THE IMPACT OF YOUTH PEACEBUILDING CAMPS: CONNECTEDNESS, COPING, AND COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Young people from Cyprus who attended bicommunal youth camps in the United States developed new competencies for leadership and peacebuilding. These capacities were measured in terms of 1) deeper connection to peers from the opposite community in Cyprus, either Greek or Turkish Cypriot, 2) increased capacity for coping, when the political situation became or remained difficult in Cyprus, and 3) collaboration in follow-up activities and projects with peers from the other community. The impact of these two-week intensive, summer peacebuilding camps conducted at the School for International Training in Vermont was measured with a survey administered at a follow up reunion of programme graduates held in the UN administered buffer zone in Cyprus. Former participants attested to significant development of inter-communal connections, sustained hopefulness and ability to cope with a negative and divisive political climate, and ongoing commitment to collaborate with peers across the island to maintain bicommunal relationships and work for a peaceful future.

Introduction

Since 1990 the School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont has organised a variety of youth programmes focused on global issues, social action, and peacebuilding between young people from communities in conflict around the world, particularly Cyprus, Northern Ireland, and Israel. People always ask about the impact of these programmes when these students return home from the United States. These teenagers feel that they have changed, but they go back to an unchanged and still difficult social and political environment. Anyone who has seen the joyful friendship and tears that these young people share when parting and at reunions cannot doubt the transformation that has occurred in them as individuals representing communities in conflict with each other. Still the question remains: do these students remain connected back at home after this intimate experience of the other in a positive summer camp environment?

It has been suggested over the years that we are setting these teenagers up for great disappointment and disillusionment after they go home – that we will make it worse for them psychologically by building up their hopes and dreams, which could be let down when they are back at home in divided and sometimes violent societies. A second key question then arises: how will these young people cope with the difficult realities they will face when they return home?

While the camps are an exuberantly positive experience in and of themselves, critics and funding agencies question whether these adolescents go on to significantly impact their societies by taking effective action for peace. No matter what their motivation, it is guaranteed to be hard for them to work together on peacebuilding activities and projects at home. So the third question we must answer is: Do these youth continue to collaborate effectively with members of the other community in working for peace in their home countries?

This research project seeks to determine what qualities, characteristics, and capabilities remain active in these young people after the end of these peacebuilding camps. To explore the three critical questions above, the criteria for measuring the ongoing impact of a one-time youth peacebuilding programme are isolated as capacities for 1) connectedness, 2) coping, and 3) collaboration. Exploring the criteria of connection is done to assess the relationships that have been built between young people at the camps and whether they have been lasting. Understanding the criteria of coping assesses how these young people have developed mental and emotional coping mechanisms, individually and with group support, while living within an atmosphere of inevitably difficult social and political challenges in their communities. Focusing on the criteria of collaboration reveals whether the students have or have not worked together towards building peace in their homeland after the conclusion of these programmes.

Many who doubt the long-term impact of youth peacebuilding programmes had watched an episode of the CBS television show 60 Minutes, on which a number of graduates of Seeds of Peace, the Middle East youth peace camp in Maine, described how many had grown distant from their friends from camp once they returned to the extreme atmosphere of animosity and violence between Israelis and Palestinians that emerged during the second Intifada. Cynics evoke this episode as evidence that youth peacebuilding programmes do not work. This sobering documentary episode revealed a painful scenario of acute violence and mistrust, with fresh wounds, explosive anger, and no glimmer of political hope. Seeds that are not nurtured have no realistic chance to grow. Yet even in this sobering show ex-campers exhibited a glimmer of possibility, evidenced in dormant kernels of relationship, sometimes only retained through rare online communications or queries about mutual safety during outbreaks of violence.

In less acute cases of inter-communal violence, such as Cyprus or Northern Ireland – which can even be seen as essentially post-conflict divided societies – where there are recurrent moments of political hope and where violence has become a rare occurrence, the impact of youth peacebuilding work reveals genuine cause for optimism. Teenagers are capable of dramatic re-assessment and shifts within their personal and collective identities. Monolithic, exclusive communal identities can become transcendent (Kelman, 2002), inclusive of people who were formerly seen as enemies. The novel identity of 'peacebuilder' itself gets added onto an ethnic or religious sense of self. This identity can be something to hold onto in challenging times or developed into a leadership role.

The results of personal change and group cohesion are impossible to miss at the tearful end of these peace camps. The fun, the mutual celebration and support, and the camaraderie are tangible. But what happens when they re-enter a society that has not changed along with them? Can this transformation last? Assessing the connection, coping, and collaboration that remains in these students after the thrill of the camp experience is behind them can begin to answer these questions.

Background of the Camps

In 1990 we began a summer youth programme at the School for International Training under the auspices of the Governor's Institute of International Affairs. This programme brought together American students from Vermont with Soviet students from Leningrad. In the second year the Soviet students had become Russians from St. Petersburg and the Cold War was over. The Governor's Institute programme has continued with a focus on current issues and youth activism. In 1996 Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot youth began coming to SIT for an inter-communal Confidence Building Workshop for college-aged participants in the Cyprus American Scholarship Programme (CASP). Since that time over 500 young people have participated in peace building programmes for Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland, and Arabs and Jews from Israel. With summer attendance ranging from 45 to 165 each summer since 1990, there have been over 1500 participants involved in these youth empowerment programmes. Most youth campers are 15-17 years old (for a description and photos of the camps online go to: http://sit.edu/youth).

The Cypriot Youth Camps in particular were an outgrowth of citizen bicommunal activities begun in the 1990s particularly under the auspices of the Cyprus Fulbright Commission and with the assistance of visiting scholars who conducted joint trainings in conflict resolution for Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot citizens (Broome, 2004). These trainings grew into a range of bicommunal citizen dialogue groups run by Cypriots themselves in which participants sought to understand the

perspective of members of the other community (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis). When the Turkish-Cypriot authorities forbid members of their community to enter the UN buffer zone for dialogue groups at the end of 1997, it became more pressing to find ways for Greek and Turkish Cypriots to meet off the island. The off-island youth camp model also allows young people to get away from the pressures of living in communities in conflict and creates a fresh context to reconstruct relationships with members of both Cypriot communities in a retreat setting (Ungerleider, 2001).

During the recent era in which Cypriots cross to both sides of the island with regularity, initial research reveals that contact between the two communities contributes to optimism about coexistence (Webster, 2005). Still, opportunities for structured or systematic dialogue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, either on or off the island, remain very rare. Bicommunal citizen dialogue groups that were proliferating and gaining momentum in the mid-1990s have not recovered to pre-1997 levels of activity. Bicommunal programmes like the SIT Youth Camps are still providing an opportunity for deep inter-communal dialogue that has not yet become commonplace in Cyprus.

The design of the programme consists of a combination of skills training, dialogue sessions, outdoors teambuilding activities, social and recreational activities, and the learning that goes on from living together in a common and positive social milieu (Ungerleider, 2001). For students from communities in conflict, the dialogue leaders are adult representatives of those communities. These "trainers" have some, often limited, training in dialogue facilitation, sometimes through SIT's CONTACT (Conflict Transformation across Cultures) graduate professional certificate programme (http://sit.edu/contact). These facilitators have ongoing supervision from programme directors and SIT faculty during the camp session. A sub-set of adult trainers have acquired multiple years of experience by working at the SIT Youth Camps, Seeds of Peace, and in the Youth Encounters for Peace (YEP) programme back in Cyprus, and have gained significant expertise in bicommunal youth dialogue facilitation.

Research Methodology and Results

In order to determine what measure of connectedness, coping, and collaboration were developed in graduates of the youth peacebuilding camps, former participants from Cyprus were asked to respond to a questionnaire with narrative questions and a numerical ranking designed to measure the emergence and sustenance of connectedness between programme graduates from the communities in conflict. This questionnaire was administered in Cyprus at a reunion of camp graduates held at the Fulbright Centre in the United Nations administered buffer zone in Nicosia in January, 2004. Forty-one former campers attending this reunion were from camp

years 2000-2003, with most coming from summer 2003 programmes.[1] (Unable to cross between the Turkish north and Greek south since 1974, Cypriots are now able to pass freely into the buffer zone, and since April 2003 they can show passports to cross into the other side of the island for the day.) At the time they took the survey, respondents were secondary students, university students, or serving in the military. For most participants this survey was completed six months after their camp experience, for the rest it had been eighteen months – three years since they were at the camp. Forty students attend each programme, twenty Greek Cypriots and twenty Turkish Cypriots, with either one or two sessions per summer.

Connectedness

Connectedness can be represented as a relation assessed within a matrix, in this case wherein former camp participants numerically express their dynamic subjective experience of connectedness with other participants from the other community, in this case Greek Cypriots experience of connectedness to Turkish Cypriots, and vice versa (Shakun, 2003). Former youth campers were asked to rate their connectedness on a scale of zero (unconnectedness) to 5 (full connectedness) reflecting how connected they felt – before, during, and after camp – to five specific programme participants from the other community whom they were asked to name. That is, each participant listed three scores, 0 to 5, next to the names of friends from the programme to express their sense of connectedness: 1) before camp, 2) during camp, and 3) now (i.e., after), which ranged from six months to four years after their experience at the programme.

Since none of the campers knew each other, there was a nearly guaranteed dramatic improvement in connection from before camp to during the camp, unless no connection was made at the camp at all. This proved true, as the average increase from before to during camp was close to 4 (3.89) on a scale of 5 with a frequency of 47 per cent students listing the maximum score of 5 as their sense of connectedness to new friends from the other community.

The trickier question was the comparison of connectedness scores during and after camp. Did these connections last? The connectedness increase stayed at an average of 3 (3.01) six months after camp, a drop of .88 from during camp. Twenty-two per cent of students still cited a score of 5 for feeling maximally connected to these new friends.

Scores reveal both increased and decreased connectedness after the camp among various participants. One might expect the teens to lose the intensity of the residential camp experience and feel less connected months or years after the programme. This was evidenced in their responses to some extent, but there are also examples of participants who felt even more connected to specific counterparts

from the other community well after the camp had ended. This revealed that some friendships that had been started at the camp were deepened and developed over the months or years since the end of their time together in the US.

Since the end of the programmes, all of those who took the survey had visited with campers from the other community. The average number of visits with campers from the other community after camp was 4.41 visits per camper over a six-month period. Of course these results are biased by the fact that those taking the survey were willing to come to a reunion. Those who did not come may not in fact have stayed in touch with acquaintances from the other community. Though some expressed regrets due to private lessons and family obligations, which are common in Cyprus and keep teenagers too busy to attend reunions, clearly others had not been motivated enough to remain in contact with their new friends from the other community. This was the case with one particularly challenging cohort of Greek Cypriots, where a few negative leaders discouraged their peers from mixing bicommunally; Turkish Cypriots from this session complained that their Greek-Cypriot counterparts had made no effort to get together with them when back in Cyprus. While positive results were revealed, the impact of the programmes, or lack thereof, on those not participating in the study remains hidden.

One-hundred per cent of survey respondents said that they continued friendships with campers from the other community. Ninety-eight per cent utilised the Internet as a source of communication with friends from the other community. Eighty per cent attended reunions with friends from the other community. Thirty-two per cent said that they made personal visits across the island to see friends from the other community. Only 22 per cent said that they use the telephone as a form of communication, though it must be mentioned that it is somewhat complicated to place a call to phone lines on the other side of the island.

There was a built in bias in the research sample as it was more likely that former campers who had friendships with others would attend the reunion and thereby fill out the questionnaire. Still, beginning with the fact of zero connection between these teens, who also had been socialised to see members of the other community as enemies, the increase and sustenance of these friendships is a pro-social fact.

Coping
On the questionnaire, former participants were asked a set of questions to determine how the camp had helped them cope with the political and emotional challenges caused by the conflict that remains unresolved on their island since they returned home. A resounding 97.6 per cent reported that the camp experience made them feel more hopeful about the future of Cyprus. When asked how the camp influenced their thinking about the Cyprus conflict, the impact of the camp

experience on improving the general sense of hopefulness in these teens toward the future of their island was nearly universal among those who participated in the survey. This sense of hope was revealed in representative comments, given in English by the Cypriot youth:

> It has made me believe that there is hope for freedom for Cyprus and that we can as people from different communities live together peacefully.

> The camp made me understand that the candle of hope still exists.

> I started feeling much more confident that the problem can be solved soon.

They also saw similarities between the two communities:

> I think that we can live together without any problems, we are the same and we create good friendships. We can live peacefully.

> It made me think of the Turkish Cypriots as ordinary people with so many similarities with us and that we could easily live together.

> At past, I thought that Greeks are really opposite people to our community but after camp, I saw that they are just like us and I started to look positive to peace.

Positive thinking towards solutions, an active rather than just a hopeful stance, seemed to be a lasting result as well:

> It allowed me to have a more positive outlook on the problem. I realised that we can live together and we have so many things in common.

> At the camp, we talked and discussed about our history. We learned many things that we didn't know and when we tried to find a solution we were successful. So I believe that we are the seeds of peace and we want peace. Where there is a will, there is a way.

Such positive thinking translated to advocacy in political discussions:

> It has influenced me a lot since now I am able to take part in discussions actively, as I have more knowledge on the subject and I feel more confident in defending my views.

> I have become more open-minded and my negative image about Turkish-Cypriots has faded away. I have also tried to convince and discuss with others that we can live together in peace.

Yet it wasn't completely easy to come home. They are well aware that camp provided an idealised environment for them to become friends. They understand the limitations they face at home: in terms of how little power they have as teenagers in controlling the policies of their county, and of managing the challenges of their busy daily schedules as teens:

> At the camp, things weren't as real. There I thought that everything was very easy, but coming back to Cyprus, I found out that things weren't so easy.

> When I was at SIT, I thought that we will be good friends and never forget each other, but when we came back we can't usually meet.

There have been many politically difficult periods in the recent Cypriot history, as various politicians continue all variety of machinations to retain the status quo in the face of strong international pressure to move forward. Negotiations repeatedly stall or fail. The international community struggles to promote progress in the peace process and then, as so many times before, withdraws its efforts in frustration. In such difficult times, did the camp experience affect former participant's thinking and behaviour?

After they returned to Cyprus, from six months up to several years after the camp, an overwhelming 92.5 per cent reported that the camp still helped them feel more hopeful and positive, even when the political situation was negative. In such times, students felt that their camp experience bolstered their hopes and determination for the future.

> In such times, I feel more hopeful because I learned from camp that through discussion, problems can be solved.

> We will be the next generation, the next politicians. We want peace. We know we can change everything. So, even though the political situation was negative, I will not lose my hopes!

Collaboration
The most tangible way that these students kept their hopes for a peaceful Cyprus alive was by becoming active in bicommunal peacebuilding activities and ongoing projects. A set of questions sought to assess their level of participation in bicommunal activities back at home. There is evidence that these programmes not only build friendships and break stereotypes in the short term, but also have an ongoing impact back at home – not only interpersonally, but socially and even politically. While only a very few had been involved in bicommunal programmes before attending the programme 53 per cent of the respondents claimed to have participated in bicommunal activities and 41.5 per cent claimed to have worked in

more substantive bicommunal projects after the camp. They listed participation in:

1. A Bicommunal Youth Orchestra
2. A Tree Planting Event in Pyla (see below*)
3. Youth Encounters for Peace (YEP) weekend workshops
4. Bicommunal Projects for School
5. Youth Promoting Peace (YPP), meetings to organise a Bicommunal Rock Concert, Festival, and Party
6. A Bicommunal Folk Dance Group meeting in Pyla
7. Dinner, shopping, swimming, playing pinball together
8. The organisation of a Bicommunal Hip Hop Party
9. Environmental activities such as the Bicommunal Green Project
10. Bicommunal Drama Clubs
11. UNDP Sponsored Bicommunal Projects
12. A Drawing for Peace Activity

Furthermore, the extension of cross-community contacts was not limited to friends that were made at camp. Seventy-three per cent of the graduates said that after the camps they met new individuals from the other community who had not been to SIT, and they met these new friends as a result of bicommunal activities that they entered only after participation at the camp. Most of these new contacts were made in Nicosia or in the unique, mixed village of Pyla* located within the buffer zone, which bicommunal activists utilised to meet at times when they were forbidden to cross the checkpoints in the capital. Others met at Youth Encounters for Peace (YEP) workshops, the only long-standing and consistent bicommunal youth programme in Cyprus, at the annual United Nations Peace Day, and at various reunions, including at the American Academy of Larnaca.

Former participants were also asked to do a quantitative assessment of how often they discussed bicommunal issues before, during, and after camp. They rated the frequency of their participation in political discussions on a scale of 0-5, ranging from "0 if you never discussed/discuss these issues" to "5 if you discuss them very frequently." The frequency of political discussions before camp averaged at 2.42. Participants increased discussion on political matters by 1.86 while at camp, up to 4.28. More impressive is that the participants continued to maintain relatively similar levels of discussion after camp as discussion decreased by a mere .13, to 4.15. In a frequency analysis by individual participants of discussions before versus after camp, the general trend was to more political discussions after camp, with the frequency focused in the 2-3 range before camp and in the 4-5 range afterwards. Two individuals marked that they had no discussions of this sort at all (0) before camp and frequent discussions after camp (5).

This scale reveals that former campers began to think and talk more about Cypriot politics and bicommunal issues after the camp. There is evidence that increased levels of engaged discussion and action continues for at least the first 3-4 years after the programme, a time when Cypriot youth are extremely busy completing secondary school and entering college or the military. Hopefully this increased engagement in considering and acting on strategies for peacebuilding in Cyprus is a step towards becoming more analytical, responsible citizens who are better prepared for an active, effective role as future Cypriot leaders.

Conclusions

Cyprus is no longer an active violent conflict, yet stubbornly divisive ideologies remain in need of peacebuilding interventions. While these young people have not changed the adult politics of their conflicted homeland, they have rewritten the script of their socialisation and prejudices. Previously unimagined friendships with Cypriots, who used to be seen as Greeks or Turks in the most condescending sense, have changed their own sense of who they are in relation to their neighbours. While still aware of their differences, these young people articulate a newfound, transcendent Cypriot identity. This expanded perception of belonging to one of two communities sharing a small island combines with an emerging sense of oneself as a peacebuilder. The result manifests a nascent transformation, a shift that in many programme graduates is rooted and stabilised during the first year after the camp experience.

The connections between campers have remained: some thinned by busy schedules, yet some deepened by having endured the reality of re-entering a divided society and successfully maintaining a friendship with an "enemy." Former campers have demonstrated the coping ability to withstand, with their hope intact, the initial exposure to ongoing intolerance and divisive politics, and continually dampened hopes of social reconciliation. These young people will continue to be tested over the years, but have identified a foundation and touchstone to refresh the truth of their inter-communal experience and their inspiration for peace. It may be too soon to say whether their commitment to a peaceful future will grow into the perseverance that will be needed to successfully advocate for the progress they envision. They have proven to themselves, however, that they are committed to each other and to the simple truth that they should be able to live in peace on their small island, without fear or the threat of violence.

Note

1. Attendees by year: 2003 = 24 (two sessions); 2002 = 13 (one session); 2001 = 3 (one session); 2000 – 1 (one session).

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