ARTICLES

Using Playback Theater with Adolescents in the Qalandia Refugee Camp in Palestine

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This work focuses on the lived experiences of 16 adolescent Palestinian boys who live in the Qalandia refugee camp under Israeli occupation in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. This work examines the boys' engagement in Playback Theater, which is "an interactive form of improvisational theatre in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot" (International Playback Theater Network, 2021). The findings illustrate that although the participants have much in common with other youth across the globe, they also experience stress and sorrow that are specific to their circumstances and context. Engagement in Playback Theater provided a collective space in which the participants could express grief and sadness at the loss of close family members and community members. Through the process, the participants also strengthened their ability to listen, to focus, and to interact positively with others.

ونحن نحب الحياة إذا ما استطعنا إليها سبيلا—محمود درويش

And we love life if we find a way to it—Mahmoud Darwish

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INTRODUCTION

Life as an adolescent can be complex and demanding, and navigating the countless transitions during this time of life can be exceptionally complicated. While this may be true for adolescents anywhere in the world, these layers of complexity are particularly vivid for teenagers growing up in areas of conflict, contention, and strife. A key example of a stressful context in which to experience adolescence is in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (POT).

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), 4.8 million Palestinians live in Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps in the Occupied West Bank of Palestine. Among the varied communities within the POT, there are several large refugee camps, including the Qalandia refugee camp, located at the border between Israel and the POT, between the cities of Jerusalem and Ramallah. The Qalandia refugee camp was established by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in 1949 for Palestinians who were displaced in 1948 and became refugees (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, n.d.). Reflective of the demographic proportions of the rest of Palestine, with 56% of the population of Palestine being below the age of 24, the population of the Qalandia refugee camp skews quite young (Index Mundi, 2021).

Physical barriers such as checkpoints, as well as separation walls, are tools used by the Israeli government to control the movement of Palestinians, both of which make it difficult for Palestinians to move and travel within their own country. There are detour roads for Palestinians to bypass Israeli settlements that are spread throughout Palestine. Sometimes confrontations occur between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians that lead to the short- or long-term closure of points of transition. Further, Palestinians experience frequent incursions and invasions by the Israeli military.

Needless to say, life in Palestine and particularly in refugee camps like Qalandia can be quite stressful. The presence of the Israeli checkpoints at the entrance to the camps, very close to homes and schools, can stimulate anger and feelings of oppression in addition to curtailing the people's freedom of movement. Many demonstrations take place at the checkpoints, wherein hundreds of Palestinians, including teenagers, clash with Israeli soldiers. These confrontations can lead to injury, arrest, and in some cases, death.

Israeli military occupation creates a stressful environment for Palestinians (Qouta et al., 2003), and this is especially true for Palestinian adolescents. Youth often participate in direct, quite often violent, confrontations at checkpoints with Israeli soldiers, and are at risk of arrest or in some cases death. B'Tselem and Defense for Children International (2017; 2021a, and 2021b) reports show a precarious and vulnerable situation for youth in Palestine, with 500–700 Palestinian adolescents being arrested, detained, and prosecuted in the Israeli military court system each year, and dozens of Palestinian youths killed each year.

Motivated by these terrifying statistics, and because adolescents living in refugee camps need spaces to breathe, play, and create, I was compelled to focus my work on this population in a means to provide as much psychological support as possible. To this end, I created an opportunity for youth to experiment with the philosophy, tools, and strategies made possible through the participatory theater exercises of a process known as Playback Theater, which is "an interactive form of improvisational theatre in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot" (International Playback Theater Network, 2021). Three other Palestinian theaters have engaged the Playback method within Palestine, including The Freedom Theater in the Jenin refugee camp (www.thefreedomtheatre.org/), The Fringe Ensemble of Nazareth Theater in Nazareth (fringe-naz.org/), and the Y Theater in East Jerusalem (ytheater.wordpress.com/). For this project, I collaborated with a trained Palestinian Playback Theater facilitator, Fida'a Ataya, to plan a series of engaging workshops for interested youth in the Qalandia refugee camp.

I come to this work with a sense of resonance and connection to the youth of Qalandia, having been born in the city of Acre, Palestine, near the sea. Acre is my father's hometown, and my mother is from the village of Nahaf, further inland. My family lived in the village of Al-Birwa before 1948, where they owned a home, land, and farms. When Palestine was occupied by Zionists in 1948, my family lost their property, and returned to Acre with their 7 children. As I had (and have) a dedicated focus on being in solidarity with those enduring pain, I earned my master's degree at Lesley University in Boston, MA, USA, in Expressive Art Therapies in 2009, and my Ph.D. from the same university in 2020. Currently, I train schoolteachers, work with parent groups, and support women's groups in the Bedouin-abandoned areas in Palestine. I mainly work in refugee camps and villages where there is a great need for social, educational, and psychological support.

PLAYBACK THEATER

In considering how best to engage with Palestinian youth in Qalandia refugee camp in ways that could be beneficial, I was drawn to Playback Theater, an interactive process established by Fox and Salas in the 1970s (Salas, 1993) that is "an interactive, improvisational form used to illuminate life and incite dialogue. In playback theatre, life stories are shared by audience members and then re-enacted spontaneously on stage" (Fox, 2008, para. 1). Playback Theater is based on creativity and improvisation, both tools that can be beneficial for youth as they develop imagination, creativity, and spontaneity, as well as being of benefit as they cope with stressful life circumstances. The physical, imaginative, and improvisational exercises that form the basis of Playback Theater may help participants both physically and psychologically. Music and movement may play key roles here.

According to the International Playback Theater UK website (n.d.), there is common configuration for the basic setup of a Playback Theater event, regardless of where the performance takes place (which could be a theater, a hospital, a public space, etc.). Figure 1 illustrates the Playback Theater setup, which works in any setting. The setup includes scarves, five actors' seats and musical instruments, as well as two side chairs: one for the "conductor," and one for the storyteller. Regardless of the place hosting the performance, the same flexible and portable setup is used, intended to facilitate the incorporation of music and free movement.

The conductor plays a key role in a Playback Theater performance. They are typically the contact person, organizing and communicating the necessary information about the location, participants, and process.

Figure 1. A typical Playback Theater setup. Adapted from International Playback Theater UK (n.d.)

On the day of the performance, the conductor sets up the physical space. They welcome the audience, introduce the performers, and explain the process of Playback Theater. The conductor works to develop a sense of community, facilitating communication between actors and audience. After some introductory warm-up activities, the conductor invites a participant from the audience, called "the teller," to share a story, which the actors will portray. Rivers (2013) explained, "Playback Theater praxis is based on the assumption that stories are told for a purpose: to remember, to transmit a message or evoke certain responses in the audience" (p. 161). The conductor directs the process, and takes part in the acting when needed (Good, 1986).

Through Playback Theater, the actors listen carefully and deeply to the story shared by an audience member (the teller) and improvise the story within a theater piece in front of an audience. Then, the Playback facilitator/conductor asks the teller about their feelings while watching the scene, whether the scene reflected the story that was narrated, and if anything should be added or shared with the audience and the actors (Rivers, 2013).

As Playback Theater is a relatively new theater form, the number of research studies examining it is still small. To date, most work in and study of Playback Theater has primarily focused on adults. However, I turn to two related studies that inform this project with adolescents in the Qalandia refugee camp.

First, Jordaan and Coetzee (2017) described the positive effects of the Playback Theater experience on participants. Some participants sympathized with at least one of the stories they heard from another participant; some expressed a sense of commonality between their stories and those of others. Through engagement with each other's stories, participants developed the sense of belonging and connecting with their community. For these participants, the Playback Theater process facilitated togetherness, powerful communications, and cohesion. Jordaan and Coetzee concluded that Playback Theater could allow for a variety of understandings and points of views to surface, which they suggested allows one's perspective to shift in both meaning and comprehension. As a result, one's understanding of self may be widened to include a larger social context.

In a related study on Playback Theater, Rivers (2013) documented his work in Palestine through the "Freedom Bus," in which he and a group of Palestinian Playback actors toured Palestine to engage with people's stories. According to Rivers (2013), all participants who shared their stories through this experience expressed their hope that their stories would be

shared with the outside world as well. Rivers (2013) explained, "Through art, ritual and communal storytelling, we shape meaning out of unfathomable suffering and loss" (p. 173). Their stories expressed devastating events, such as Palestinian children arrested with their hands painfully tied behind their backs, left alone and scared in interrogation rooms. Other stories told were about remembering martyrs' deaths, feelings of anger, and the people's attempts to forget such traumatic events, including the psychological torture that was reported by one of the participants as the worst aspect of his three years in jail.

RESEARCH PROCESS

As noted earlier, I was compelled to provide as much psychological support as possible for the youth of the Qalandia refugee camp. As such, for this project, I recruited a group of adolescent boys from Qalandia to participate in a series of Playback Theater workshops. Of interest was how they would experience the workshops and how they would use the workshops to express and relate to their daily experiences. Thus, two key questions emerge:

1. What type of stories would Palestinian adolescents bring through Playback Theater?
2. How can Playback Theater enhance adolescents' communication skills such as expression, listening, and peer-peer interaction?

To address these questions, we scheduled 20 Playback Theater sessions with youth in the Qalandia refugee camp. With all appropriate consent in place, I recorded all of our sessions, and conducted interviews with each participant at the end of the project. I also interviewed the mothers of the participants, all in an effort to provide a panoramic view of the experiences of the adolescents.

As a way to make sense of the experiences, voices, and perspectives of the participants, all of whom were experiencing Playback Theater for the first time, I engaged in a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell, 2012), wherein I focused on the personal stories of the participants. The purpose of phenomenology is to describe the depth of an experience, and allow a researcher to attempt to embrace complexity, intentionality, and suspend beliefs in order to understand human experiences. While this is a lofty goal, my attempt to uncover the experiences of the adolescents in this project was additionally approached from multiple, triangulated perspectives. These perspectives included the boys' words, reflections, and stories, my observations of the Playback Theater workshops, the observations and

perspectives of the Playback trainer (Fida'a), and the boys' mothers' observations of the final performance and their sons' ongoing responses to the workshops.

Participants

All elementary and secondary schools in Qalandia refugee camp are under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency and are segregated by gender. I selected a secondary school, and I met with the school principal and school counselor, explaining the purpose and methods of the research project. I obtained permission from the school principal, the school counselor, and the refugee center committee responsible for the meeting space. I then met with two classes of ninth grade students and provided the prospective participants an overview of the project, as well as all the information needed to participate.

Of the students who indicated an interest in participation, I randomly selected 16 interested participants, and then contacted their parents to provide an overview of the project. I scheduled and engaged in home visits with the parents to further explain the project. The home visits helped me to become more familiar with the unique environment in which each student lived. These visits contributed to getting me closer to the boys and breaking the barrier of shyness between them and me. Additionally, the visits provided parents with clarity about the program and process, and confidence in supporting their children's participation in it.

A series of 20 after-school sessions were planned to be conducted over 10 weeks, 19 of which actually took place. (Midway through the project, in April 2019, a Palestinian man was killed in the camp because of a clash with the Israeli soldiers. The situation remained unstable for several days, so we canceled one of our sessions.) Sixteen of the 19 sessions were Playback (PT) sessions, all taking place between February 2019 and May 2019, before final school exams.

As this research was conducted under the auspices of Lesley University in Massachusetts, USA, I provided participants and their legal guardians with the official Institutional Review Board documentation for consent (from legal guardians) and assent (from the students). Following standard protocols, I maintained the confidentiality of all participants throughout the project, and all participants selected pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. As noted, the participants in this project were Muslim boys, ages 15–16, all lifelong residents of the Qalandia refugee camp. Of the initial 16 participants, eleven participated for the duration of the study.

Due to varying circumstances, nine of the original 16 attended the final performance. Again, all names of participants included in this work are pseudonyms.

Playback Theater Workshop Implementation

Although I have a drama background, I am not a specialist in Playback Theater. Specialists in theater in Palestine are few, and as noted earlier, I was lucky to find Fida'a Ataya, a Playback Theater trainer/conductor, who had previous experience working with adolescents and had the time to collaborate with me on this project. Having previously worked with groups of adolescents in other parts of Palestine, she was a wonderful collaborator in this project, although this was her first experience working with youth in a refugee setting. Fida'a and I worked together to plan the workshop and the workshop curriculum in ways that were appropriate for the experience level, ages of the participants, and length of the workshop. The work plan we created was flexible and was adjusted during the project in response to the group's interactions and needs; for example, the cancellation of the one session necessitated by the April 2019 violence described above.

Fida'a and I planned to meet with the group twice a week after school, from 1:30 to 4:00 pm. The first half an hour would be dedicated to welcoming the group, having a brief chat, and providing them with lunch and refreshments. The two-hour workshops would be focused on team building, drama activities, sharing stories, and improvisational activities. With permission from local leadership, the workshops were scheduled to take place in the theater of the Child Center for Culture and Development in the refugee camp.

Due to the oppressive and volatile circumstances in which the refugee camp operated, before each visit to Qalandia I had to call the Child Center for Culture and Development to make sure the center was open to welcome the group, as well as checking a particular website to see the current status of roads in the area. (When clashes occurred between youth and Israeli soldiers near the checkpoint, the soldiers might close the road, not allowing people to enter or exit the camp.)

After the process of recruitment and documentation of their required consent, the 16 participants were invited to come to the first session. Fida'a and I explained the objectives and the procedures of the project, and defined each role in the process. Fida'a conducted the sessions with the participants, and I primarily took notes, photographs, and videos.

Throughout the 10 weeks of the project, Fida'a and I regularly reminded the participants of the basic rules of the workshop, and that participation was voluntary, and they could choose to withdraw or decline to participate at any point in the process. We explained that Fida'a and I would communicate with parents when necessary, and parents had the right to communicate with us whenever they might need to do so; that participants were expected to help arrange and clean the space after each session; that participants were required to show respect for everyone in the group at all times; and that failure to adhere to the group rules could mean not being allowed to continue the workshop. After each activity, we held a group discussion to allow those who wished to share their reactions or what they had learned.

Although an audience is typical for a Playback Theater experience, for the purposes of this project, there was no outside audience throughout the sessions, aside from the final session, wherein the mothers and close friends of participants were invited. The youth practiced and experimented with being the storyteller, the actors (troupe), and the music players. This contributed to creating a safe space for the young participants to become comfortable with each other and engage in the activities and exercises allowing themselves to express, to act out, to perform, to reflect, to dialogue, and to support one another.

As the culminating experience for this project, the parents of the participants were invited to a final performance. By then, the participants had grown confident in their voices, their physical movement, their use of Playback Theater, and were eager to share the experience with adults in their lives, and to act out their mothers' stories.

Data Collection

Data collected included observations I made at every session documented using video; interviews with each participant at the end of the workshop series; an interview and evaluation with Fida'a, the conductor; and interviews with the boys' mothers who attended the final performance. I documented my observations during and after each session, filming all movement, drama, and Playback activities, as well as making extensive field notes focused on interactions between group members. After the final performance, I met with Fida'a for a formal evaluation of the workshop series. I documented the key interactions in the videos, the observation notes from each session, and final interviews to coordinate data analysis for the different forms of data.

At the end of the project period, I conducted interviews with each of the key players, including the participants, their mothers, and Fida'a. I facilitated in-person interviews with the participants, and phone interviews with the mothers of the participants, including those who were not able to participate in the final performance. In addition to the regular continuous brainstorming preparation meetings with Fida'a, we held a thorough interview a week after the end of the project, where several topics were addressed. These topics included the group interaction, the development of their acting skills, the changes in the group dynamics, interpersonal interactions, and their knowledge and understanding of the Playback method, the preparation for the final performance, and the final performance itself.

All original information was provided in Arabic, which included my observation notes, comments, and each of the stories from the participants, their mothers, and their friends, in addition to the evaluations from the participants, their mothers, their friends, and Fida'a, the conductor. In my work to address the two research questions, and to ensure this work reached as broad an audience as possible, I translated everything from Arabic into English. For a correct, honest, and clear translation as close as possible to the participants' original language, I engaged two trustworthy readers: one Arabic speaker and one English speaker, to make sure the translation reflected the integrity of the project.

INSIGHTS

When talking about Playback Theater, Salas pointed out how important it is to welcome and accept any story the participants—and in this case, adolescents—bring to the stage (J. Salas, personal communication, May 18, 2018). Salas believed that adults should not urge adolescents to talk about a specific theme or themes, but rather let them talk about what matters to them, without imposing an adult perspective. According to Salsas's experience in using Playback Theater with adolescents, this approach allowed adolescents to feel free to talk about what concerns them, to become open to discussion, and to slowly feel comfortable in performing in Playback Theater. Salas explained that when adolescents feel that they are heard and understood, they are freed up to experiment with happy and sad stories alike. We took these ideas to heart as we engaged with the participants in this collaborative experience.

In the sections that follow, I will explain the key findings, which include a discussion of the kinds of engagement and interaction the boys

exhibited, the role of peer influence, and the kinds of narratives the participants shared.

Engagement and Interaction

Music and movement are key parts of Playback Theater, and from the beginning of the project, all participants engaged enthusiastically as they danced independently or with props such as scarves (figure 2). During the first few sessions, they enjoyed moving freely, focusing on moving their bodies with high energy. When the music would stop, they would look disappointed, and ask for more. Each participant moved with the music and engaged in the movement activities according to his own rhythm and physical energy on that day. The same energy was echoed when they engaged in the Playback exercises.

Around the fourth session, after taking part in several kinds of warm-up and drama activities intended to break the ice (figure 3), they became closer to one another, and the level of interaction increased. However, Fida'a expressed that in previous experiences with other groups of adolescents, the harmony and cohesiveness among the group members developed earlier, often around the third session. In the case of these boys, cooperation, harmony and group cohesiveness seemed to need more time to develop. I theorize that this group had not had this kind of experience before, and it took time to become comfortable with the process.

Seven of the participants, Khalil, Rateb, Hammad, Zayed, Hamzah, Shahadah, and Naser, were the first participants to appear to understand

Figure 2. Dancing with scarves. March 29, 2019.

Figure 3. Warm-up activity. March 3, 2019.

the methods and "skills and knowledge in acting, improvisation, ensemble work, movement, facilitation, storytelling, and listening" (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2016, p.11). In contrast, in the first few sessions, Alqam, Awwad, Kareem, and Salam were less talkative in terms of sharing feelings or stories, but they seemed to enjoy acting out other people's stories. They were quick in imitating/following others.

All participants were competitive with each other throughout the project, and fought hard to win during competitive games. Aside from Kareem, Naser, and Khalil, the rest of the participants teased and made fun of each other from time to time. On some occasions, they made fun of the "loser" in the competitive games and activities, and treated each other harshly. They sometimes provoked one another on purpose, and became angry quickly, but also calmed down quickly.

During the discussions that Fida'a had with the group about the importance of not bullying or insulting each other, it was clear from their reactions that those kinds of behaviors were familiar, and part of their ordinary interactions. Although the bullying and harassing behaviors did not completely disappear, they decreased over time, and I noticed that the boys were able to be more understanding of each other as well as the instructions of Fida'a.

In the beginning, the participants reacted quickly to every direction they were asked to follow. They sometimes answered questions before they thought about the answer.

Sometimes, they started acting/working before hearing the complete instructions. They talked over one another, and offered their opinion or

Figure 4. Playback trainer Fida'a gives instructions. February 2, 2019.

instructions when they were not asked to do so. They had difficulty waiting for their turn.

Any external factor, such as hearing voices from outside the building, would easily distract the boys. No matter how focused they were, or how important the story they were sharing was, any external factor could interrupt their focus or stop a story. Many times, participants chatted while Fida'a was giving instructions, while waiting for their turn to speak, or while onstage preparing for their scene. They would stop when Fida'a asked them to do so, but quickly resumed chatting when they were not involved in acting or discussion. Figure 4 depicts a typical moment in the work together.

However, over time, most participants became better listeners when other participants spoke. They become more patient waiting for their turn to give their comments or feedback. They also began to give fewer negative comments to each other, and to distract each other less and less from the intended focus. Over time, the boys began to pay more attention to each other, and decreased their use of obscene words toward each other in the sessions.

Peer Influence

As noted, the influence of peers seemed to play a big role in how participants engaged or withdrew from activities. This was both verbally and behaviorally demonstrated by Hamzah, when one of his best friends was asked to leave the group after the center director found him smoking cigarettes. On that day, it seemed clear that Hamzah had lost the motivation

to share or interact with others in the group. He clearly expressed this sentiment when he said: "I feel sad today because my friend is not here." Although Hamzah did not leave the project when his friend was forced to do so, for the next few sessions, Hamzah seemed less happy and less energetic than he had been when his close friend was still in the group.

Participants' Stories

Since Playback Theater is based on stories that come from the audience, in this project, participants played two roles: the role of the audience and the role of actors, wherein they shared stories and also acted out each other's stories. Fida'a gave the participants the freedom to tell the stories they felt they wanted to share with the group. For the most part, the boys' stories focused on everyday life. They highlighted the people and events that dominated their lives, such as friends, family, school, and playing video games. Some participants brought up happy stories in one session, and shared angry and sad narratives in another. In one example, a participant expressed happiness at the first part of his story when preparing himself for a school trip, but then expressed his sadness about the trip's cancellation. What came across immediately in these stories was that they seemed to be common adolescent experiences, focused on interactions with friends and family. However, at times, the stories from participants took a different turn.

"A Story Behind the Scarf" Activity. The Playback Theater stage incorporates chairs, musical instruments, and colorful scarves. These elements are consistent, but their use by actors is flexible, and can change to suit the stories being portrayed.

Normally, the scarves are stored behind the actors, but for this particular activity, about four weeks after the project started, Fida'a put the scarves on stage in front of the participants and asked each participant to choose one. In the previous eight sessions, Fida'a had provided the scarves while using music, and the participants interacted/moved/danced with them. Now, however, Fida'a asked them to look at the scarves, and tell her if the scarves reminded them of someone or something.

In this activity, participants told two types of stories, which included stories from everyday life, as well as stories from the past that were painful or sad. This was the first activity that elicited stories from the past that were not just about everyday occurrences at school or at home. It was clear that the participants were beginning to trust one another, and to trust the Playback Theater process.

Figure 5. Salam. April 23, 2019.

A Story without Words. On one occasion, Salam chose a large, white piece of fabric. He lay down on the stage, and covered his body with the scarf, similar to the way Muslims put a shroud on someone who has died (see figure 5). Salam's story had no words; he did not speak when asked about his story.

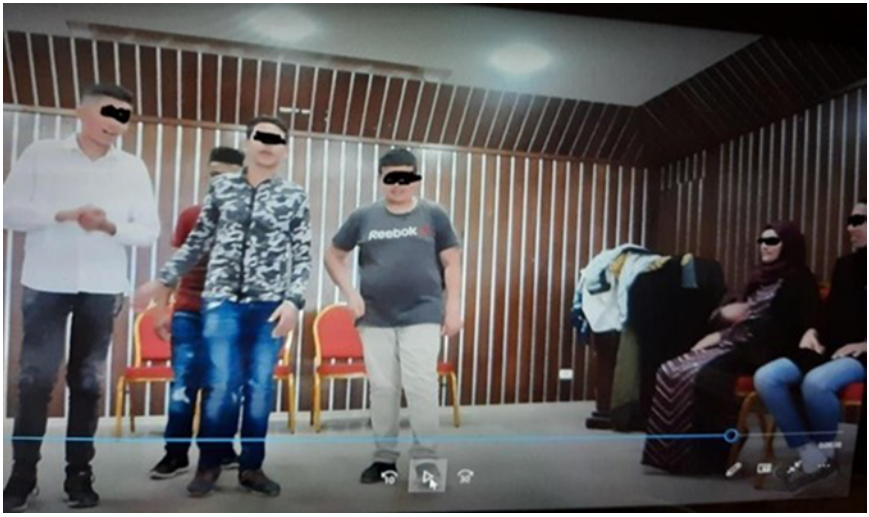

Figure 6. Khalil (in white shirt) acts out his mother's story. April 30, 2019.

FINAL PERFORMANCE

The culminating performance, for an audience consisting of the participants' mothers and close friends, started with the group singing "A Blood Song," focused on their admiration of martyrs from Qalandia. This was a song that they all knew before the project, and which they had practiced together in previous sessions. After the song, the stage was open to the audience to share thoughts, feelings, and stories. Four audience members chose to share and have their stories acted out, and two of those who shared were mothers of participants (figure 6), while the other two were close friends of the participants. All of the stories shared onstage focused on political situations experienced under Israeli occupation. For example, Mustafa, a friend of the participants, told a story focused on death and martyrdom.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

At the end of the project, I engaged in one-on-one interviews with participants. We had these conversations at the site where the project had been carried out, as this was a space both easily accessible to the participants, and also comfortable and familiar.

The process was clearly transformative for many of the participants. For example, when asked, "Did you notice any change in your thinking, acting, or social interactions with others through this experience?" Awwad noted,

"I learned that I could learn and apply new things that I had no idea about before." Similarly, when asked, "Did you face any difficulties or challenges while participating?" Khalil explained, "Certain things I could not apply at first, but they became easier over time."

Nine participants expressed that participating had a positive impact on their social interactions. All participants described some appreciation for being able to act out their stories or see them acted out onstage, and all reported a positive response overall to participating in Playback Theater. They used words like "good," "beneficial," and "joyful." Most participants interviewed stated they they discovered new things about themselves or new abilities through Playback Theater. Salam said, "Anyone who lives in the camp would like to share everything. I managed to tell about a few things that happened to me." Similarly, Naser noted, "I shared stories, and it felt as if those stories were happening right now in front of me."

In reflecting on the experience of the final performance, most of the participants described it as allowing them to share their growth with their families. Reflecting upon being onstage for the first time, Hamzah said, "It was a beautiful experience. I would have loved my mom to be there." Naser was candid, explaining, "I was embarrassed in the beginning, [but] then I felt fine onstage. I was happy to have my mom there, and she told me she was happy to be there as well." All participants reported a willingness to participate in similar activities in the future. Some participants even asked for more sessions.

DISCUSSION

The participants reported that they experienced a range of responses to the Playback Theater sessions that included awareness of thoughts and feelings, learning new skills, and having a first exposure to performing onstage. These insights were supported by the observation of the participants' mothers as well. For example, the boys that included positive feelings such as happiness and pride as well as sadness reported a range of emotions. Their mothers reported noticing changes in their behaviors, and the conductor, Fida'a, noted positive changes in their ability to work together over time.

For these adolescents, the responses reported were contextualized by the social context of the project and their stage of adolescent development. Galván (2012) explained that during this second decade of life, adolescents are in a period of adapting to their social environment. That adaptation appeared in

the stories that were shared by the participants in this project. The boys' stories were primarily about their daily lives—school, friends, and friendship—while some were about loss of relatives or acquaintances. Their stories highlighted their ability to adapt to their political environment, in which as Palestinians they lived in a camp without free access to areas outside the camp. It is this environment that likely contributes to the findings of B'Tselem (2021) that a large number of adolescents arrested by the Israeli army felt the need to take an active role rather than a passive role in their people's struggle.

For the adolescent boys who participated in this project, I noticed that they needed time to begin to develop comfort with the techniques used, with each other, and with Fida'a and myself as well. Behavioral issues and challenges related to interaction with individuals in the group, as well as the rules of the center where the work took place, characterized early sessions. Much of this seemed to be rather standard adolescent testing behavior. The theme of feelings that emerged in this work seemed quite in keeping with the research on Playback with adolescents. In a conversation with Playback Theater founder Jo Salas, one of the challenges she described from her experience with Playback and adolescents involved addressing adolescents' feeling of shyness and fear in sharing personal stories. She noted this was particularly challenging for adolescents at the beginning of the process, when they were unfamiliar with the conductor (J. Salas personal communication, May 18, 2018). In this group, it took time for participants to begin to share stories, and to decrease disruptive behaviors.

In this project, the participants noted changes in each other as a result of the group development over time. In addition, the stories involved everyday occurrences with peers, both positive and negative. Blakemore and Mills (2014) discussed the peer group's impact on adolescents, noting that in most cases the role of the peer group is greater than that of parents. Blakemore and Mills showed that peer orientation in adolescence is normal and even necessary for adolescents as they mature, and my findings support this idea. For example, in my interview with Hammad, he reported how close he became to some of the group members during the project. The same occurred with Shahadah, in that he befriended several group members and visited them at their homes.

In her 2018 study of Playback Theater in Palestine, Rohrbach (2018) wrote that Playback Theater has the power to provide a safe space for participants to "visualize themes and emotions" (p. 83) that are often unexpressed or even repressed. In my project, eventually, the participants shared stories that contained some risk, indicating that they felt safe in

sharing. Rohrbach explained further, noting that "most of them (the tellers) explained that they felt a kind of relief and shifting of perspective that can play a crucial role in the healing process" (p. 84). She added, "The teller usually tells his or her story not only to inform the audience, but he or she also urges the audience to fight against the injustice as well" (p. 83).

As noted previously, an event took place during the project that had a profound impact on the entire community when a conflict in the camp with the Israeli Army ended the life of one of the refugees in the camp. In the session that followed the death, the participants seemed less focused than in previous meetings. In that specific session, Fida'a and I both noted signs of sadness on the group members' faces, and the interaction in that session took time to develop, perhaps an indication of the participants' sorrow or distress. Levine (2008) described trauma as "the most avoided, ignored, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering" (p. 7). In this project, Fida'a and I purposefully attended to the participants' reactions. Fida'a provided a space for them to share their feelings or talk about the death incident in their own ways, including the decision to not speak about it at all. The narratives that emerged in the "Story Behind the Scarf" activity, in addition to the singing of "A Blood Song," which the group later chose to start their final performance with, indicated that the death in the camp had made an impact on them. In considering the ways trauma manifests, Levine (2008) emphasized that in some cases, symptoms of trauma may remain hidden for some time, and may not emerge until later. For these participants, given their lives in an environment rife with ongoing violence, exposure to trauma is well familiar.

The loss of life topic was highlighted in two participants' verbal stories in addition to the nonverbal story (the "Story Without Words") that was acted out by Salam and expressed through his actions when he covered his body with the shroud-like white fabric. The topic of death was also invoked by the participants' friend who went on stage in the final performance to share his story of two martyrs he knew who were killed in clashes with the Israeli army. Again, we return to this quote from Rivers (2013), who noted that "stories are told for a purpose: to remember, to transmit a message or evoke certain responses in the audience" (p. 161). Perhaps the tellers did not consciously aim to transmit a message, and perhaps did not consciously mean to evoke certain responses from listeners, but they certainly needed to remember those who were missed, and Playback Theater gently offered this opportunity.

Stevenson et al. (2014) noted that adolescence is often a time of increased flexibility in learning, exploration, and creativity. This was borne

out by the participants in this project, who described the new skills that they obtained, such as being more focused, becoming better listeners, having better anger control, and being more freely expressive and even audacious on stage. Feldman (2001) wrote that the parents of her participants in a similar study indicated that their children became less shy after participating in her project, their creativity increased, their ability to handle mistakes improved, as did their communication with their families. Similarly, in my project, the participants' mothers expressed happiness and pride at seeing their sons onstage, acting and collaborating. They clearly saw the positive impact of the experience on their sons' behaviors.

Research Challenges

It was demanding for me as a female, Palestinian, expressive art therapist to engage with male youth in the Qalandia refugee camp. As a Palestinian researcher who lives and suffers from the same occupation, and as a therapist who is addressing the concerns of a group that is often ignored, I worked to be mindful of my positionality, which includes my compassion for them as teenagers, and my sympathy for them as Palestinians, who live (as I live) under the Israeli occupation.

Since the residents are Muslim, some of whom were conservative and very religious, I had to pay attention to the way I talked about sensitive topics, such as religion and human relations. Working with adolescents in general can be challenging, and working with adolescents from a refugee camp located at a military checkpoint presented a greater challenge. During the whole project, I noticed that I felt "on edge" and worried that something might interfere with the safety of the boys, the trainer, myself, or with the process. I worried that Fida'a might be prevented from entering the camp. At the end of the project, I noticed a sense of relief, yet I know my participants continue to live in this context of stress and vulnerability.

Considerations

The participants were boys who came from a single boys' school, as all schools in the Qalandia refugee camp are gender segregated. I chose this population for this project due to my experience with adolescents, and the fact that many avoid this age group due to their fears of working with them as well as their insufficient knowledge in how to navigate relationships with adolescents. Working with boys raised new questions about how things may have gone if there had been girls as part of the project as well. How might the behaviors and stories have been different?

I was aware of the fact that I am a Palestinian living in Palestine, and suffering from the same occupation that her people suffer from in their daily life. I was also aware that my choice to apply my research with refugees stemmed from my sympathy to those who lost their original land and became refugees in 1948, at the time the State of Israel was established. This is the same sympathy I have for my own family, who lost their land in the same year, although they did not end up refugees, as they were in their hometown of Acre.

SUMMARY

In a context like the Qalandia refugee camp, where youth are harassed and restricted in movement, Playback Theater may serve as a safe space, in contrast to the often unsafe environment of the refugee camp. Since the arts are not prioritized in the educational curricula in most schools in Palestine, and scheduled art classes may be canceled to compensate for other classes, Playback Theater can provide teenagers with a space to practice drama, theater, movement, and music that their school cannot offer. Playback Theater may also provide youth a platform to express themselves through sharing stories or incidents they have experienced, but have never had the opportunity to share.

Adolescents in many parts of the world today are living in an environment characterized by violence, lack of safety, and repression. Through this project, the participants revealed their commonality with adolescents across the globe through their focus on stories of everyday life. At the same time, the participants recognized and processed the reality of the violence and death that are steady parts of their lived experiences as well. The responses of the participants offer hope about the potential of arts-based methods like Playback Theater to offer an outlet for expression and development of skills that might foster positive growth over time. And while the future of the boys in this study and the potential impact of the workshops cannot be known, for the two months of the project, the boys were alive with possibility. May their voices and stories live on.

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