Renewing Communities through Forgiveness Education: A Prospect for Peace

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Gandhi has said that if true peace is ever to be achieved in this world, if we are to make war against war, then we must begin with the children. Thomas Merton has said that we are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves. In other words, peace *out there* in the world is possible only when we have peace *inside of us* and that can take years to develop. It is sad to say, but few peace programs put their attention on young children and even fewer put the emphasis first on interior change. Fewer programs still actually evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches with children.

After almost a quarter-of-a-century of studying the moral virtue of forgiveness, I am convinced that forgiveness is the missing piece to the peace puzzle. Over a dozen social scientific studies conducted in our lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison demonstrate that as people forgive, they become less angry, depressed, and anxious, and more hopeful of their future. In other words, people become more peaceful within themselves, making the possibility of peace with others more likely. It is our contention that if we can educate a majority of students in a community in the fine art of forgiving , then that community is likely to become more peaceful in the decades to come as the children enter adulthood and apply forgiveness to family, work, and other community contexts.

Our program for peace, based on forgiveness education, is possibly one of the major answers to societal and individual unrest within communities beset by poverty and violence. Our approach is consistent with the understanding of forgiveness as a moral virtue. Forgiveness-as-moral-virtue is defined as an expression of mercy as the offended person offers the cessation of resentment and the unmerited gifts of compassion, beneficence, and love toward a person or persons who were unfair.

If a person is to become proficient in the exercise of this virtue, then he or she needs much practice expressing it. Starting in childhood then may be best as this affords for maximal practice. If a person is to grow in the expression of the virtue, then he or she might start with rudimentary expressions and then progress to more subtle and sophisticated expressions with age and practice, again pointing to the necessity of starting with children and advancing through the grade levels. If a person is to move as far toward the endpoint of that virtue's expression as possible, then he or she will need to be *educated* in the qualities of that virtue and by those who understand it and know how to teach it.

For these reasons, we thought it best to start forgiveness education with children by first training classroom teachers in the understanding and practice of forgiveness and by developing sound teacher curriculum guides so that each instructor has a common manual from which to work. In our case, we decided to begin in Belfast, Northern Ireland and in the central city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin because both communities have the challenge of poverty and violence.

In each community we began with first grade (Primary 3 in Belfast) classrooms because from a developmental perspective it is here that children begin to think logically, in terms of causes and consequences, and simple deductions. We decided to extend the development of the teacher guides through the end of secondary school, a 12-year project. Our expectations were a reduction in anger in the short run and an ability to dialogue more effectively with "the other side" more deeply and effectively once the students became adults.

The Teacher Workshops

To date our programs have been delivered by the classroom teacher, with the one exception of Gambaro et al. (in press), which employed the school counselor as forgiveness instructor. We constructed the program in this way to preserve the cultural and religious nuances within each region in which we work. Classroom teachers attend a workshop that can last up to one full day in which they first explore the term *forgiveness*. Because this term is pervasive across religions and cultures, and at the same time is not necessarily discussed and debated on a community level, teachers come to the workshops with a wide variety of beliefs about forgiveness. For example, some equate it with excusing an offense, others with reconciling with an offender, still others with simply letting go of angry feelings without offering moral goodness to the offending person. The workshop allows the teachers the time to discuss the term with others and to see how philosophers, from ancient times to the present, have defined the term.

Next, the teachers are asked to think of a person who has treated them unjustly and who has hurt them emotionally. We then have what we call a "guided private reflection" in which each teacher begins the process of forgiving this one person for one incident. We use the book *Forgiveness Is a Choice* (Enright, 2001) as the manual in the guided reflection. Each teacher is given a copy of the book so that he or she can continue the forgiveness process following the completion of the workshop. The guided private reflection has no group discussion as we want the exercise to be private. Each teacher is free to discuss concerns with the workshop facilitators in a more private setting.

We ask the teachers to begin forgiving someone prior to teaching forgiveness to their students because we reason that those who have forgiven make the best teachers of forgiveness. Consider an example. If one were choosing a soccer coach for young children, everything else being equal, would the one who has played the game be chosen over the one who never has played it? The one who has played the game has an insider's knowledge. "First forgive, then teach about forgiveness" seems to be a reasonable approach.

Following the guided private reflection, we introduce the teachers to the various forgiveness curriculum guides and related materials. We turn to a description of one of those guides now.

The Forgiveness Curriculum Guides

To date, we have constructed teacher curriculum guides from Kindergarten through grade 8. Only grade one will be our focus here. The teacher guide for this grade level lays a foundation for the children by introducing them to the basic moral foundations of forgiveness (Knutson & Enright, 2002). When a person forgives, he or she incorporates at least four moral virtues into the action and at least one central form of reasoning. The four virtues are kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love. The central form of reasoning is inherent worth, the idea that all people naturally possess infinite value, not because of what they do but because of who they are. Because each person is so valuable he or she does not have to earn kindness, respect, generosity, or moral love. Others are free to give these as they wish; it is their free moral choice.

Children learn about these five moral qualities through picture books and films. Dr. Seuss' books are at the center of the first-grade curriculum and his book *Horton Hears a Who* is the centerpiece of all of the materials. We chose Horton because of his oft repeated wisdom: "A person's a person no matter how small" because this idea captures well the concept of inherent worth.

The first-grade curriculum is divided into three parts. In Part 1, the children are introduced to stories which illustrate the five principles (inherent worth, kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love) apart from forgiveness issues. In other words, the children do not yet focus on injustices and the solution to them, but learn about the principles. In Part 2, the children are now introduced to story characters who have been treated unjustly. The students see how the characters apply inherent worth to the one who acted unjustly. They see how the characters exercise the moral virtues of kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love toward an offending person. In Part 3, the children are asked, but only if each chooses to do so, to think about one person who has been unfair to them. They are challenged, again as their free choice to participate or not, to apply the five principles toward the person who was unjust. The exercises in Part 3 are private, as they were in the Guided Private Reflection for teachers in their workshop. Students are encouraged to discuss any issue with the teacher if the student is uncomfortable or confused.

Throughout the curriculum, the children are repeatedly instructed on the difference between forgiving and reconciling. They are taught that they can exercise the moral virtue of forgiveness toward someone who is acting in a bullying way, but then they can and should take action, such as informing a teacher, of that person's hurtful behavior. In other words, we build in protections for the children within the curriculum guides so that the students do not confuse forgiveness with related concepts. The children's safety is a primary concern in this curriculum.

Throughout the years, up to the end of high school, the curriculum gets progressively more challenging so that by the twelfth grade, the students are encouraged, if they so choose, to bring the principles of forgiveness to their community outside of school.

Scientific Findings on the Effectiveness of Forgiveness Education

Does this approach to forgiveness work? We must recall the short-term and the long-range goals. In the short run, it is our hope to reduce anger in the children. This we can assess. In the long-run, we are hoping to increase the quality of dialogue between previously contentious groups so that a deeper peace may pervade the society. This cannot be addressed for years to come.

Three studies in Milwaukee's central city (Holter et al., 2008) and two studies in Belfast, Northern Ireland have been reported to date (Enright et al., 2007). In the first study reported here, we randomized first-grade classrooms in Milwaukee to either an experimental condition in which the classroom teacher delivered the forgiveness curriculum or to a control condition in which the teacher waited one year before teaching forgiveness. Using t-test gain scores on the level of the child (not on the level of the classroom), we found that the experimental group decreased statistically significantly more in anger than the control group. From a clinical viewpoint, the experimental group started above the clinical cut-off for anger (Beck, Beck, & Jolly., 2001) and went closer to the average range following intervention (Holter et al., 2008). Anger reduction in the students following forgiveness instruction in grades 3 and 5 in Milwaukee and grades 1 and 3 in Belfast showed similar results. In each case, those receiving the instruction reduced significantly in anger. In all cases except grade 3 in Milwaukee, those receiving the instruction reduced in anger significantly more than the control group, which did not receive forgiveness instruction.

Given that the interventions were delivered by classroom teachers and not trained psychological professionals, this is a cause for hope. Significant results can be obtained within classrooms by instructors who are teaching forgiveness for the first time. It is further worth noting that that the results were generally comparable to those obtained on highly motivated adults who volunteered for their forgiveness therapy. In other words, even though the children gave their consent to be a part of these projects, we cannot expect them to be as motivated as adults who sought out the forgiveness experience and who approached the task with considerably higher cognitive complexity than the children.

A Challenge: Is This Approach Dangerous to Culture?

The scientific approach by itself is no justification for forgiveness education. Statistical significance does not answer the question of whether or not we *should* be doing this. Are there not dangers inherent with this approach? Perhaps the most serious objection is that forgiveness educators are altering a given culture. The criticism is this: We come into a culture with our bag of tricks and we are not even aware of the subtle changes, negative changes, which could be occurring as a result of our presence and the presence of forgiveness education. For example, forgiveness has its origin in spiritual philosophies. Might the introduction of forgiveness actually change a culture toward a more focused spiritual philosophy? What right do we have to do this?

We need to realize that our approach preserves the cultural and religious nuances of the society by having the children's own teachers do all of the instruction. Second, culture is never a static term. Part of the essence of cultures is that they are dynamic and so they are always changing. To suggest that an introduction of a new way with forgiveness might change a culture which should not change is to misunderstand culture.

Expansion of the Forgiveness Education Programs

We consider our initial efforts in Belfast and Milwaukee's central city as reported here only a beginning. We began this work in schools in the 2002-2003 academic year and during the 2009-2010 school year we worked in approximately 50 classrooms in Belfast with a total of more than 1,250 students learning about forgiveness and 77 classrooms in Milwaukee with a total of approximately 1,925 students in the program.

Our goal now is to expand the program so that a significant number of students in both communities have the opportunity to learn about forgiveness on an annual basis for up to 12 years. To accomplish this goal, our needs are as follows: a) a part-time recruiter in each community to visit schools to introduce the principals and teachers to this scientifically-tested program; b) continue to develop the curriculum up to grade 12; c) train effective workshop leaders; d) purchase the necessary materials for the first year for new classrooms; and e) continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs by asking teachers about their experiences.

We would like to see at least two generations of students (a 24-year vision) introduced to forgiveness with an increase in the developmental challenges for the students each year. By the end of secondary school, the students should have a strong foundation in understanding the term forgiveness, know the nuances of forgiving and receiving forgiveness, and have insights into how to give back to the community. It is our hope that they might consider giving back to the community by introducing others to the concept of forgiveness and its application within friendship, family, and community groups.

Might these students, once they are adults, begin to see that all people possess inherent worth? Might it be a contradiction to one's own identity to disparage people from "the other side" just because of where they were born, what they believe, or the color of their skin? Forgiveness is a virtue hard to exercise and challenging to implement in the face of injustice, but one that offers a concrete hope for peace. Perhaps it is time to bring forgiveness education into the hearts of even more children and through them to the community.

References

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