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## The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Peace Education and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Israel

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*This paper examines the current research literature addressing the effectiveness of planned interethnic encounters and student groups formed for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, in the context of institutions of higher education in Israel. It will analyze the role of higher education institutions in promoting diverse and democratic campus environments that are conducive to peacebuilding and conflict resolution, despite the challenges of the ongoing conflict taking place in Israel. The existence of student groups, peace education programs, and the state of the campus climate will be examined to determine each factor's role in promoting the peace process, conflict resolution, and interethnic dialogue.*

Israel presents a complex, pluralistic society that is grappling with an enduring conflict between its people. This paper will focus on the role that higher education institutions play in implementing a range of programs that help create positive dialogue and a format for positive interethnic relations and encounters by analyzing research that has examined some of the various initiatives that have been implemented. Higher education institutions have long been viewed as instrumental in creating a democratic, peaceful society in which conflicts can be voiced through dialogue and discourse (Heyneman, Kraince, Lesko, & Bastedo, 2007). It is with a sense of urgency that Israel should use this resource to enhance the peacebuilding process.

The higher education system of Israel presents a distinct opportunity through which to view the impact of peace education and conflict resolution programs. In 1993 the Oslo Accords, an agreement negotiated between the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, brought renewed hope from both sides of

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the conflict that a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would finally be reached (Wasserstein, 2004). However, shortly thereafter these hopes were dashed when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had helped broker the peace deal, was assassinated by an extreme ultra-orthodox Jew who was opposed to the peace deal (Wasserstein, 2004). Mounting tensions led to escalating violence and conflict on both sides, which was compounded by the emotionally charged media reporting and public rhetoric from different factions (Abu-Nimer, 2004; Jaeger, Kor, Miaari, & Paserman, 2008). Tension has continued to escalate with the recent military operations in Gaza, which led to a number of conflicting protests and counter-protests taking place on Israeli university campuses (Raved, 2008). Because of this difficult scenario, peace education, conflict resolution, and coexistence programs have gained increasing importance in university and college settings. This importance is often expressed in the mission statements of higher education institutions, as well as through the implementation of various academic programs, research institutes, student organizations, and cultural programs of these institutions.

Some research has been done on the impact of peace education programs in Israel as well as in other conflict-riddled regions. For example, *Oasis of Dreams* (Feuerverger, 2001) looks at a program in Israel, known as the School for Peace, which is targeted at Arab and Jewish high school students. Although past research has focused largely on programs targeted at elementary or high school students, research that examines the impact of programs in the context of higher education is gaining prominence. A closer look at the structure of the Israeli education system and how it fits into society will reveal why the university and college campus presents a specific and distinct environment. When examining the impact of these programs, researchers have looked at different factors, including student perceptions, the relative success or efficacy of the programs, and the role that the university or college administration and organization play in the support of such programs. The research has also examined how individual students view their interethnic relations as participants of intergroup dialogue programs, in addition to examining how students perceive the campus climate and their informal interactions. Although the research has not been conclusive as to the efficacy of these programs, the researchers do agree that each program and initiative is part of a small step that carries forward a larger transformation that is far off in the distance, yet ultimately attainable.

According to Abu-Nimer (2004), many problems exist in the current incarnation of interethnic encounter programs that are organized for the purpose of improving Arab-Jewish relations in Israel. Over the past several decades these

programs have undergone several transformations, ranging from facilitating intergroup dialogue to the recognition of cultural harmonies to the more current phase of transforming dialogue into collective action and political change (Abu-Nimer, 2004). Abu-Nimer's qualitative studies of these encounter programs uncovered many of the challenges that they face, as well as shed light on the question of whether such programs have lasting, positive impacts on Arab-Jewish relations.

### Background and Context

Arab citizens of Israel, not counting those living within the borders of the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, comprise approximately twenty percent of the total population of Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007). As a minority population, they are of a lower socioeconomic status than the Jewish majority population, and also begin their educational lives at a considerable disadvantage compared with the Jewish majority (Abu-Saad & Champagne, 2006). Jews and Arabs attend separate schools for primary and secondary education, and this segregated system has resulted in many disparities between Jewish and Arab educational achievement. The Arab education sector has been found to suffer from a lack of facilities, fewer teachers, and fewer subjects taught, among other discrepancies (Eisikovits 1997).

Higher education represents the first time these two groups are together in the same environment for the purposes of education and coexistence. The distinct setting of the college or university presents an opportunity to examine and critique the types of support services, dialogue groups, student groups, and peace education programs that are formed, and the support that such programs are given by administrators and school faculty. According to Davidovitch and Soen (2008), who studied the effects of higher education on intergroup relations, the academic environment brings a sense of common purpose that is shared by students of different backgrounds, despite the fact that they may be engaged in protracted conflict outside the school setting.

Proportional to their representation in society, fewer Arab students are admitted to higher education than Jewish students, especially to the more elite universities and colleges. In recent years, however, Arab students have made inroads into higher education enrollment through affirmative action and scholarship programs initiated by the universities in an effort to diversify their student bodies in a more equitable way (Haim, 2006). Because higher education instruction is in Hebrew, Arab students are at a further disadvantage because their

native language is Arabic (Al-Haj, 2003). These structural imbalances, stemming from the Arab students being a linguistic and cultural minority, impact Arab-Jewish relations at the university and college level.

Researchers have studied the presence and effects of peace education and conflict resolution programs from within several frameworks. These include examining the campus climate as well as investigating the role of dialogue in both planned and unplanned encounters between conflicted groups. Individual colleges and universities have implemented a wide range of programs and initiatives that serve many purposes, which are directly and indirectly related to enhancing positive dialogue and promoting reconciliation among conflicted groups. For example, Ono Academic College, a private institution, has a program in which religious leaders from the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities attend educational seminars aimed at promoting dialogue between their respective communities; another program has an academic center focused on research on business relationships with Arab countries (Ono Academic College, 2008). The inclusion of such programs has the potential to build relationships between diverse groups.

### Campus Climate

Soen, Davidovitch and Kolan (2007) investigated the state of the campus racial climate at two public institutions in Israel: the College of Judea and Samaria and the College of Western Galilee. In this study, the researchers not only recognized the importance of diversity for both discourse and democracy, but also that the colleges must go further than simply increasing the numbers of Arabs within the student body. The colleges must also offer additional support services tailored toward helping the Arab students, many of whom come from rural villages, integrate into campus life that is dominated by the Jewish majority. Although these colleges demonstrated advances in admitting more Arab students, they had not yet made the adjustments necessary to support a diverse student body.

Democracy is often cited as one of the purposes of higher education, and researchers have utilized a framework of promoting democracy and dialogue as the motivation behind enhancing and supporting a diverse student population on campuses (Rowland, 2003; Hurtado, 2006). U.S. researchers have also pointed out the relationship between the diversity of the student populations and the students' views of the campus environment (Pike & Kuh, 2006). As Soen, Davidovitch, and Kolan (2007) suggest, achieving a positive campus climate

among conflicted groups is a difficult task. According to Pettigrew (1998), optimal intergroup contact depends upon fulfilling several conditions. In the best case scenario described by Pettigrew, groups should have equality of status, share common goals, and have the support of authority figures.

As Soen, Davidovitch, and Kolan (2007) found, although Arab and Jewish students had unequal statuses outside of the college setting, they were surprised to find that a relatively positive atmosphere pervaded the campus of the two colleges that they investigated. They found that Arab and Jewish students began their studies from a point of view of equality, cooperated on academic projects, and maintained friendships in informal settings, thus fulfilling several of Pettigrew's requirements for optimal intergroup contact.

### Intergroup Dialogue Programs

In contrast with Soen, Davidovitch, and Kolan's (2007) study of student perceptions of the campus environment, Helman (2002) studied the efficacy of a specific program that took place at Ben Gurion University, located in the remote Negev Desert in the southern part of Israel, for the purposes of intergroup mediation and conflict resolution. The program was a joint venture between the Behavioral Sciences Program and the School for Peace at Neve Shalom/Wahat el Salam, a planned bilingual community in Israel that promotes peaceful co-existence between Jewish and Arab Israelis. Helman noted that it was difficult to gauge the long-term effect of this program since it may have had more of an impact on the individual, but not necessarily the collective. The researcher argued that these types of programs, whether deemed successful or not, are important for maintaining a dialogue between conflicting groups. In this case, the study examined a year-long program in which Palestinian Israeli and Jewish Israeli students participated in meetings during which they discussed the ongoing conflict. Despite the efforts of the participants and the facilitators, the essential dialogue remained the same. Neither the Palestinian nor the Jewish participants seemed to come away from the meetings with a new sense of appreciation or knowledge of the other's point of view; rather, according to Helman, their previously held views appeared to be more entrenched than ever. Helman concluded the study with the admonition that such dialogue groups are still an important part of an ongoing process of reconciliation in Israel, but only if they are redesigned in such a way as to allow productive dialogue that does not simply replicate the existing inequalities of status among the participants.

Abu-Nimer (2004) executed a study that examined the impact of six different

programs for the promotion of coexistence between Arab students and Jewish students in Israel and found that these programs had many limitations. For example, the programs were enacted on the basis of an asymmetrical relationship, as many of them were facilitated from the point of view of the dominant majority, the Jewish sector, in addition to being supported by a number of Jewish-led foundations which initiated many of the programs. Furthermore, Arab students often felt that they were at a linguistic disadvantage, since the language of the programs was most often Hebrew. From Abu-Nimer's investigation, he found that Arab students held strong doubts about the efficacy of such programs when the discourse focused on the tolerance and acceptance of their cultural characteristics (i.e. eating humus in "peace tents"), rather than on a discussion of the question of the political rights of Arabs. Despite the less than positive results of his study, Abu-Nimer also had several suggestions for enacting more effective and impactful programs. Abu-Nimer recognized that addressing concrete political conflicts between Arab students and Jewish students was the most important element for a successful dialogue, rather than the often superficial appreciation of cultural differences.

Khuri (2004) offered similar insight after conducting a study of an intergroup dialogue that took place in a college environment. Although this study took place at an American university, the dialogue was part of a course on peace education, the purpose of which was to discuss elements of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Many of the participants were Israeli-American or Palestinian-American. Similarly to Abu-Nimer, Khuri found that while there was no concrete way to measure how the program might affect peoples' viewpoints, such dialogue is an essential part of reconciliation and should be continued despite not achieving conclusive results.

Bar-On and Kassem (2004) implemented a study of a year-long intergroup dialogue program between Arab and Jewish university students in which they used storytelling as a tool for working through their conflicts with the other group. In this study, the researchers reported that the added dimension of purposeful storytelling for both sides led to an increase in empathy and understanding of the points of view held by each group. Although, as in the other programs previously discussed, it is difficult to assess the long-term efficacy of such programs, Bar-On and Kassem believe that their study revealed an essential piece that may contribute to the forward movement of the reconciliation process.

In discussing how education can play a role in peaceful coexistence, Bar-Tal (2004) suggests that in an ethnocentric society with an imbalance of power be

tween dominant and marginalized groups, education is essential in transforming society to move beyond the entrenched conflicts. Bar-Tal suggests that it is up to the dominant group to allow a platform for such transformation and dialogue to take place; yet at the same time, they must be open to empathizing with the point of view of the minority group. It is often the attitudes of the individual participants in groups and programs that determine their effectiveness. In addition, the effectiveness of such programs can sometimes be determined on an individual level but not necessarily at the collective level. Bar-Tal characterizes intergroup dialogue programs as an important part of engendering more harmonious and positive interethnic relations, despite the problem of not being able to see tangible results for a very long time.

### Conclusion

Since the failed Oslo Accords, programs in Israeli higher education that implement and support peace education and conflict resolution appear to be more essential than ever, despite the constant shadow of the ongoing conflict and the slow pace of change. Neuberger (2007) describes the urgent need for education that promotes democracy not only among the conflicted groups of Jews and Arabs, but also among the other deep divisions found in Israeli society: between the religious and secular, immigrants and non-immigrants, and the politically liberal and conservative. Such initiatives, while important at all levels, are especially important during the 11th and 12th grade years before students enter higher education. Education for democracy has not always been a top priority for Israel, but Neuberger points out that since the 1980s, this issue has gained increasing prominence on policy and research agendas. The inclusion of greater numbers of Arab students in higher education is an important step in this direction, which may also lead to the implementation of more programs to enhance diversity and coexistence between groups.

Despite the many points of conflict in Israeli society, the university and college campus has the potential to be one of the most democratic institutions that exists in Israel. It is on the campus that students from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions come together for a common purpose. Higher education presents a window of opportunity for discourse, coexistence and democracy. As demonstrated by the results of different programs and initiatives taking place at universities and colleges, it is vitally important for higher education institutions to take an active role in facilitating educational programs and a climate that leads to managing difference and encouraging dialogue between conflicted groups. With the expansion of its higher education system, Israel is well poised

to encompass goals of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and democracy that are essential components of a pluralistic, multiethnic society.

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