

# Empathy for Interpersonal Peace: Effects of Peace Education on Empathy Skills\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of Peace Education Program on the sixth grade elementary students' empathy levels. The research was carried out using pretest – posttest control group quasi-experimental design. While Peace Education Program was applied on experiment group; control group has not been provided any treatment. The study group included 281 students; 158 (56.23%; girls n= 84, 53.17%; boys n= 74, 46.83%) in the experiment and 123 (43.77%; girls n= 57, 46.35%; boys n= 66, 53.65%) in the control group. In the research, Index of Empathy for Children and Personal Information Form were used as measuring instruments. Research was conducted on sixth grade classes of two different elementary schools which are located in Menemen town of İzmir in 2010 - 2011 academic year. Research results indicated that Peace Education Program implemented on experiment group was effective in increasing students' empathy levels. Compared to experiment and control groups in terms of gender, both girl and boy students' empathy levels increased in favor of experiment group.

## Key Words

Peace, Peace Education, Conflict Resolution, Negotiation Skills, and Empathy.

Violent acts between people are gradually increasing in social life. Based on news from the printed and visual press along with research data (Deveci, Karadağ, & Yılmaz, 2008; Dilekmen, Ada, & Alver, 2011; Türnüklü & Şahin, 2004; Uz Baş & Topçu Kabasakal, 2010), it can be stated that violent acts between students at schools have also increased in recent years in parallel with the social life. In recent years, “*peace education*” has started to attract the attention of researchers carrying out studies to prevent student violence at schools. Following the statement of the

theoretical foundations of peace education by prominent theorists such as Harris (1988), Reardon (1988), Brocke-Utne (1989), and Galtung (1996), efforts to establish inner peace as well as interpersonal, intergroup and international peace have increased. Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) have stated that the focal point of peace education should be schools and have grouped the reasons for this statement under four main headings: (i) the obligation to continue school ensures that all of society is reached; (ii) schools have the required environment and resources to carry out peace education; (iii) younger children are open to new information and ideas and (iv) information given in schools are trusted. Whereas cognitive gains are given particular importance in formal education; peace education is necessary in schools due to the fact that values such as democracy, human rights and critical awareness are not sufficiently dealt with (Harber & Sakade, 2009). Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2005a) also emphasize that in order to build and maintain sustainable peace, children should acquire various skills and values at schools starting from early ages.

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In order to understand the objective, content, scope and principles of peace education, it is primarily required that one knows how the concept of peace is handled. Galtung (1969, 1996) has defined the concept of peace in two dimensions as *positive peace* and *negative peace*. *Negative peace* means absence of violence whereas *positive peace* reflects the social justice condition in which conflicts have been transformed creatively without resorting to violence. Similar to Galtung's definition, it is seen that many researchers today (e.g., Harris, 2002; Harris & Morrison, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2005b, 2010; Opatow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005; Perkins, 2002; Reardon, 1988) consider peace not only as the prevention of violence but also as remission, respect, cooperation, tolerance to the beliefs, skin colors, ethnic and national identities of others, justice, harmony and equality. Hence, the topic that peace education emphasizes today is not only the attainment of negative peace but also the attainment of positive peace as well.

Harris and Morrison (2003) indicated that peace education in which the causes of violence and its alternatives are taught ensures not only a philosophical dimension such as love, compassion, respect and nonviolence but also a process including listening, reflection, problem solving, cooperation and conflict resolution skills. The definition by UNICEF of peace education is as follows:

The process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior change that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level (Fountain, 1999, p. 1).

One of the most important skills that need to be developed at schools in order for students to understand the value of peace and internalize it is empathy. The literature review shows that empathy is generally defined as the affective response process of individuals in consistency with the experienced situation (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 2000). Deutsch (2006) has stated in a definition of empathy that it includes the process of understanding the perspective of other individuals in addition to their emotions. Salomon (2002) indicates that goal of peace education carried out at regions of intractable conflict is to help participants gain the skills of empathy to be able to look from the perspective of "other" and develop an understand-

ing. Thus, the acquirement or the development of the skill of empathy by the students at schools plays an important role in ensuring that students understand the emotions and perspectives of each other, display prosocial and moral behaviors and control their antisocial behaviors such as aggression etc. (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). In literature, results of correlational researches examining the relationship between variables of empathy and conflict resolution skills indicated that levels of empathic tendency were positively related to problem solving skills while aggressiveness tendencies were negatively correlated (de Wied, Branje, & Meheus, 2007; Rehber & Atıcı, 2009). However, in order to determine more conclusively the causal nature of these relationships, the more experimental studies are needed. In that context, it was expected that current study would contribute to fill this gap in the literature.

It is seen that school based preventive peace education was used in a limited number of studies in our country in order to prevent student violence, transform interpersonal conflicts using constructive – peaceful methods and build a peaceful environment. In this study, first of all, an education program sensitive to the realities of the society, cultural elements, regional requirements as well as the needs of the school has been developed. Peace education program was applied to all primary education sixth grade students in an elementary school located at a low socio-economical region and its effects on the empathy levels of the students were examined.

## Method

### Research Design

In the research, pretest – posttest control group quasi-experimental design was used. Since true experimental design can hinder educational activities due to the random selection into groups, quasi-experimental designs in which random selection is not required are frequently used designs in educational researches and guidance and psychological counseling studies (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1997; Lodico, Spaulding, & Vouegtle, 2010). Since in this study, the assignment of sixth grade students who currently continue a certain class to new groups is not possible, a quasi-experimental design was used. Peace education program composed of twenty four sessions were applied on experiment group two hours in a week during 2010 – 2011 school year. On the other hand, control group has not been provided any treatment.

### Study Group

The research was carried out on the sixth grades of two primary schools under the Ministry of National Education at the Menemen town of Izmir. The basic common features of the schools in which the study was carried out: they are located at a region of low socio-economical level and violent acts are frequently seen among students. During the 2010-2011 academic year, the sixth grade students of the school at which the first author was working as a psychological counselor were appointed as the experiment group whereas the sixth grade students of the other school were appointed as the control group. In total, five out of the classes were in the experiment group whereas the remaining five were in the control group. In order not to decrease the internal validity of the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007), the experiment group was selected from one school whereas the control group was selected from another school. The total number of students in the experiment group was 158 (female  $n=84$ , 53.17%; male  $n=74$ , 46.83%) whereas the total number of students in the control group was 123 (female  $n=57$ , 46.35%; male  $n=66$ , 53.65%) and all were from the sixth grade of primary schools.

**Independent Variable:** The independent variable of this study was the “Peace Education Program”. Relevant theories in literature and similar programs (e.g., Bettmann & Tiven, 2004; Brander et al., 2008; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2008; Goldstein, 1997; Güner, 2007; Hallak, 2001; Kreidler, 1997; Kurt & Sertel, 2006; Kuzucu, 2007; Özmen, 2006; Schrumpf, Crawford, & Bodine, 2007; Smith, 2001; Taştan, 2006; Türnüklü, Kaçmaz, İkiz, & Balci, 2009) were used by the researchers during the development of this program. The requirements and cultural properties of the region of the study were also considered during the development of the peace education program. The peace education program consists of four main parts and covers a total of 24 classroom hours. These are; understanding the nature of peace and violence (7 hours), elements that prevent and support peace (5 hours), basic skills for a peaceful individual (7 hours) and negotiation as a method of conflict resolution (5 hours).

### Instrument

**Index of Empathy for Children:** The “Index of Empathy for Children” developed by Bryant (1982) and adapted into Turkish by Yüksel (2004) consists of 20 items. The increase of the score obtained from the two point Likert type scale (I agree – I don’t ag-

ree) signifies the increase of the level of empathy; whereas the decrease in the total value obtained signifies the decrease of the level of empathy.

Bryant (1982 as cited in Yüksel, 2004) determined the reliability coefficient of the scale using test-retest method by applying the scale to the first, fourth and seventh grade students with a two week interval. As a result of statistical analyses, the researcher reported that the Pearson Correlation Coefficients for first, fourth and seventh grades as .54, .81 and .83 respectively. Also, the researcher determined Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficients as .54 for first year classes, .68 for fourth year classes and .79 for seventh year classes.

Bryant (1982 as cited in Yüksel, 2004) carried out convergent validity studies for the validity of the Index of Empathy for Children. To this end, the Index of Empathy for Children was used with the Empathy Scale developed by Feshbach and Roe on first year classes. A statistically significant relationship was determined between the two scales. The Empathy Scale developed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) was used for seventh year classes. A statistically significant relationship was determined between the two scales.

In the reliability study carried out by Yüksel (2004) in Turkey, the reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated by using the test-retest method and applying the scale on 89 fourth year students with a two week interval. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient calculated using the test-retest method was determined as .69. The internal consistency of the scale applied on 237 fourth year students was determined as .70. Yüksel conducted descriptive factor analysis in order to determine the construct validity of the scale and determined a single factor structure. Within the scope of this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated and determined as .76.

### Process

The study was started at two different elementary schools during the 2010 – 2011 academic year on September which is the starting month of the academic year and was finished on December. Briefing seminars for the administrators, teachers and personnel of the experiment group were organized during the first two weeks of September which is appointed as a seminar period for teachers. During the first week of school, a briefing seminar was held for the student parents and their informed consents were taken regarding the study to be carried out.

Students in the experiment and control groups were subject to pretest application during the second week of school. Peace education program was applied on experiment group for a period of 12 weeks with two hours every week. During the study, the activities within the program were carried out by the researcher in the experiment group since the first author of this study was also the psychological counselor of that school. Role playing, discussion, pair and group works, brainstorming and case study methods were used during the activities. The students in the experiment and control groups were subject to posttest one week after the peace education training given to the experiment group was completed.

### Data Analysis

Pretest – posttest control group quasi-experimental design was used in this study along with One Factor Covariance Analysis in which the pretest is controlled as a covariate variable to determine whether the experimental intervention is effective or not. It has been determined that missing values were not more than 5%. In addition, normality of sampling distributions, homogeneity of variance, and homogeneity of regression slopes suggested as assumptions of ANCOVA (Field, 2009; Green & Salkind, 2008; Green, Salkind, & Akey, 1999; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) have been examined and reported. When the Compromise Power Analysis which can be used either before or after the study (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) was calculated for the one-way covariance analysis, eccentricity parameter  $\lambda$  was calculated as 16.94, Critical F value as 1.06 and statistical power as .66. It has been observed that the F values reached in the analyses are higher than the critical value.

### Results

When the pretest measurements of the experiment and control groups were examined, it was observed that the empathy level of the female students in the experiment group ( $\bar{x}_j = 13.94$ ) was quite similar to the empathy levels of the female students in the control group ( $\bar{x}_j = 13.36$ ). The same similarity was determined for the empathy average scores of the male students in the experiment group ( $\bar{x}_i = 11.56$ ) with the empathy pretest average scores of the male students in the control group ( $\bar{x}_j = 11.47$ ) and the total pretest empathy average scores of the experiment group ( $\bar{x}_i = 12.80$ ) with the average pretest

scores of the control group ( $\bar{x}_j = 12.22$ ). When the similarity levels of the pretest measurements for females, males and total participants were examined by independent samples t-test, it was determined that there were no significant differences between the pretest measurements of the experiment and control groups for females ( $t_{134} = 1.168, p = .245$ ), males ( $t_{138} = .212, p = .832$ ) and in total ( $t_{270} = 1.464, p = .144$ ); in other words it has been determined that the groups have similar empathy levels in the pretest measurements. In addition, it was clear that the female, male and total adjusted posttest means were greater for the experiment group in comparison with those of the control group. Hence, ANCOVA has been used to examine whether the differences between adjusted posttest means of experiment and control groups were significant or not.

According to the results of the Levene test which was used in order to examine homogeneity of variances which is one of the assumptions of covariance analysis, the following results have been obtained for females ( $F_{1,131} = .168, p = .683$ ), males ( $F_{1,134} = 1.233, p = .269$ ) and total ( $F_{1,269} = 3.317, p = .070$ ). Lastly, it has been determined that the homogeneity of regression was achieved for females ( $F_{1,133} = 2.438, p = .121$ ), males ( $F_{1,136} = 3.253, p = .074$ ) and total ( $F_{1,267} = .534, p = .465$ ). When it was examined whether there are statistically significant differences between adjusted posttest means or not in order to examine the effects of the peace education program on the empathy levels of sixth grade elementary school students, it was observed that the empathy pretest average scores were significant predictors for empathy posttest average scores for females ( $F_{1,132} = 8.035, p = .005$ ), males ( $F_{1,132} = 16.796, p = .000$ ) and total ( $F_{1,132} = 35.378, p = .000$ ) regardless of whether it is the experiment or the control group. It has been determined that there were statistically significant differences for females ( $F_{1,132} = 12.282, p = .001$ ), males ( $F_{1,135} = 43.990, p = .000$ ) and total ( $F_{1,268} = 52.902, p = .000$ ) between the adjusted posttest means of experiment and control groups.

Contrast analyses have been carried out in order to compare adjusted posttest means of experiment and control groups. According to the contrast analyses results, adjusted posttest means of female students in the experiment group ( $\bar{Y}_i = 14.77$ ) was significantly greater than adjusted posttest means of the female students in the control group ( $\bar{Y}_j = 12.76$ ) (Contrast estimation = 2.047,  $p = .000$ , 95%CI = .921-3.173). It has also been determined that adjusted posttest means of male students in the experiment group ( $\bar{Y}_i = 14.39$ ) was significantly gre-

ater than adjusted posttest means of male students in the control group ( $\bar{Y}_i= 10.53$ ) (Contrast estimation= 3.815,  $p= .000$ , 95%CI= 2.685-4.945). Lastly, it has been determined that in total the empathy adjusted posttest means of students in the experiment group ( $\bar{Y}_j= 14.43$ ) was significantly greater than the empathy adjusted posttest means of the students in the control group ( $\bar{Y}_i= 11.48$ ) (Contrast estimation= 2.952,  $p= .000$ , 95%CI= 2.153-3.751). It has been observed that the empathy adjusted posttest means of female students, male students and total were between the 95% confidence interval and thus the results were consistent.

It has been calculated that in total the explained change for female students was 1652.40 (Total sum of squares,  $KT_T$ ) and that 240.91 units of this change were explained by experimental effect (Model sum of squares,  $KT_D$ ) whereas the unexplained changes were 1411.49 units (Residual sum of squares,  $KT_A$ ); it has been calculated that the explained change for female students was 1057.38 ( $KT_T$ ) and that 715.82 units of this change were explained by experimental effect ( $KT_D$ ) whereas the unexplained changes were 341.56; and it has been calculated that in total the explained change was 3991.45 ( $KT_T$ ) and that 1057.38 units of this change were explained by experimental effect (Model sum of squares,  $KT_D$ ) and that the unexplained change was 2579.96 units. When eta square ( $\eta^2$ ) values were examined, it was observed that regardless of pretest scores, being in other groups explains 9% of the change for female students, 25% for male students and 17% for total. Thus, according to the effect size values it can be stated that peace education affects empathy level of male students more.

## Discussion

The results of the study indicated that the peace education program put into practice for sixth grade elementary school students was effective in increasing the empathy levels of students. It has been determined that the empathy levels of students in the experiment group which received the peace education were significantly greater than that of the students in the control group. Similarly, a gender based examination also showed that the empathy level increased for both the male and female students in the experiment group. These results indicated that peace education program, which was the independent variable of this study, was effective in increasing the empathy skills of students.

Empathy skill which prevents marginalization, ostracizing from society, portraying as an enemy

and violence will increase cooperation and altruist behavior (Deutsch, 2006). When parents and educators become role models and help students gain skills of empathy and obtain perspectives, positive conflict solution will have been implemented as well (Sandy, 2006). It is also observed in literature that the importance of empathy skill is emphasized for the resolution of conflicts between groups besides interpersonal conflicts. Stephan and Finlay (1999) emphasize that when empathy skill is used effectively in intergroup contact programs, individuals will understand the emotions, thoughts and perspectives of people from other groups much better. According to these researchers, acquiring empathy skill decreases violent behavior for members of both groups whenever there is a conflict between groups while increasing prosocial behavior. Similarly, according to Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami (2003), implementation of intergroup contact in regions of intractable conflict will increase the empathy levels of group members thus decreasing intergroup conflicts and prejudices. In conclusion, it is observed that in order to transform interpersonal or intergroup conflicts in a constructive manner and to instill a culture of peace, prevention interventions should start at schools especially for younger age groups. In order to create a peaceful school environment, an indirect approach should be used and students should be taught constructive conflict resolution methods along with empathy skills.

It is observed in the literature that the results of experimental studies aiming to increase empathy skills (Genç, 2006; Malhotra & Liyanage, 2005; Shechtman, Wade, & Khoury, 2009; Türnüklü, Kaçmaz, Gürlü et al., 2009) are in accordance with the results of this study. The effect of peace education program on the empathy skills of both female and male students was examined separately and significant results were obtained for both groups in favor of the experiment group. In the literature, it is determined that whereas conflict resolution programs (Türnüklü, Kaçmaz, Gürlü et al., 2009) were effective in increasing the empathy skills of males; the same effect has not been determined for females. In this regard, the fact that the empathy skills in this study have increased for both female and male students proves the effectiveness of this study.

In the study, it has been observed that the empathy level score averages of female students in both the experiment and control groups were greater than those of the male students. When the literature was reviewed, it was determined that the empathy levels of females were greater than the empathy levels of

males in many studies (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Mestre, Samper, Frias, & Tur, 2009; Rueckert & Naybar, 2008). When an effect size comparison was made, it was determined that the peace education program implemented for the experiment group affected the empathy level of males more. A similar result was obtained in the study carried out by Türnüklü, Kaçmaz, Gürlü et al. (2009) and it was observed that the empathy skill of males developed more than that of the females.

In conclusion, in order to transform interpersonal conflicts by peaceful methods, students should be taught to realize violence and its causes from an early age and should learn about alternative conflict resolution methods while acquiring the required skills. At this point, it is thought that the implementation of peace education programs at schools will enable the spreading of interpersonal, intergroup and international peace in the long term. The development of peace education programs suited to different classes in future studies and the evaluation of their effectiveness may provide alternative methods and approaches to the solution of problems in the field while making important contributions to the literature.

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