



PEACE PLAYERS

PROVEN IMPACT

**Long-term research
into the impact of
PeacePlayers Middle East**

*Including a Randomized Control
Trial and other mixed methods*

PEACEPLAYERS - MIDDLE EAST: TRANSFORMING DIVIDED COMMUNITIES THROUGH SPORT

Since 2006, PeacePlayers Middle East (PP-ME) has used the game of basketball to bridge divides, change perceptions and develop leaders among thousands of Palestinian and Israeli youth in Israel and the West Bank. PP-ME is a part of the global PeacePlayers network, a movement of young people around the world working together to create peace and equity in their societies and beyond.

THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT: A NEVERENDING CYCLE?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most seminal of our time. Complex challenges tied to history, religion, national identity and sovereignty are at the heart of almost a century of bloodshed. Even in the “mixed” city of Jerusalem, Palestinian and Israeli children live in separate neighborhoods, attend different schools and speak different languages. Without opportunities for contact, Palestinian and Israeli young people know each other only through the media, myths and stereotypes. This exacerbates hatred and fear, undermining the potential for a sustainable peace.

CONTACT THEORY AND THE PEACEPLAYERS MODEL

PeacePlayers’ program model reflects the spirit of Contact Theory, pioneered by Gordon Allport (1964), which posits that, under certain conditions, intergroup contact provides a powerful tool to transform conflict between hostile groups.

PeacePlayers’ program integrates the conditions identified in Contact Theory to be important for interaction to translate into impact: cooperation on “superordinate” (or shared) goals - through sport - and long-term, frequent interaction. Combined, these conditions can create an atmosphere that diffuses hatred and fear and fosters empathy and friendship.



RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL: THE GOLD STANDARD IN IMPACT MEASUREMENT

A Randomized Control Trial (RCT) is a type of scientific experiment in which participants are randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. An RCT is the only way to prove that any given outcome is the result of an intervention (in this case PeacePlayers' program), ruling out other possible explanations for the results.

A DEARTH OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

To date, there has been limited research on the impact of intergroup contact in the intractable conflict setting. In fact, there has only been one similar RCT study, which focused on a mixed Christian-Muslim soccer team in post-ISIS Iraq (Mousa, 2020). The study showed that contact had no effect on the players' attitudes toward one another, and that behavior changes occurred only on the field. Without adequate research, we do not know if intergroup contact translates into real-world impact.

THE PEACEPLAYERS RCT: A GROUNDBREAKING STUDY

In 2012, Dr. Ruth Ditzmann (Hertie School) and Dr. Cyrus Samii (New York University) invited PeacePlayers to take part in a groundbreaking research evaluation. The 8-year study included more than 800 Palestinian and Israeli participants and utilized a fusion of research methods: a pilot study; an annual general survey; and a randomized control trial (RCT), implemented over multiple years.

Combined, these methods proved what we have long recognized: **PeacePlayers' young leaders become active ambassadors for peace in their communities. As a result of sustained participation, they acquire the positive attitudes, personal resources and motivation needed to influence their peers.**

“ PPI truly wants to understand the causal impact of its program on a wide range of ambitious outcomes, many more far-reaching than is typical in program evaluations. To participate in our research, PPI has to commit a substantial amount of resources. By doing so, PPI not only rigorously evaluates its own program but also provides a great service to the global research community on conflict resolution and peacebuilding. ”

DR. RUTH DITLMANN

RCT RESULTS

They came looking for a basketball team. They found the power of peace.

Conflict resolution programs are often criticized for attracting people who are already in favor of reconciliation and neglecting more antagonistic individuals who need these programs the most. By using basketball as a primary educational tool, PeacePlayers minimizes this “selection bias,” providing an alternative motivation for joining. Indeed, the study proved just that: As Figure 1 demonstrates, more than 70% joined to play basketball versus less than 10% who joined to meet someone from the “other side.”

REASONS FOR JOINING

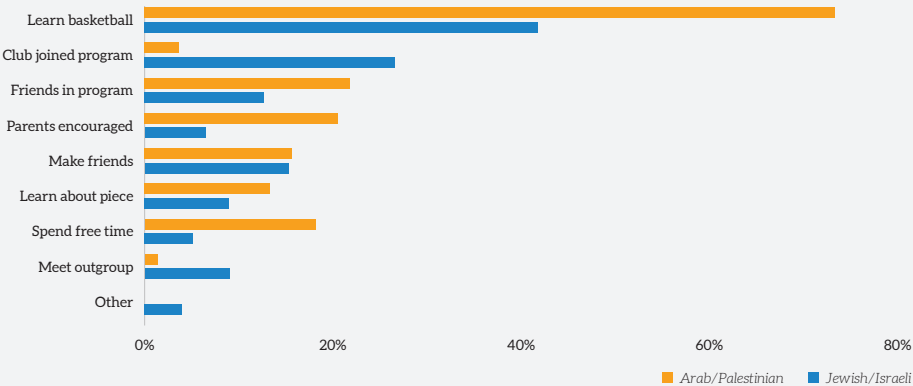


Figure 1: Reason for joining PeacePlayers





Reducing Prejudice: Changing the Status Quo of Separation and Fear

There is evidence that PeacePlayers activities can be powerful in reducing prejudice among youth participants. The longer and more frequent the interaction, the stronger this impact became.

Figures 2 and 3 show that PeacePlayers youth were more willing to interact with the “other side” following participation. Willingness to interact with the “out-group” included the willingness to visit each other’s homes, study in the same school and live in the same neighborhood. These examples of cross-community interactions are highly unusual and are even actively discouraged in the Palestinian-Israeli context.

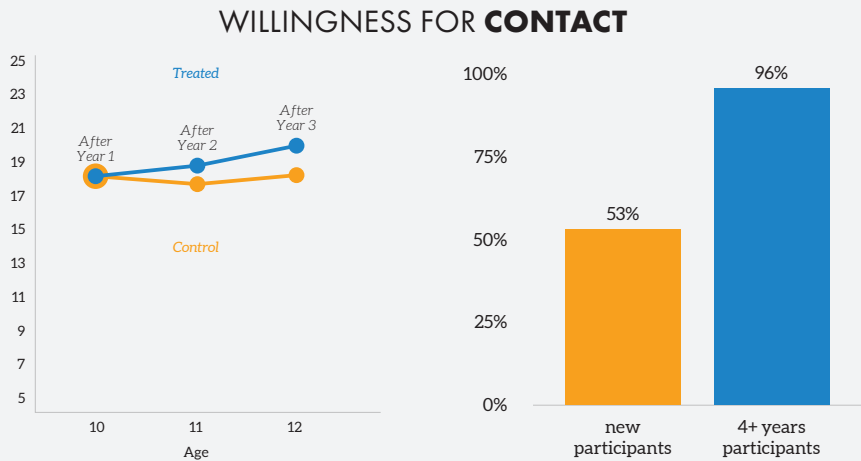
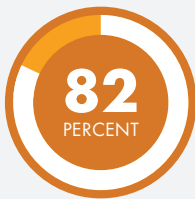


Figure 2 - A comparison of PeacePlayers participants and a control group.
Figure 3 - A comparison of new vs. veteran participants using additional data analyzed by PeacePlayers.

The majority of PPI participants were also more positive about the “outgroup” and were willing to cooperate across conflict lines following participation:



of participants reported being more positive about the outgroup.



of participants reported being more willing to work with the outgroup on common issues

“ When I meet new people, I don’t have to talk to them just from the way they look. I have to really meet them to know exactly. If we choose to judge people just from the first time, this might be the easier way. But you can choose not to, and try to make a difference with all this conflict we have. ”

JINAN
Age 19, Palestinian

Friendships across “Enemy Lines”

Survey results suggest that, overall, Arab and Jewish participants at PeacePlayers develop meaningful cross-community friendships over time. Adding to this finding, supplementary PeacePlayers data indicated that more than 96% of long-time participants made a friend from the “other” group, compared to 20% of new participants. This is a vital finding, since prior research has found friendship formation to be among the most important conditions necessary to reduce prejudice and stereotypes.

CROSS-COMMUNITY FRIENDSHIP

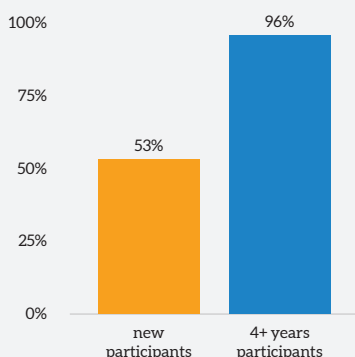


Figure 4: The presence of cross community friendships among new vs. veteran participants.

Advocating for Peace

Combined, the results illuminate various ways in which PeacePlayers youth can become active ambassadors for peace who use their voices and actions to advocate for reconciliation and equality, creating a significant ripple effect in the community at large. The pilot study demonstrated that as a result of participation in PeacePlayers' programs, youth engage in behaviors that mitigate conflict within their communities, including admonishing peers for discriminatory behavior and defending or advocating for the outgroup. Such behaviors have a substantial ripple effect, altering the very dynamics that perpetuate the conflict.



“ I started to stand up for people, not just Arabs, but everyone, be it because he is an Arab, because of his skin color, or anything. I can’t stay quiet anymore. And it’s only because of PeacePlayers. ”

TAMAR GREENBAUM

14 years old, Israeli



As a result of participation, youth also began to share the other side's perspective, an important step to creating empathy, reducing prejudice and adding nuance to the discourse on Palestinian-Israeli relations. In addition, more than 90% of participants talk about PeacePlayers with friends, family and other people they know, thereby extending impact to the wider community.

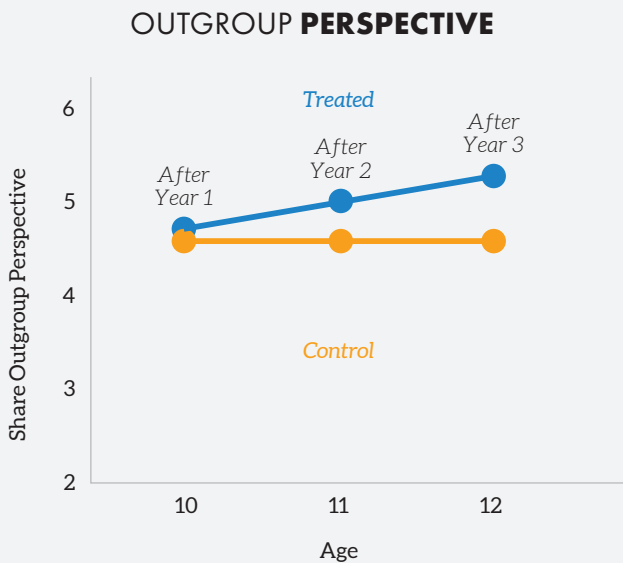


Figure 5: Sharing the out-group's perspective, a comparison of PeacePlayers participants and control group.

An example of this ripple effect can be found in words of Lea, the mother of a participant who spoke up against racist slurs that came from the stands during a game against an unaffiliated team:

“We had a big game in the league, and one of the parents from the other team got mad and started making racist comments, and my mom was at that game, and she got so mad at him. She started telling him:

“ You don’t talk to my girls like that. They are all my girls, and you won’t say anything like that to them. ”

HADAS

Jewish PeacePlayers alumna, recalls how her mother, Lea, stood up for her Arab teammates.

The study also provided some evidence that participants were more likely to intervene when a member of their own community commits an injustice toward the outgroup.

Personal Resources: Cultural Differences

The study found that members of PeacePlayers’ Leadership Development Program (LDP) are highly confident in their ability to serve as leaders. This is significant, since at least for Palestinian participants, personal resources, such as confidence, have been found to have far reaching effects for peacebuilding as well.

The earlier pilot study found that, among Palestinian participants, those who scored higher on personal resource measures, such as self-esteem, were more likely to engage in conflict mitigating behaviors, such as standing up for someone from the “other” group. In contrast, for Israeli participants, conflict mitigating behaviors were linked to positive attitudes toward the outgroup, and not personal resources. This is a valuable insight, since it demonstrates the need to consider cultural differences and power dynamics in both program design and in measurement design.

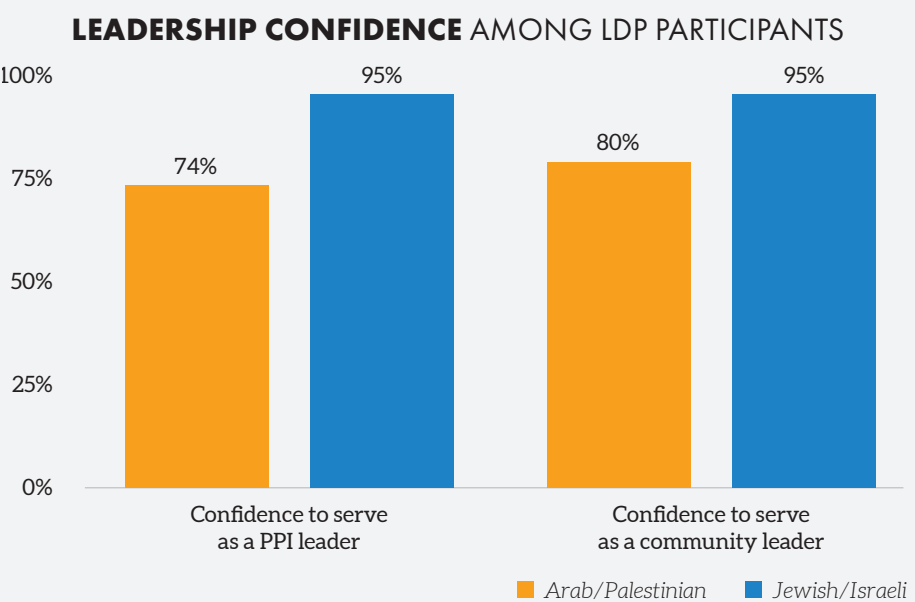


Figure 6: Leadership confidence among LDP participants.

Long-Term Impact: Creating Champions for Peace

Throughout the study, long-term participation led to increased positive outcomes. With this in mind, the study determined that participants in the PeacePlayers Leadership Development Program, which engages longtime participants in frequent and meaningful programming, have the capacity to act as ambassadors for peace. They possess less prejudice, higher personal resources and greater motivation to influence in-group peers.

*** This study was conducted under the auspices of New York University (NYU), and was partially funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), for funding the pilot and long-term study, respectively.*



TURNING FINDINGS INTO **ACTION**

The fact that the mixed methods evaluation of our program found positive improvements, even in the dire Palestinian-Israeli context, gives us confidence that **programs like ours can have a positive impact anywhere**. Knowing this, our priority is to leverage these findings to maximize PeacePlayers' programs around the world and to benefit the global peacebuilding community in general.

To this aim, our next steps include:

- Ensuring that proven aspects of our program model are integrated into PeacePlayers programs around the world and in the wider field of sport for development, through global partners.
- Ensuring that organizations explore cultural differences in impact and adapt programming to reflect these findings.
- Using results and conclusions to develop cross-cutting measures to evaluate PeacePlayers' impact globally.
- Extending measurement to alumni and the community at large in order to assess the full scope of our impact.



JOURNEY OF A PEACEPLAYER: A CASE STUDY

Duha, 25, is a Palestinian basketball player, coach and peacebuilder from East Jerusalem. Duha's journey has followed each step in PeacePlayers' leadership pipeline: at age ten, Duha began the program as a youth participant; at 14, she transitioned to youth leader in the Leadership Development Program; at 18 she earned coaching certification and joined the PeacePlayers staff as a coach, facilitator, and project manager. Between each of these stages, Duha progressed in her commitment, confidence and capacity to affect change. Duha's journey aptly demonstrates the findings of the study, with each measure illuminated in her story.

Duha is just one of **thousands of Israeli and Palestinian youth who have encountered PeacePlayers' leadership pipeline**. Each one of them, in their own way, has gone through a similar process - from fear and apprehension to tolerance, empathy and love. Armed with a newfound motivation and PeacePlayers' leadership and peacebuilding curriculum, youth transform from participants to leaders and community changemakers.

Reason for Joining

Duha grew up in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Safafa, a close-knit village sandwiched in between Jewish West Jerusalem and the Palestinian West Bank. Beit Safafa is literally in the center of the Palestinian divide, with the boundary between East and West Jerusalem running through the center of the neighborhood.

Duha joined PeacePlayers at age 10, when, through her school, she heard about a new basketball team for girls. Duha was close with her brothers, and watched as they left the house to play sports and engage in other extracurricular activities, while she was forced to stay home. As a curious girl who liked to try new things, Duha was excited about the chance to play basketball on a team. Until that point, Duha had only played basketball with her brothers, as athletic activities had not been available to girls in her community. At her first basketball practice, Duha recalls: "There was a little talking, introducing to PeacePlayers and the whole idea, but I really paid no attention. I really wanted just to get the ball and try to bounce, and just play a sport."

Soon, Duha learned more about PeacePlayers' mission: "After a while in PeacePlayers, we got deeper into the idea of Jews and Israelis together [with us]," Duha said. "I knew that this situation could be kind of risky for me to continue. Like, I really fell in love with the game, I fell in love with everything... And I knew after a while that it was going to be mixed teams and I was going to be meeting people I would never meet... And I remember that I hid that from my parents, for a while, actually."

Willingness for Contact

When Duha joined PeacePlayers at age 10, she had no existing interest to meet or interact with Israelis: "The idea of meeting the other side wasn't actually in my dictionary. Like, I never thought that it's possible. So many barriers: the language, the hatred."

"You know, I was young, and I didn't really know a lot about the conflict... I knew that we were supposed to hate each other, and we kill each other." Like many Palestinian young people, Duha's familiarity with the conflict didn't stem only from vague exposure to media and rumors - her feelings were informed by the devastating impact of the conflict on her own family.

Growing up, the closest supermarket to Duha's house was in a Jewish neighborhood, but she would always walk the extra distance to shop at the Palestinian store. On the few occasions when Duha's mother sent her on an errand to the Jewish supermarket, she remembers it as a fearful experience: "I was afraid that anyone would make eye contact or try to talk to me." These fears continued even after Duha had begun to meet Israeli young people through PeacePlayers programs. "I never thought that these [Israeli] girls that I meet are going to be like everyone else, and if I have good communication with these kids, that means I'm going to have great communication with everybody. So whatever happens in PeacePlayers, that's in PeacePlayers. The world is a different thing."

Over time, Duha began to generalize her experience in PeacePlayers to how she viewed the wider society. "What I think helped the most for me... is being aware that if there is going to be a change... I don't have to just sit there and wait for other Israelis to accept me....[I had] always counted on others doing these things - counted on others to accept me, counted on others to change... I think the first step that changed the whole thing is that I believed that I'm going to be the one to start - helping each other, accepting each other, being nice to each other, trying to understand each other."

Even though, in PeacePlayers, Duha quickly began to feel more comfortable interacting with Jewish Israelis on the basketball court, her willingness for contact at that stage did not transfer over to the outside world. "I would be super afraid, I would be terrified if I went to their house, and no chance that she would agree or that I would literally have her in my house."

Fast forward to today, Duha and her Jewish Israeli friends text each other, go to the mall together, sleep over at each other's homes, and are mainstays at each other's birthday parties and other celebrations. These days, Duha is even planning an international vacation together with her Israeli friend Toot. "This is something that I really wanted to do and I chose Toot because she's the friend that I would really enjoy [traveling] with... I know we met through PeacePlayers, but the friendship was more than just the court."

Prejudice Reduction

Like all Palestinian and Israeli new participants, Duha and her team spent several months focusing on basketball and conflict resolution training on their own before venturing into cross-border activities with Israeli youth. At Duha's first joint practice, with Jewish girls from the Israeli town of Beit Shemesh, Duha and her friends made a pact to stick together and present a united front against everyone else - only to discover upon arrival that they would split into mixed Israeli-Palestinian groups.

"They started dividing us into groups... and in this group they wanted us to communicate, like getting to know each other kind of questions, and they asked 'What are your hobbies?' So one of the Israeli girls said 'my hobbies were singing, swimming and dancing,' and these were the exact things that I wanted to say. When they translated [her answer from Hebrew to Arabic] I kind of looked at her and smiled and she looked at me and smiled... Maybe I didn't think much about it when that moment happened, but I remember when I went home and I was, you know, happy, and I said, oh my God, like, she's a girl, she's the same age, same class, and she plays basketball in PeacePlayers and she has the same hobbies. I was really impressed that there's these kinds of kids on the other side... That was something shocking for me. I thought maybe their interest would be, you know, being a soldier, killing Arabs, like literally."

Today, Duha's experiences have led her to feel a certain empathy even for those who don't accept her. "If I hear an Israeli hates me... I think he doesn't know. He never led my life, he never led [my Jewish best friend] Toot's life. It's pretty obvious that he would feel the same. It's not his fault. He is kind of blind, living his life."

Cross-Community Friendship

Duha stops shy at calling that early relationship with the Jewish Israeli girl she met at her first twinning a friendship. "Like I said 'Hi' and I waved to her, but I don't think we were friends. Maybe at that age, I called her my friend, but if I look at it now - no, she was just someone that I know... and it's enough for me to smile and just wave."

Duha considers Gal, a Jewish girl from Beit Shemesh who grew up in an Orthodox family, to be her first real friend across the Palestinian-Israeli divide. Duha and Gal first met at Twinnings, but their friendship really took off several years later, after both girls joined the Jerusalem All-Stars, trailblazing integrated Israeli-Palestinian teams that compete together in the official Israeli basketball league.

For Duha, the initial bridge she found, beyond basketball, was language. "In my Hebrew class in school, I was learning some words just to say to [Gal] in a game. I remember one day, we learned about what 'commercial' is [in Hebrew], and... I tried to include it in a



Photo by Roei Elman

conversation with her, so I can show her that I learned some things. And one day when we were sitting on the bench [at a game], and there was a window behind us and there was a lot of wind, and I told her 'I feel like we are in a shampoo commercial.' Because I just learned these words in class and I wanted to use them when I was with her. She smiled and we both laughed."

Still, Duha's friendship with Gal remained confined to the framework of PeacePlayers. They didn't visit each other's homes, they didn't meet on their own initiative. "We used to eat pizza and have some activities, but it's all been in PeacePlayers. Maybe I was in 10th grade, maybe I wasn't that young, but still, this thing, to go with her all around... I really didn't think it was possible."

Today, Duha uses no qualifiers when describing her Israeli friends from PeacePlayers. She doesn't feel the need to call them her Israeli friends. She doesn't feel the need to call them her PeacePlayers friends. For her, they are simply her friends - some of them even best friends.

Duha has two best friends, one Palestinian friend and one Israeli. Duha's Israeli friend, Toot, also started PeacePlayers as a youth basketball player and progressed to coach and program manager. Duha trusts Toot so much that she feels like she can tell her or ask her anything. "I'm really pretty open to say everything, even embarrassing thoughts, but I still share it with her, because I know she's not going to judge me."

"It changed [me] a lot. Me accepting them, and them accepting me... It's a really huge change. It makes me feel comfortable... This is the way it is supposed to be... and I think we achieved something that not in a million years the country or the government or the society or the culture would provide us."

Advocating for Peace

Discussing PeacePlayers with Friends and Family

When she first joined PeacePlayers, Duha told her parents that she was playing basketball but hid the fact that she was playing with Israelis. She feared her parents would disapprove, putting her only chance to play sports at risk. A few months in, Duha opened up to her family, sharing everything she was gaining through PeacePlayers: She was learning English and Hebrew, her basketball skills were constantly improving, and she had met some Americans as well as youth from the Palestinian neighborhood of Esawiah and the Israeli town of Beit Shemesh. "They saw how much I'm happy and the things that I'm getting that no other girls my age would have gotten."

With time, Duha began openly discussing her PeacePlayers experiences and learnings with her family. "I used to tell them we've been fighting over this country for 70 years... and sometimes when you try something and it doesn't work, you have to switch the method. But here in this country, we always use violence, war and hatred."

"We live once. If you want to live it with fear and hatred, you know, it's not worth it. We're not born to suffer. We're born to live."

Even though Duha's family and friends are supportive of her work with PeacePlayers, they don't always agree with her opinions. "But the thing is, if I have something to say, I say it - no matter what the response is going to be."

Eventually, Duha's extended family in the West Bank witnessed the positive impact PeacePlayers had on Duha, and the opportunities she received: "They saw I'm part of something bigger and they respected it, even though it goes against what they believe."

Duha's relationship with her extended family helped open the door for her to launch the first basketball teams for Palestinian girls in the West Bank city of Hebron, where many members of her distant family live. "My parents helped me recruit the kids, and that's a huge deal. You know, in the beginning I was really afraid to tell my parents about PeacePlayers, and now my parents are helping recruit kids in the West Bank."

Outgroup Perspective Sharing

After graduating high school, Duha enrolled in a university in the West Bank. In a course on the History of the Middle East, Duha's lecturer described the Palestinian perspective of the conflict, focusing only on the injustices enacted against Palestinians. This one-sided approach didn't satisfy Duha. "So, I was asking him, 'In the meanwhile, what was happening on the other side.'" The lecturer responded with sarcastic remarks, but Duha didn't give up. "I asked him so many times, 'In this thing, in this year, what happened on the other side?'" And I actually felt he didn't know."

At home, Duha happened to have an Israeli textbook, which had been part of the curriculum at her East Jerusalem high school. Duha's school offered Israeli matriculation studies, which some East Jerusalem residents choose for pragmatic reasons, believing it will improve their university admissions options or chances to find a good job, which is especially crucial for the undervalued Palestinian population in Jerusalem. "In my textbook, they mention nothing about Palestine, they mention nothing about Arabs."

Duha decided to talk to her professor and offer to bring in her textbook to provide an additional perspective to their study of history. "I said, 'Listen, I know we live in this society and there's Occupation, but if you want to study history, you have to study it literally.'

This conversation with the professor was difficult, and had personal repercussions for Duha. "He looked at me as a normalization girl (a Palestinian in favor of normalising relations with Israel, which is considered by many in Palestinian society to be a form of treason, with consequences such as blacklisting, public humiliation and even the threat of violence), and also the students." Much of the remainder of class turned into a verbal attack against Duha. "Literally two hours of hatred towards me."

Duha told her classmates, "Listen, I always thought about it and studied it from one side, and now I'm studying the other, and the truth is always between. And I'm not going to tell you the truth. You can develop it yourself. But don't just say no to this textbook because it doesn't talk to you, or it talks about the other side. You should know everything and then you decide what the options are."

Despite the tough reaction, Duha is proud she used her voice. "For myself, I can say that I feel satisfied... that I gave an idea that maybe it wasn't there."

Despite the professor's initial resistance, he asked to keep the textbook, and it remained on his bookshelf for the remainder of the year.



Personal Resources

Duha describes her baseline confidence as being relatively high - as long as she stayed within her comfort zone: "When it came to meeting the others and going to Twinnings (joint practices with Israelis)... I was really terrified." In general, Duha describes her outlook of herself at that time as being "neutral." Even though she felt like she had many positive qualities, her self-esteem was also impacted by the many negative comments she received in her neighborhood and at school about playing basketball and being a "tomboy," which made her "feel like less of a girl. And I thought maybe I don't look that good, and maybe that girls should look different."

"Like, I could be proud of this thing in front of my family, but super embarrassed at school. I didn't feel that sure, I didn't have this confidence that everything I do is acceptable and it suits me."

Over time, Duha's self-esteem and confidence grew. Basketball, which had at one time caused her to feel unsure about herself, had ultimately led to social triumphs and a personal feeling of achievement. "I became one of the very popular girls in the school because I play on a basketball team, and I have some American friends and I go to Beit Shemesh and to different neighborhoods that the girls in my age wouldn't."

Today, Duha is an extremely confident young woman who is secure in her life choices and her beliefs. "I super love what I do, and I love it more than anything in the world. It became a part of me."

"I traveled the whole world, I met a lot of people, I have good connections. I became one of the the first [Palestinian] girls to play basketball in the Israeli league, actually in Jerusalem, being able to coach a lot of girls and opening some [new] teams in different places."

Youth Leaders as Ambassadors for Peace:

"At a young age we started studying the [PeacePlayers Curriculum with the ideas of] seeing people as people and seeing people as objects, and it's always been talking about you... From there, I started to have more confidence, and I know we should be the ones, like the ambassadors, we should be the ones taking that step. Not just sitting there and waiting for it, because this is the thing that I've been suffering from. The society asks you for something, the culture, the community, the religion, everything. You just sit there and everyone throws things at you and you have to obey everything. You know, sometimes you have to be a [rebel]."



PEACE PLAYERS

BUILDING A GLOBAL
YOUTH PEACE MOVEMENT
THROUGH SPORT

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