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The Role of Educational Psychologists in Promoting Prosocial Behaviours within Post-Conflict Settings

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Abstract

Even after the signing of a peace agreement, children and adolescents often develop in divided societies that experience continued intergroup tensions and hostilities. A majority of research carried out in post-conflict settings has tended to view young people as passive victims or troublemakers perpetuating a cycle of violence. However, young people can also play a positive role in rebuilding society after conflict. There is a need to foster positive youth outcomes among those born after the height of violence, such as prosocial behaviours, which may serve as an indicator of positive adjustment and antecedent for peacebuilding. The current paper explores the peacemaker role of educational psychologists in promoting prosocial behaviours within post-conflict settings. Implications for educational psychology practice are discussed.

The Role of Educational Psychologists in Promoting Prosocial Behaviours within Post-Conflict Settings

Growing up in a post-conflict setting may have unique challenges for children and adolescents (Reidy et al., 2015). Even after the signing of a peace agreement, those born after the height of violence continue to be impacted by a legacy of the conflict (Taylor, Štambuk, Čorkalo Biruški, & O'Driscoll, in press). That is, children and adolescents tend to encounter extensive segregation, which permeates into both personal (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007) and educational life (Hayes & McAllister, 2009). For example, within present day Northern Ireland, over 90% of pupils attend segregated schools (Blaylock, Hughes, Wölfer, & Donnelly, 2018). In addition to segregation, young people may be directly exposed to sporadic outbreaks of episodic violence (Cummings et al., 2011). Research carried out within these divided societies has tended to conceptualise young people as passive victims or as troublemakers continuing the cycle of violence (Muldoon, 2013). By perceiving children and adolescents as simply perpetrators of intergroup hostilities, it is easy to overlook the positive contributions they can make to social reconstruction and peacebuilding after protracted periods of conflict (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). Educational psychologists (EPs) possess a wealth of applied knowledge on child and adolescent psychology and may be well-positioned to work with young people to deal effectively with conflict and reconciliation. The current paper explores the role of EPs in promoting positive youth outcomes in post-conflict settings, specifically prosocial behaviours.

Prosocial behaviours within post-conflict settings

The paper understands prosocial behaviours to be voluntary acts intended to benefit or improve the wellbeing of another person (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2017), which may include helping, soothing, and sharing (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010). Within countries emerging from armed conflict, prosocial behaviours are commonly viewed

as a proxy indicator of positive psychosocial functioning and resilience among children and adolescents (Haroz, Murray, Bolton, Betancourt, & Bass, 2013). Research on posttraumatic growth suggests that people who have experienced traumatic life-events may use prosocial behaviours as a coping mechanism (Triplett, Redeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012). That is, helping others may provide a distraction from their own problems via downward social comparisons, increase their feelings of self-worth, and give meaning to their suffering. However, current evidence suggests that growing up in post-conflict societies may constrain prosocial behaviours. For example, teachers in Croatia reported lower levels of prosocial behaviours among 11- to 13-year-old children suffering conflict-related stress (Keresteš, 2006). Similarly, adolescents in Northern Ireland that had directly experienced political violence were less willing to behave prosocially toward others both immediately (Cummings et al., 2010) and at a one-year follow-up (Taylor et al., 2014). Engagement in prosocial behaviours may also decrease as children transition into adolescence, with exposure to political violence accelerating this reduction (Taylor et al., 2018). Children confronted with intergroup violence may respond with helping behaviours at first, but with time may recognise that these prosocial acts are rather futile. In other words, sustained exposure to a conflict-ridden environment may alter children's reasoning in relation to reconciliation and retaliation (Ardila-Rey, Killen, & Brenick, 2009), including outgroup members.

The signing of a peace agreement does not suddenly make a society more peaceful or stable (MacGinty, Muldoon, & Ferguson, 2007). Within post-conflict societies, prosocial behaviours may also be an antecedent for long-term peacebuilding if these acts are directed toward members of the traditional rival group (Taylor & McKeown, 2017). That is, these helping behaviours may provide a useful starting point for groups to collaborate and work together. Previous research suggests that young people's attitudes may play an important role

in promoting prosocial acts across group lines (O'Driscoll, Taylor, & Dautel, 2018), which may have implications for both individual outcomes, as well as broader intergroup relations.

A number of cognitive-emotional (e.g., empathy [Taylor, O'Driscoll, Dautel, & McKeown, in press]) and social factors (e.g., contact with the outgroup members [Turner, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2013]) may influence young people's intergroup attitudes, and in turn, behaviours associated with peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. However, the socialisation of young people may also be impacted by family (e.g., parental transmission of intergroup biases [Taylor & McKeown, 2019]) and school-based processes (e.g., perceived peer norms toward the outgroup within school [McKeown & Taylor, 2018]).

Implications for educational psychology practice

The role of the EP is multifaceted and includes assessment, intervention, consultation, research and advocacy. However, within post-conflict settings, the role of the EP may be extended to include peacemaker. There is the potential for EPs to bolster young people's engagement in both general and outgroup-directed prosocial behaviours to facilitate social change through intervention at different levels of the social ecology.

At a child level, EPs may work with young people to prevent a decline in general prosociality across time. EPs may be uniquely placed to carry out intervention work in settings that are familiar to young people, such as schools, which may increase the likelihood of affecting meaningful change. For example, EPs may engage in individual or group-based therapeutic work with children and adolescents to help them cope with previous victimisation as a result of political violence and promote altruism out of suffering (Vollhardt, 2009). That is, such interventions may bolster cognitive restructuring, as young people may develop a greater concern for the welfare of others, improve their perspective taking ability, boost sensitivity to perceived injustices, and encourage shared identification with victims that have experienced similar traumatic events (Vollhardt & Staub, 2011). EPs may also deliver

interventions to young people at risk of perpetuating intergroup hostilities who display negative outgroup-directed attitudes and behaviours. For example, interventions aimed at improving empathy may be effective counteracting budding intergroup divisions. Increasing empathy may encourage children and adolescents to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of outgroup members. This increased sensitivity for the welfare of members of the traditional rival group may manifest in the form of more positive attitudes, which in turn, may motivate young people to engage in prosocial behaviours across group lines. (Taylor et al., in press). Empathy therefore has the potential to unfreeze traditional conflict dynamics by reducing feelings of prejudice among the younger generation and laying a foundation for constructive forms of engagement associated with peacebuilding, such as helping and the sharing of resources. EPs may also challenge the narrative of young people as victims or troublemakers. Instead, EPs can highlight the positive contributions of youth and their peacebuilding potential. EPs tend to have specific skills that can be utilised to access the voice of young people (Harding & Atkinson, 2009), and are aware of the therapeutic advantages associated with having an opportunity to speak and feeling heard (Ingram, 2013). Toward this end, EPs may be effective in gaining pupils' views and ensuring that these views are represented when decisions are made relating to the peace process.

At the familial level, EPs could provide psychoeducation on the need to inhibit the intergenerational transmission of negative intergroup attitudes and biases, which may perpetuate cycles of violence (Taylor & McKeown, 2019). EPs may also work with the family unit to improve intrafamilial dynamics, such as increasing family cohesion. For example, strengthened sense of togetherness may buffer the negative outcomes associated with exposure to political violence and foster children and adolescent's contributions to post-accord peacebuilding (Taylor et al., 2017).

At the school level, it may be beneficial for EPs to deliver training to school staff on the importance of prosocial behaviours for positive adjustment and the consolidation of peace. It may be useful for practitioners to provide teachers with strategies to increase pupil's participation in prosocial acts, which may then be incorporated into classroom practices. The application of these strategies within the classroom could have the potential to foster the development of a prosocial mindset among a greater number of pupils, serve as a mode of early intervention and create a perception of positive peer group norms toward the outgroup.

At community level, EPs can engage in systemic peacebuilding by advocating for peace education to be incorporated into the ethos of a school. That is, young people are taught to respect intergroup differences, forgive and appreciate diversity (Gallagher, 2010). Given that schools within post-conflict societies are often segregated institutions on the basis of group membership, EPs could establish links between schools so that pupils from both groups have opportunities to collaborate and experience positive contact. In addition, EPs may assist school staff in organising events that promote reconciliation and a shared future for young people and the local community. For example, having former combatants that have opted for peace share their stories.

Conclusion

The paper explores the potential role of EPs in promoting both general and outgroup-directed prosocial behaviours among young people developing in post-conflict societies. That is, prosocial behaviours can be a marker of positive psychosocial functioning and resiliency. However, prosocial behaviours may also be an antecedent for peacebuilding. EPs may be effective cultivating these constructive forms of engagement among young people. Toward this end, EPs may serve as peacemakers in the face of ongoing division and intergroup hostilities. The paper is the first to propose the peacebuilding potential of EPs within post-conflict settings. There is therefore a need for future work to further explore this new face of

the profession. For example, it would be useful to consider some other ways in which EPs can contribute to the development of positive youth outcomes in areas emerging from armed conflict; for example, dealing with the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the resulting impact on the emotional wellbeing of the post-accord generation. Although other psychological services may work directly with the effects of this trauma for young people displaying a high level of need, EPs may link in and supplement these services. For example, EPs could deliver therapeutic interventions to young people that have not met criteria to access trauma-based services. EPs are also well equipped to support learning or behavioural difficulties associated with transgenerational trauma within the classroom.

Given that protracted conflicts often span decades, it may take a similar amount of time to build constructive intergroup relationships. This ‘decades thinking’ method focusses on the long-term process and highlights the need for peacebuilding initiatives to work with and support the post-accord generation (Lederach, 1997). Educational Psychology Services operating within post-conflict settings may contribute to this process by encouraging the expansion of the repertoire of EPs through the allocation of time or specialised posts to promote and consolidate peace.

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