generations. Yet, they are constructed, and can therefore be de-constructed and re-constructed again – in essence fully transformed, potentially from conflict and violence to conciliation and peace. The increasing credence given to the idea of conflict transformation is reflective of the acceptance that conflict is a socially constructed phenomenon. To paraphrase Alexander Wendt's assessment of the social construction of international power politics (1992), conflict is what people make of it.

Conflict and war is inherited: socialization theory and child psychology

Once it is decided that both conflict and war are based on social constructs and therefore conducive to transformation, one's attention turns to finding the entry point into the nefarious spiral of fear, enmity, and aggression, in order to reverse the flow of social construction in a new direction of confidence, conciliation, and compassion. Since long-standing, inter-group conflict must necessarily be passed from one generation to the next, it is sensible to argue that intervening in the social and psychological formation of children is the optimum place to foster new perceptions and meanings – before the notions of enemy, conflict and war of past affected generations are deeply embedded.

In the field of child development psychology, socialization theory focuses on the process whereby socializing 'agents' – parents, teachers, peers – implicitly and explicitly, by example and by design, influence and mould an individual's values, standards, skills, motives, attitudes, and behaviours by assigning such development as desirable and appropriate for the individual's present and future role in society. In other words, children are socialized – through their environment, their experiences, and the adults with whom they interact – to perpetuate the attitudes of the preceding generation towards

conflict, war, and the enemy. Constructs of enemy, conflict and war are passed from generation to generation.

Other streams of child psychology differ as to the level of children's passivity or activity in acquiring the values, attitudes, and behaviours of their environment, yet they all believe that children's understanding of conflict and war is 'based on personal constructions which are codetermined by a multitude of individual and environmental variables' and is 'always subject to changes as a result of a changing understanding.' Therefore, a child's understanding of peace, conflict, and war 'is considered to be changeable and dynamic' (Raviv et al, 1999: 8). This understanding, in turn, affects attitudes, reactions, and behaviours. The cycle is begun, but still reversible.

Children inherently have less psychological baggage from conflict and war than adults. Intervening during the formation of perceptions, values, attitudes, and behaviours – before intergenerational constructs are embedded in their psyches – is critical to breaking the spiral of enmity, fear, and aggression.

That is not to say that children are immune from profound psychological scarring from their own experiences. A violent environment has an intense effect on a child's worldview:

Society at war provides heroic explanations for traumatic events and encourages strong ideological commitment as a solution and as healing. Ideological conceptualization of war helps children to understand why hardships happen, to feel protected, and to ventilate feelings of frustration and aggression. [...] Children incorporate a violent environment into the way they think, remember, and make sense of casual rules through their interactive activity, such as playing and learning. Myths and legends are people's construction of their accumulated experience; they provide children with explanations and conceptualizations of issues of war and peace. (Punamaki, 1999: 139, 132)

Those children who have experienced the trauma of war will necessarily be more difficult to rescue from the spiral of socially constructed conflict. The slippery slope of militarism in some societies begins with poverty, despair, and a sense of hopelessness and cynicism. Much has been written of 'dispossessed young men' who join terrorist or military groups to find a sense of belonging, or to escape their lonely misery. The only answers to this tragic flow of logic are confidence and hope – there is hope to be found in the numerous exhibitions of resilience among the most profoundly war-affected children. Special healing processes are required in order to have a chance at salvaging the remarkable idealism and optimism of youth, and harnessing it to useful, positive contributions.

Introduce alternatives to conflict and war: children as peacebuilders initiatives

The third link in the theoretical chain between children as peacebuilders initiatives and

effective, enduring peace involves the CPBIs themselves. Having established that socialization and other learning processes influence children's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to conflict and war, the theoretical merits of CPBIs are evident. The social constructs of inter-group conflict and the socialization of children towards enmity and conflict can be arrested, and a culture of peace and reconciliation can be fostered. The process of transforming enmity into empathy, and 'us-them' into 'us', is accomplished in both peacebuilding education and youth peace initiatives.

Bush and Saltarelli (2000) aptly point out that many educational systems tend to create and propagate enmity and stereotypical images between groups, and segregate children from different groups, building walls instead of bridges. The 'us-them' mentality is incited from a very young age in history texts, religion classes, and the actual segregation of children along group lines.

The socialization process is equally intense outside the classroom: Palestinian children throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers in late 2000 are one example of the tens of thousands of war-affected children who do not go to school. Their hatred and aggression is learned at home or on the street.

The principal theoretical aim behind both peace education and YPIs is to build a sense of human commonality and empathy in children towards one another, as expressed in the Buddhist question: 'If you can see yourself in the eyes of others, then whom can you harm?'³ Moriarty, Phillips, and Ziller (1999) propose that a 'peace personality' can be fostered in individuals by stressing common human experiences and feelings – in essence, constructing an attachment to one large in-group, namely humanity. They posit that the creation of violent attitudes towards an out-group involves a three-pronged process: de-humanizing the enemy, recounting historical enmity and ethnic division, and romanticizing conflict and war through patriotism and heroic imagery. If this trend were reversed, then 'persons who are predisposed to attend to similarities (rather than differences) between themselves and others may be expected to be more empathetic and less hostile under a variety of interpersonal conditions including conflict and war' (Moriarty et al, 1999: p. 78).

The effect need not necessarily be so drastic: even an appreciative regard for the feelings of the other leads to a substantial amelioration in inter-group understanding and relations. Seeds Of Peace founder John Wallach aims merely to 're-humanize a process that has too often been hijacked by regimes intent on dehumanizing their adversaries. Just think how much... harder it would be [to engage in conflict] if you got to know your enemy as a human being, as someone you liked or at least understood' (Wallach, 2001).

In addition to fostering a sense of children's common humanity with their 'enemy', CPBIs aim to empower children to take positive steps in other ways towards the betterment of their communities. Notions of leadership, voluntarism, social involvement, and peer mentoring free children and youth from the belief that they are powerless against their society's despair. Contributing positively to their communities'

³ This question is attributed to Gautama Buddha (Moriarty et al: 78).

development removes the hopelessness, dispossession, and cynicism that are so crucial to the sway of violence and de-humanization. Developing a strong sense of purpose and self-confidence in children is an effective step in producing positive leaders and a sense of optimism for a society's future.

If no other objectives of CPBIs are achieved, at minimum one must aim for the 'delegitimization of the use of violence as a means of addressing problems' (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000: 30). If the children of a deep-seated conflict come to believe with passion and energy that peaceful means are the best means of resolving conflict, CPBIs will have fulfilled their mission to help societies mired in war begin their path to peace.

Reverse the spiral: the theory is effectively realized

Finally, having transformed the attitudes and behaviours of children towards peace and cooperation, CPBIs will theoretically have various and considerable effect on the conflict dynamic. Ideally, there will be a chain reaction of confidence, conciliation, and compassion that touches the children's peers, families, communities, leaders, and societies.

The two principal forms of CPBI are focused on different targets, and expect drastically different effects. Peacebuilding education is focused on the so-called 'grassroots'. Through school curricula, it potentially reaches the largest possible number of children, in communities across the country – rural and urban, rich and poor, highly war-affected and relatively war-sheltered. Local teachers, parents, and community leaders who have accepted the introduction of the peace alternative are affected in no small way by the ideas, perspectives, and skills their children are learning. As war-affected children are rehabilitated and reintegrated into their communities, they too are able to break the conflict spiral, albeit with greater effort. The community-based, widespread transformation of the conflict is realized, and resolution of the heretofore mutually exclusive interests can be pursued in an atmosphere of peace and mutual empathy.

Youth peace initiatives focus more specifically on fewer children. Often (but not necessarily) selected by their respective group elite, the participants in many YPIs are believed to be the leaders of tomorrow. The skills they learn at many of the YPIs, however, empower the children to become the leaders of *today* – in their families, their schools, and their communities. The exceptional understanding and empathy they develop for their former enemies (whom they now call friends) are of incalculable value to the process for peace. The support – rhetorical or genuine – of the present leadership and group elite for YPIs is also a significant contribution to peace. For example, even as the Palestinian leadership refused to send representatives to the 2001 *Seeds of Peace* camp in Maine, Yasser Arafat continued to don his SOP pin (Maine Telegram). As the leaders of various warring parties express their desire for peace through such support, international peacebuilding rhetoric emerges and influences decision makers on all sides. To borrow from an analogy cited above, the seeds are planted not only in the minds of tomorrow's decision-makers, but in the minds of today's leaders as well.

The ideas, perceptions, and skills learned by the young participants during their formative stages will be carried with them throughout their lives, and they will become peace advocates as adults. Raviv et al reassure us from a psychological perspective that:

knowledge that is acquired in childhood and adolescence serves as a basis for adult understanding. Experiences which shape early childhood may be crucial for the way the world is perceived in adulthood. [...]The shared sociocultural structure or the view of the world as shaped in childhood and adolescence to a large part determine adult perspectives. (Raviv et al, 1999: 2-3)

As CPBI alumni marry and start families of their own, the intergenerational spiral effectively reverses its flow in the direction of enduring peace and reconciliation. As they take their positions as the leaders of the respective groups and nations, the political process can move forward in peace and mutual understanding.

A Note on Curriculum

The assortment of curricular devices and approaches that conflict transformation and peace trainers have available makes for a highly adaptable discipline. The basic notion that children and youth can develop awareness and skills to contribute positively to the betterment of their communities is central to sustainable, homegrown solutions.

Kids Can Free The Children is an international youth leadership and empowerment organization based in Toronto, Canada, that develops and facilitates workshops on leadership and social involvement for young people aged eight to twenty-five. It operates on the belief that children and youth both want to and can be effective agents for social change in their communities and in their world. A four-pronged curricular framework focuses on guiding eager young people through the process of becoming aware, self-confident, and skilled leaders and advocates for their generation who are capable of actively asserting their voice on issues that concern them, and inspiring their peers to do the same. The energy, hope, and idealism of youth are powerful engines of lasting social change in any society.

Tapping into the youth resource is a matter of choosing one's tools. *Kids Can Free The Children* uses a variety of methods to encourage youth to contribute positively to their communities by demonstrating the value of such actions, both for themselves personally, and for the society as a whole. By developing awareness, mutual understanding, and a common commitment to action on the issue, fostering a heightened sense of self-confidence and personal well being among the participants, equipping participants with concrete leadership and advocacy skills, and collaboratively devising a setting-specific plan of action, *Kids Can Free The Children* has trained young people from all over the world to realize real social change in their communities and in their world. Alumni from its programmes are actively and heavily involved in social activism, charitable work, voluntarism, and awareness building on local, national, and international levels.

Just as children and youth can be leading agents of social change, they can be trained to be leaders for peace by similar means. The tools and approaches used by *Kids Can Free The Children* would follow a similar format whether the particular issue is a social issue such as child labour, a community need such as a food bank shortage, or a protracted conflict marked by enmity and violence.

Practical Barriers and Conditions

This theoretical framework follows a clear logic, but CPBIs are certainly confronted with substantial barriers, questions, and conditions in realizing such a logical process in practice. The feasibility and effectiveness of such approaches to peace are subject to the nature of the conflict and to conditions on the ground that vary enormously from one conflict setting to another. However, with considerable thought, perseverance, and flexibility, the theory and practice of CPBIs carry extraordinary potential in most circumstances, because the fundamental hope and idealism of youth will always be a critical resource in the quest for a more peaceful future in all settings of conflict.

To begin, there is admittedly a fine balance to be treaded between introducing peaceful, compassionate, and tolerant attitudes and behaviours to children on the one hand, and imposing a complete deconstruction of individual and group identity on the other. Further, the profound social constructs that have been embedded in a society's collective psyche are not easily – or willingly – purged.

There are two responses that address this concern. First, the key to CPBIs – for their effectiveness, their cultural sensitivity, and their legitimacy at the community and international levels – is approaching the projects in terms of providing the ideas, the perceptions, and the skills of peace and reconciliation as an *alternative* to those of conflict and war instead of as an absolute:

Peacebuilding education (during and after violent conflicts), no less than peacetime education, must be a place that articulates and demonstrates alternatives. Children take their cues from the legacies of hate and distrust that permeate a post-conflict setting. It would be naïve to believe that the existence of a place of tolerance, dignity, and respect will meet and defeat a militarized culture in a direct confrontation. The fundamental objective is to show children that alternatives exist, *if choices are made*. While these choices might be hard and painful, they do exist. This, then, is a message of empowerment: you have a choice; you have the power to change your world in a way that affects your place and your role – past, present and future. (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000: 29-30; emphasis in original)

Second, conflict transformation and peace training can be highly sensitive and adaptive to diverse settings, cultures, and circumstances. John Paul Lederach (1995) draws from various tenets of popular education, the notion of appropriate technology, and

ethnography to construct what he calls an 'elicitive' approach to conflict transformation training across cultures. The root of its name – elicit – reflects his strategy's fundamental tactic: to facilitate the development of a homemade, culturally and setting specific solution, by drawing out knowledge, experience, and ideas from the affected people themselves. The elicitive approach sees learning as a mutual process between trainer and participant, and prefers a larger focus on reflection and discovery, while downplaying but not eliminating the prescription of established ideas. Participants define, or 'name', their circumstances and their reality before setting out to analyse it critically. The elicitive approach recognizes the inherent value of implicit social knowledge and experiences stored in the minds of local people as indispensable resources in the process of understanding and defining the circumstances and problems involved in their particular setting, and of indigenous techniques and practices as critical building blocks from which their own lasting solutions can be forged.

A second barrier to the effectiveness of CPBIs is the vast difference in the experiences of war-affected children. The nature of some armed conflicts, such as those fought over diamond mines or oil deposits, may not fit the theoretical mould of in-group identities, social constructions of enemies, and myths of violence and hatred. Child soldiers who know nothing but violence are not necessarily motivated by vengeance or consumed by hatred – they suffer from a severe distrust of adults and the world in general, and they know only violence to provide them security. This experience differs greatly from that of the child affected by ethnic or religious conflict that is embedded in centuries of history and enmity. The many strategies and tools of the youth leadership trainer and the flexibility of the elicitive approach, both described above, allow for a variety of curricular tactics to be tried depending on circumstances.

For example, in refugee camps where enmity is not as much the issue as abject poverty, training in self-confidence, voluntarism, and community building can be invaluable to young people – particularly males – who do little in the camps and are prime targets of military recruiters. Yet these children are aware and carry immeasurable promise for a bright future given guidance, opportunity, self-confidence, and basic needs such as relief from the despair of war (Bearak, 2001). Instead of idleness or violence, young people can be empowered with self-confidence, skills, and the knowledge that they can have a say in their future. They can devise plans to undertake projects that will be of benefit to themselves and their desperate communities. Pessimism and dispossession – so fundamental to the trap of conflict and violence – are replaced with optimism and empowerment. A society's new leaders are born, and the cycle is reversed. Of course, the incredibly complex and fragile conditions of children in these situations – physical and psychological – must be heavily considered before any training regimen can be tried. However, restoring hope and idealism is, and must remain, one of the principal goals of any CPBI, which can play a valuable role in the recovery of war-afflicted societies.

A third conditionality attached to CPBIs and the accompanying framework is a minimal degree of stability. The most war-torn of societies are not in any shape or position to implement CPBIs until the intensity of armed conflict subsides. A lapse in fighting, or a prolonged but unstable peace where rumbling animosity is still rampant, are much more

favourable conditions to the message of peace and conflict transformation than where violence and suffering is prevalent. This is certainly not to imply that peace and leadership training cannot target ongoing wars. Testing initiatives in areas that are even minimally stabilized or sheltered from the war might plant an initial seed in the process and alleviate the potential for deeper conflict by building bridges of understanding and assuaging tensions. If such an approach holds no other promise, youth empowerment and participation and in a strong community will reduce the likelihood of re-recruitment of recovered former child soldiers.

Fourth, the recognition of the rights of the child – let alone the participatory voice of the child – has barely begun to spread. The rhetoric is heavy in the international community, but the genuine conviction is practically absent: so too will be the realization of a strong children's voice in decision-making until this situation changes. The strength of an elicitive programme is empowerment and the idea of creating setting-specific strategies using local resources and the social knowledge and experiences of the participants themselves. Children are encouraged to devise pragmatic ways to have their voices heard that would be effective in their given culture and setting. Also, as the children's movement grows and young people increasingly demonstrate their capacity as leaders and agents of positive social change, this barrier will be easily overcome.

Finally, the impact of grassroots awareness is similarly limited in military-governed states or otherwise non-democratic regimes. If the previous point regarding voice applies to the western world, it can hardly be expected that children living under military rule can have an impact in the short-term. In these instances, only small-scale impacts can be expected of the proposed training style. Still, by developing self-confidence and a sense of camaraderie and hope, communities can be strengthened, and young people can be exposed to their own potential to make a positive contribution to their communities and their societies. Again, the youth themselves are encouraged to devise their own, setting-specific strategies to make their voices heard.

As such, the proposed theoretical and curricular frameworks must be flexible under vastly different circumstances. The elicitive approach and a priority on setting-specificity are capable of achieving such flexibility, and some potential can be seen for the frameworks in many diverse scenarios and circumstances. As a starting point, conflicts that are at a point of relatively stable peace, with a degree of rhetorical commitment to peace among leaders and elites, and a degree of progressive thought related to children's rights and voices are the prototypical settings in which the proposed CPBIs would be most effective. Current projects undertaken by *Seeds of Peace* confront conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans. That said, *Kids Can Free The Children* is developing curriculum and strategies to head into refugee camps in Pakistan and Eastern Africa, confident in the adaptability and potential of CPBIs in more dire and sensitive circumstances.

As a final note on barriers, it must be said that they exist only to be overcome in due time. Such is the essence of social action, and the beauty of children.

Conclusion

There can be no more important initiative than bringing together young people who have seen the ravages of war to learn the art of peace.

– Kofi Annan (Seeds of Peace)

As the world increasingly focuses on children's rights and needs, it also is gradually coming to recognize the extraordinary potential of children to effect positive change in their communities and their world, not only in the future but also *today*. The acknowledgement of the value of children as bastions of idealism, innocence, and hope has spurred an influx of children as peacebuilders initiatives founded on the belief that, by introducing children in war-torn societies to ideas, perceptions, and skills of peace, conciliation, and empathy, a more peaceful world can be built. Critical to the legitimacy of such initiatives is the knowledge that behind the rhetoric lies a chain of theoretical assumptions and underpinnings that is rarely, if at all, expressed in its entirety.

This paper outlines such a theoretical framework with four principal links. First, social constructivism argues convincingly that enmity, conflict, and violence between warring factions are neither inherent nor inescapable, but instead “socially constructed through mutual perceptions and interactions” (Risse-Kappen, 1995: 507). Secondly, child development psychology reveals the existence of an ‘inter-generational transfer of particular values and norms’ (Raviv et al, 1999: 7), and concludes that children's understanding of peace, conflict, and war is indeed socially constructed and therefore transformable. Third, CPBIs aim to transform the enmity into empathy, and the war child into the peace personality, by introducing ideas, perceptions, and skills of peace as an alternative to those of war. Finally, the young participants in the two principal types of CPBI will expectedly employ those newfound ideas, perceptions, and skills to have a significant impact on the peacebuilding process. From peacebuilding education come tomorrow's parents, teachers, and community members; and from youth peace initiatives come today's outspoken peace advocates and tomorrow's decision makers.

The curricular tools and strategies used in CPBIs are constantly developed and improved to meet the diverse conditions and circumstances of very different conflicts. The array of approaches taken by organizations like *Kids Can Free The Children* reflect the adaptability and potential of CPBIs in conflicts that are relatively stable and feature a degree of commitment to peace, such as the Middle East, as well as those that have only minimal shelter from direct conflict and little room for the voices of children, such as Afghanistan and many in Africa.

The difficulty of securing tangible, empirical proof of the effectiveness of CPBIs in terms of fostering a more peaceful world must not discourage theorists and practitioners alike from recognizing the potential of such initiatives to have an impact on children's perceptions of war and peace, and their future attitudes and behaviours as adults in their respective societies. For an enduring resolution of today's nefarious armed conflicts to be achieved, we must look to innovative approaches and ways that have not necessarily

been tried. Indeed, to solve humanity's bleakest and most dire ill, we must look to our most fundamental human strengths: our idealism, our hope, and our dreams. Where we are sure to find all those wondrous things is in our children.

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