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CHAPTER 27

GIVING VOICE TO CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON PEACE

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You are really interested in what I have to say about peace! I enjoy talking to you.

I do have a lot of thoughts about peace, war, and solving conflicts but nobody ever asked me about it.

This comment was made by a 13-year-old Dutch girl who participated in an interview study. In this chapter, the concept of peace and strategies to attain peace will be addressed from the perspective of children and adolescents. By listening to what children have to say about these issues, we have access to what they internalize through various kinds of interactions with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In order to give voice to children's ideas about peace, we will present some results from a cross-cultural research project initiated in the middle 1990s (cf. Hägglund, Hakvoort, & Oppenheimer, 1996). An international group of researchers (i.e., from Australia, Croatia, India, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Philippines, South Africa, and

Sweden) collaborated in this ongoing endeavour. In this chapter, voice is given to children from two relatively peaceful European countries with a long tradition of democratic political systems: the Netherlands and Sweden.

We begin by presenting children's reflections on the concept of peace and their ideas about strategies they think will promote peace. Four themes will emerge: communication, interpersonal relationships, human values, and nature. In the following sections, we elaborate on these four themes and then we present developmental considerations, focusing on the increasing complexity of children's conceptions of peace. Throughout, we emphasize the diversity of children's conceptualizations which is caused by the varying contexts in which children are socialized. We conclude with some thoughts about children's conceptions of peace and implications for training children in conflict management in the twenty-first century.

From our perspective, children's conceptions of peace and strategies to attain peace are products of their interactions with the social, cultural, political, and physical environment (cf. Durkin, 1995; Winegar & Valsiner, 1992a, 1992b; Woodhead, Light, & Carr, 1991). Accordingly, we begin by highlighting some features of the contexts in which Dutch and Swedish children live and grow.

CHILDREN'S CONCEPTIONS OF PEACE IN TWO SOCIETIES

The Netherlands and Sweden

The Netherlands and Sweden represent two different but overlapping contexts for socialization and development (Hakvoort, Hägglund, & Oppenheimer, 1998). Both countries are positioned in northwestern Europe and are members of the European Union. While the total Swedish territory

covers 449,964 square kilometers (173,732 square miles), the Dutch territory is much smaller, covering 41,526 square kilometers (16,033 square miles). The populations show a reverse order: The Netherlands has a population of 15,499,000 people, while Sweden has a population of 8,564,000 people. The Netherlands and Sweden both have democratic political systems and both are monarchies (i.e., the monarch is the formal head of the state—a hereditary title—and a prime minister is the head of the government). The voting age in both countries is 18 years of age. The Netherlands represents a mixed Catholic and Protestant tradition (i.e., 39 percent no religion; 33 percent Roman Catholic; 23 percent Protestant; 3 percent Muslim; 2 percent other). Until recently Sweden had a State church in the Protestant tradition to which the majority of the population (88 percent) belonged.

Children in both countries face comparable standards of social and economic development in education, health care, child care, and social welfare. Moreover, Dutch and Swedish children can expect similar prospects for future education and employment. Basically, both have identical experiences with regard to information in the mass media (i.e., news about world events, fashion, and music). Generally, peace and democracy tend to be regarded as stable and unthreatened in these countries though there are some tensions between immigrants and national groups.

The most obvious difference between the two countries is the historical fact that the Netherlands was directly involved in the Second World War in defending its borders and finally repelling the invading Germans, while Sweden was only indirectly involved by supplying arms and information to both sides of the conflict. Hence, Dutch children are raised in a context of collective memories and symbols related to the war (e.g., war cemeteries, parents and grandparents telling about the war, annual memorial services for the fallen, and liberty and peace celebra-

tions). Swedish children rarely, if ever, have experienced these kinds of cultural manifestations and memories of peace and war.

Assessing Children's Conceptions of Peace

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 207 Dutch and 209 Swedish children, aged seven to 17. These children presented their ideas about peace and war, and strategies to attain peace (cf. Hakvoort et al., 1998). We wanted them to think about peace from various perspectives, including their own personal role in peace processes, and what they would do to take care of peace if they were the boss of their country and the boss of the world. During the interviews we experienced how the children were constructing their thoughts while talking to us.

THEMES

Communication

At all ages, Dutch and Swedish children referred to the absence of war and the absence of war activities (e.g., the absence of fighting) when asked about peace. Stopping and preventing wars were mentioned as ways of making peace. This tendency for children to equate absence of war (i.e., negative peace) to the concept of peace has been shown consistently in many different studies (for a review, see Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998).

Dutch and Swedish children also discussed *how* negative peace could be attained. Typically the children first mentioned who they thought should be involved in stopping or preventing wars and secondly what actions should be undertaken. Most children did not think that they themselves were able to take the responsibility for actions to stop wars. They repeatedly suggested

that someone in a power position (e.g., country leaders, kings, or the United Nations) should do so by using talking strategies, including negotiations with enemies, discussions with other leaders, and talks with their own soldiers. Previous research has shown that such a “personalization” of political responsibility is common among children (Torney & Hess, 1971). For example, Torney and Hess reported that young children “view political systems as if they consisted of one or two persons to whom personal relationships can be formed” (p. 472). As children get older, they learn to understand that political structures and political institutions exist without a particular person.

It seemed as if the Dutch and Swedish children were confident in having trustworthy and competent leaders around. By suggesting various kinds of “talking strategies” the children expressed an implicit knowledge about the importance of communication and dialogue. We would argue that this knowledge is a momentous prerequisite to attain and maintain peace.

Interpersonal Relationships: Having Friends

When peers were included in their thoughts about making or maintaining peace, the seven- to 13-year-old Dutch and Swedish children regarded themselves as active participants in making or maintaining peace. They frequently referred to interpersonal relationships in their ideas about strategies to make peace and they seemed to have developed knowledge and skills to build and maintain positive relationships with their friends and age-mates (Hägglund, 1999). Even though the Dutch and Swedish children literally referred to situations that would be defined as negative peace (i.e., avoiding or stopping interpersonal conflicts), they, at the same time, described activities and strategies aimed at maintaining and developing positive relationships with friends:

“When I have a quarrel with my friend, I would go to him to shake hands and tell him that he can

come to my place and borrow my bike this afternoon.” They also mentioned helping their mother, playing with friends, and being nice and kind to classmates.

Clearly, in their concepts of peace and in their ideas about how to attain peace, friendship seemed to play a significant role. We regard this as an illustration of the fact that peer groups constitute important social settings for the development of social knowledge. This is in line with research showing that peer groups offer natural social settings in which norms, values, and attitudes are elaborated and practiced (Corsaro, 1990; Frønes, 1995; Piaget, 1932). In short, children’s conceptions of peace are not merely the absence of something negative but also include actions that contribute to interpersonal cooperation and harmony.

Human Values: Equality and Social Justice

In contrast to younger children, adolescents (13 to 17 years) did not refer to individually oriented activities when describing ways of making peace. Instead, they spoke about values such as equality and solidarity between human beings. When proposing strategies to establish equality, Dutch adolescents expressed views different from the Swedish adolescents. The Dutch 13 to 17 year olds talked about reducing discrimination, increasing tolerance, and, to a lesser extent, strengthening democratic processes. They thought this could be done by informing and educating people via, for example, media and pamphlets. In contrast, the Swedish adolescents more frequently emphasized the importance of international collaboration and sharing their own welfare with poor people in other countries. For example, they suggested sending clothes, money, and medicine to Third World countries. They also referred to the membership of the European Union as a way to attain peace. Clearly, the Dutch adolescents were more attuned to addressing peace in their own society, while the Swedish adolescents expressed a more global orientation in which

peace in other societies was the focus (Hakvoort et al., 1998).

When compared to children, adolescents demonstrate an enlarged repertoire of ideas about peace which include not only peacekeeping and peacemaking but also social justice. In view of the monuments and other remembrances of World War II, it is not surprising that Dutch children mention actions that diminish the likelihood of war when they discuss the meaning of peace. In addition, a social justice orientation is apparent in their conceptions of peace, especially when they describe activities that would strengthen non-oppressive societal structures.

Similarly, Swedish adolescents include social justice in their repertoire. However, Swedish adolescents have an international orientation, referring to the promotion of non-oppressive structures globally. Clearly, both Dutch and Swedish adolescents are keenly aware of the importance of social justice; they differ in their unit of analysis: intranational for Dutch adolescents and international for Swedish adolescents.

Nature and Sustainability

Some children in our study, in particular, Dutch boys, referred to nature and ecological issues when asked about peace and strategies to attain peace (Hakvoort, 1996). These ideas were emphasized even more when they discussed strategies to attain or maintain peace. They mentioned, for example, preserving rainforests, closing polluting industries, and stopping the usage of cars or airplanes. In recent decades, an increase in attention to the natural environment in which humans live has been noted in the Netherlands. The media, interest groups and associations, and political organizations show an increase in their concern for these issues. In a country like the Netherlands, with so many people and so little space, information about sustainability is of wide-

spread interest.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS: COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

Evidence is accumulating which suggests that some features of children's thinking can be generalized quite widely. As children develop, their conceptions of peace become increasingly multi-dimensional, complex, and dynamic, not unlike the complex and divergent ways in which peace researchers operationalize the construct of peace (cf. Brock-Utne, 1989; Galtung, 1996; Rinehart, 1995).

Indeed, previous studies (for review see Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998) have demonstrated that older children and adolescents continue to include references to the absence of direct violence (i.e., negative peace) when they conceptualize peace, just as younger children do. In addition, adolescents enlarge their "cognitive repertoire" by including ideas about positive peace (e.g., respect, tolerance, democracies, and universal rights).

In short, our work suggests that children's growing ability to understand the complexity of peace issues is likely to be a universal phenomenon due to the child's increasingly sophisticated means of processing information. On the other hand, the content of their ideas about peace varies considerably, reflecting diversity, because children do not learn about peace and strategies to attain peace in a vacuum. Instead, they learn in particular cultural and historical contexts. Hence, when we look at children's conceptualizations across time and place, divergent meanings emerge and contextual diversity becomes our main interest (cf. Aspeslagh & Burns, 1996). By contextual diversity we mean that children's ideas and beliefs about peace and strategies to attain peace are

developed in varying contexts. For example, children in the Netherlands grow up in a context where memories of the Second World War and the celebration of peace are salient, while in Sweden, discourses about peace and war are relatively rare.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

From our perspective, children and adolescents are actively and continuously involved in the process of conceptualizing peace. Moreover, their conceptions of peace, while following a developmental course toward increasing complexity, are nuanced by the contexts within which children grow and develop. In some countries, for example, peace education and conflict resolution programmes are part of the school curriculum, while in countries like Liberia, Uganda, and El Salvador, children must face their “responsibility“ as child soldiers. In some places, children are prepared to become citizens by learning about democratic elections and their responsibility to influence political decisions; in other countries children are taught to kill their neighbors. Finally, in some countries children may perceive that they participate in peace processes by writing letters to heads of state, while their agemates in other countries participate in peace by demonstrating in the streets.

Because children’s conceptions of peace depend on context, their notions do not neatly conform to Western models of peace and the means to attain peace. For instance, while there has been a proliferation of programs to teach children conflict resolution skills in the West, the inductive approach we are employing would suggest a “one size fits all” approach might not easily be exported to children who are growing up in vastly different contexts (see also Pedersen in this volume). Moreover, in view of the increasing interdependency of the world, considerations of the context-sensitive nature of peace are likely to become more important in the future.

Because children's understanding of peace and strategies to attain peace are contextually informed, their views are good indices of the prevailing norms, values, and attitudes towards peace in their society (cf. Hakvoort, 1996). By listening to children, we can gain insights into the norms, values, and attitudes a particular society holds. Insights into the developmental substrates of children's ideas, combined with an understanding of how their conceptions vary across contexts, should help us assess the state of peace in the world and should give us some indication of its changing nature as we move through the twenty-first century.