

Israel's Peace Factory Produces a Rare Commodity – Hope by Wendy Elliman

(IPS) Jerusalem opened a new factory this past summer – the first of its kind in Israel and one radically different from any existing industry anywhere else.

“It’s a factory in which the product is hope and the raw material is children,” says Alan Freeman, Jerusalem Foundation vice president for overseas coordination. It was Freeman who encountered the prototype of the remarkable interactive Peace Factory at a March 2005 conference and encouraged the Jerusalem Foundation (in partnership with the Bloomfield Science Museum, the European-based Evens Foundation and the Olive Stone Trust) to bring it from its Netherlands birthplace to Israel.

Last June, prior to the Factory’s October 2007 launch, pilot groups of Jewish and Arab 5th- and 6th-graders donned bright blue, orange and yellow construction hats to test the factory ‘building site’ at Jerusalem’s Bloomfield Science Museum. Enveloped by the sights and sounds of a working plant, the youngsters operated the factory ‘machinery’ – its tolerance monitor, violence wheel, prejudice balance, lie detector and scapegoat mill – exploring limits to tolerance, rules of freedom and different ways of resolving conflict in the Israeli context. Their overall verdict: “Cool!”

The Israeli version of the Peace Factory differs somewhat from the original created by the Dutch non-profit organization Peace Education Projects (PEP) – as do the versions taken to Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Russia and Northern Ireland, as each is adapted to address local cultures and social conflicts. To adapt the exhibit to Israel and specifically to Jerusalem, with its high levels of intolerance and mistrust between religious and secular, wealthy and indigent, Arab and Jew, its sponsors brought on board Jewish Israeli psychologist and conflict resolution specialist Danny Fridberg and Palestinian Israeli art expert and art historian Rula Khoury.

“Some of the adaptations we made were obvious,” says Fridberg. “In some of the existing exhibitions, for example, teaching tolerance of immigrants is emphasized as in Israel this is a particularly prevalent problem. Our focus is more on the interpersonal.”

Fridberg and Khoury demarcated four main themes for Israel’s variation of the Peace Factory: the equality and uniqueness of each child; the different ways in which individuals view the same events; conflict management in schools; and the rights of the child. Bringing on board principals from religious and secular Jewish

and Arab schools in Jerusalem, pedagogues, Jerusalem Foundation and Museum representatives and the Dutch creators of the exhibit, they brainstormed about how to bring together these themes, transmit the key messages and make the end result coherent, consistent, appropriate and accessible.

“We had to tailor the exhibit to the different levels and backgrounds of the 300 or so classes [10,000 thousand 11- and 12-year-olds] booked to visit the exhibit during its October 2007 to October 2009 run,” says Khoury. “In some instances, we’re addressing not only differences but diametric opposites in perspective. Arab schools, for example, with their school uniforms and strict discipline, stress similarity, whereas the Jewish schools focus on individuality. Our solution has been to present both in a neutral way.”

How are topics such as similarity vs. individuality, tolerance and acceptance, freedom and its restrictions presented?

“Youngsters enter the factory in pairs, dressed for the part and carrying clipboards and pencils,” says Fridberg. “The exhibit is laid out as a labyrinth, with fifteen workstations along the way. Each pair starts at a different station to give the kids time to work through each idea.”

The aim is to make youngsters think for themselves; to ‘research’ each issue rather than have the information transferred. “So we have wheels and cogs, monitors, scales and selectors on which the young visitors make choices, perform exercises and test opinions, with their ideas and responses weighed and measured,” continues Fridberg. “They’ll learn, for example, that tolerance is a valuable asset, but has its limits... that freedom can’t be unrestricted because the freedom of one individual can restrict that of others... and that conflicts can be resolved in more than one way. One ongoing emphasis is on how individuals, through their own values and attitudes, behavior and actions, directly influence their society.”

An accompanying booklet, along with preparation and follow-up in the classroom, are designed to increase the impact of the exhibition long after the youngsters have had their morning’s fun at the museum as well as turn their teachers into mediators and partners in learning.

“Thinking more seriously about tolerance and the acceptance of others, examining one’s own actions and beliefs, are first steps in making peace,” says Alan Freeman. “These are tools that the Peace Factory will help youngsters acquire and which we expect will be important to them for the rest of their lives.”