Chapter 2

The Politics of Trauma in Education

In Erich Marie Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul, the main character, a German soldier during World War I, talks to a soldier he has stabbed and held in his arms until his death.

Comrade, I did not want to kill you . . . But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony—Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? (1982, p. 223)

Paul’s words echo the destructive ethos of conflict: dehumanization of the opponent; the *us* and *them* mentality; the systematic cultivation of hatred for the *enemy*. Dehumanization, the process by which people are viewed as less than human, is a process accompanied by a wide range of negative emotions toward them, such as contempt, hatred, or fear. The readers can feel Paul’s unequivocal regret for not accepting the Other as human until it is too late. In this way, Paul maps the process of *rehumanization* (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004), when he *empathizes* with the enemy and finally sees him in human terms. The major function of empathy is imagining the particular perspective of the Other—that is, realizing that the Other is like me, you, and him. Finding commonality through identification with the enemy is
perhaps the most difficult and yet profound step in the rehumanization of the Other.

The emotional effects of group conflict and trauma on individuals and large groups and the prospects of healing are significant concerns for educators in conflict-ridden societies (Danesh, 2006; Salomon & Nevo, 2002). Conflicts deeply involve society members and result in the construction of a *conflictive ethos* (Bar-Tal, 2000) that provides the dominant affective orientation to the society. This affective ethos of conflict includes particular perceptions, emotions, beliefs, and attitudes—for example, pride about the in-group, hatred about the adversary group, and unwillingness for any intergroup relations—all of which must change for *reconciliation* to occur (Kriesberg, 1998; Lederach, 1997; Rothstein, 1999). Reconciliation refers to a societal-cultural process in which new emotions and beliefs that encompass respect, coexistence, and peace are formed about an adversary (Bar-Tal, 2000). The ideal of reconciliation in conjunction with the emotional effects of conflict and trauma raises a question that has been largely ignored in the education literature. Can (and should) educators work to contribute toward the goal of reconciliation when conflict and trauma have a social and political manifestation that is larger than the sum of traumatized students and teachers? If so, how is this possible—politically, pedagogically, and emotionally?

This chapter analyzes how the politics of trauma perpetuate conflict through escalations in fear, resentment, and hatred and thus pose a great challenge for educators who want to cultivate empathy and reconciliation in their curriculum and pedagogy. In general, the theme of politics of emotions emphasizes that emotions are not private or interior states, but they are crucial to the formation of power relations and the operation of social norms in everyday life contexts (Lupton, 1998; Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990). This does not mean that emotions do not involve subjects but rather that what characterizes emotions is the lack of individual residence and their involvement in relations of power (Ahmed, 2004). For example, as shown by various scholars, the work that emphasizes the *individual* perspectives of trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear, resentment, and hatred) has disregarded the *collective* dimensions of those emotions (Biton & Salomon, 2006; Fierke, 2002; Svašek, 2005; Volkan, 1997; White, 2000). The collective memory of fear, hatred, victimization, and dehumanization becomes a powerful symbol and an effective tool to strengthen the existing conflicting ethos (Fisher, 1997).

Consequently, I argue, when the emotional elements of the politics of trauma are not accounted for in peace education efforts, they