

# ‘The Gaza Diamond’: drawings and wishes of Palestinian teenagers

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*In this study, the body of drawings and written wishes chosen from a drawing contest for Palestinian schoolchildren, provided data revealing a world of hopes, wishes and desires of Palestinian teenagers. Irrespective of the measure of regional exposure to the violent conflict, the political situation figures prominently in their wishes. Peace and statehood are dominant themes. While refugee children seem slightly more concerned by the political situation, children in the north of the West Bank region and in rural areas display less personal aspiration and more interest in material wealth.*

**Keywords:** drawings, occupation, Palestinian teenagers, psychosocial, wishes

## Introduction

In recent decades, the proportion of war victims who are civilians has leapt dramatically from 5% to over 90 % (Machel, 1996). The nature of wars has changed from conflicts between nations to essentially low intensity conflicts with intermittent peaks of violence. They extend for prolonged periods of time; years, decades and, as in the case of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, almost a century if the Balfour Declaration of 1917 is taken as the starting point of the conflict (Khalidi, 1987).

Since modern warfare is no longer fought in historic battlefields, but on the streets of towns and villages, children, as much as

their parents, are involuntarily caught up as ‘players’ in the conflict. Whether their role is passive or active does not necessarily produce different outcomes. An innocent bystander or a playing child could just as easily become a victim hit by a passing bullet as an active participant in a gun battle. The lack of security, as well as the fear and anger in armed conflict, affect adults and children alike.

Palestinian children are growing up in a world dominated by the Israeli military occupation; a world of soldiers, guns, curfews, death, destruction, movement restrictions and limited opportunities. What do we know about the impact of the conflict on their lives?

## Palestinian children in armed conflict

The picture of stone-throwing Palestinian children ‘fighting’ Israeli tanks has sparked an interest in Palestinian children and their welfare under very adverse circumstances. Numerous studies have been written about the psychological effect of the prolonged Israeli military occupation on children. While there is general consensus on the psychological impact on children, opinions regarding the nature and the severity of this impact vary considerably. Zakrison et al. (2004), for example, found that, with a prevalence of 42%, children in the Southern Bethlehem district of the West

Bank scored twice as high in psychological morbidity than the Gaza children. Baker & Kanan (2003) quote a survey by Qouta showing that 33% of Palestinian children displayed acute symptoms of posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) during the second intifada. They also warn that physical distance to violent events does not necessarily protect Palestinian children. Miller, El-Masri & Qouta (1999) found that, even before the beginning of the second intifada, a period of relative calm, Gaza children under Israeli occupation had significantly higher prevalence rates of emotional and behavioral problems than children in Ontario, Canada.

Some local investigators, on the other hand, seem to take a more nuanced approach to the question. Arafat and Boothby (2003) performed a nationwide sampled psychological assessment of Palestinian children in the summer of 2002, after the major Israeli incursions into Palestinian cities. In their study they found that, even though over 90% of children reported feeling unsafe and almost half of all children had personally experienced or witnessed incidents of violence, 70% continued to feel optimistic and able to improve their own lives by developing academically, personally and socially. Two years after the major Israeli invasions of Palestinian cities in 2002, Giacaman et al. (2003) noted that about half of their sampled schools in the Ramallah area reported an increase in violent behavior among students, while the other half actually reported increased cooperation and good relations amongst the students. Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008) demonstrates that even though Palestinian adolescents report a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms, they have found ways to adapt and to cope with endemic conflict.

## **Drawings as a source of information**

In this study we used an existing body of drawings and wishes by children from the occupied Palestinian territory<sup>1</sup>, and designed an instrument that gives information about things children tell about themselves, and about growing up in a world shaped by armed conflict. According to Malchiodi (1998);

*'children's drawings are thought to reflect their inner worlds, depicting various feelings and relating information concerning psychological status and interpersonal style. Although children may use drawing to explore, to problem solve, or simply to give visual form to ideas and observations, the overall consensus is that art expressions are uniquely personal statements that have elements of both conscious and unconscious meaning in them and can be representative of many different aspects of the children who create them.'*

This paper is based on the assumption that the drawings and written wishes of children exposed to more frequent and more intensive exposure to Israeli military action will reflect this experience. It was also expected that, although this reflection might take many forms, these forms will be less present in the drawings and wishes of children less exposed to Israeli military action.

Two themes in the drawings and wishes seemed especially useful as possible indicators of the impact of violent conflict on children's psychological status:

- 1) the presence or absence of political themes, and
- 2) the presence or absence of personal aspirations in the drawings and wishes.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

In early 2004, Birzeit University's Institute of Community and Public Health (ICPH) received 11,241 drawings made by 8<sup>th</sup> grade Palestinian school children (ages 13–14). The drawings came from children who chose to participate in a contest organised by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), in cooperation with the environmental unit of the ICPH. Children had read a short educational story in which four children in Gaza had found a diamond, then lost it and eventually retrieved it again. The story taught the children about the problems of waste management in Gaza. At the end of the story, the protagonists find a treasure chest, which they could open with the diamond. At this point, the story ended, and the children were asked what *they* would wish to find in the treasure chest. A separate form allowed children to write their three wishes, and they were asked to make a drawing of one of them.

The authors took a systematic random sample of 20% of the total: 2176 drawings and sets of wishes, just under two-thirds (64.7%) by girls and just over one third (35.3%) by boys, consistent with the proportion by sex that was found in the larger drawings and wishes pool.

The geographical sample distribution closely resembles the real population distribution between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which is 63% versus 37% (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The majority of participants were from the West Bank (67.9%), more precisely: north West Bank 37.5%, central West Bank 19.1%, south West Bank 11.3% versus 32.1% from the Gaza Strip. Most participants came from villages (47.1%) and towns (44.4%). Camps were rather underrepresented with only 8.5%.<sup>2</sup>

### *Measures*

We used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare independent variables, including sex of student, geographical region (Gaza Strip versus north, center and south of West Bank), and type of location (rural, urban, refugee camp) with a range of dependent variables identified in the drawings and the wishes. The fact that this study was developed from existing data, rather than the generation of data, allowed us to design the measurement instrument using the variables and values as they emerged in the drawings and wishes.<sup>3</sup> After examining hundreds of drawings, an instrument that conceptualised and classified the themes of the wishes as perceived in these drawings was designed. The broad themes included:

- *Relation to the story (environment or the treasure chest)*

Many of the drawings were related to the educational story. Those drawings displayed the treasure chest with its imagined content of money, jewels or other items. Other drawings contained principal characters in the story, or refer to the environmental message in the story.

- *Symbols*

Many of the drawings included symbols, for example: peace symbols such as the dove and the olive branch; political symbols such as the Palestinian flag or map, Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque; or religious symbols like the Koran or the Bible.

- *Political themes*

Some drawings depicted political themes with a different character and content from those captured through symbols. Such drawings might, for example: show

weapons; injured or dead people; the Separation Wall; demolished homes or uprooted trees.

- *Happiness themes*

Children also produced drawings which revealed the wish for a happy social environment; a happy community or family. Drawings relating to health care and education also fell into this category.

- *Personal wishes/aspirations (non material)*

This category contained drawings which conveyed wishes directly related to the students' own aspirations. In these drawings, the children expressed their wish to become lawyers, physicians, engineers, nurses, teachers, policemen, or even farmers or shepherds. Some children wished for education without specifying the reason. Many children expressed the wish to travel or to secure travel documents.

- *Wishes for material wealth*

Of course, many children just wanted the treasure chest to contain money or jewelry. Others drew the material objects they fancied, for example a car or a bicycle. Children were also inspired by the find of the treasure chest to imagine that it might hold antiquities like old books or maps.

The written wishes were categorised according to the same themes, but the second two categories (symbols and political themes) were collapsed into one. This meant that political themes in the written wishes included the desire for freedom, peace, independence, reconstruction, armed struggle, prisoners' liberation and destruction of the wall. Each of the students' three wishes were examined and classified according to its theme. Comparing the analysis of the drawings with the analysis of the written

wishes helped to increase the chances of reliability that the drawings were an indicator of the children's wishes and aspirations.

#### *Procedure*

In early 2005, the research instrument was tested and finalised. The first 200 drawings and wishes were coded separately by three different people, in order to then decide collectively on one way of interpreting the themes and coding. Following that, one person coded and entered the data of all the drawings and wishes in order to avoid classification bias. In the analysis of the written wishes, the order of appearance (first wish, second wish, third wish) was not considered. Instead, the focus was the presence of the themes in any of the three wishes, per case entry. In other words: the unit of interest was the child, and her or his three wishes. Since the children had not been instructed to record their wishes in order of desirability it made no sense to look at the wishes separately. The Chi-square test was used to determine significance, where applicable.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows the frequencies of the themes encountered in the drawings and the wishes.

Table 1 shows that the pattern of variation in themes in both the drawings and wishes is almost identical, with very small differences in the percentages. Around 30% of the children's drawings and written wishes expressed the desire for money or other material gain, closely followed by also almost 30% of the drawings and written wishes containing a political theme. More than 20% of drawings and wishes displayed children's personal aspirations. Since the

**Table 1. Themes in drawings and wishes**

	Drawings	%	Wishes	%
Environment	254	11	412	10
Political themes	700	30	1161	28
Happiness themes	132	5	431	10
Personal wish/aspiration	500	21	883	22
Material wish	768	33	1241	30
	2354*	100	4128*	100

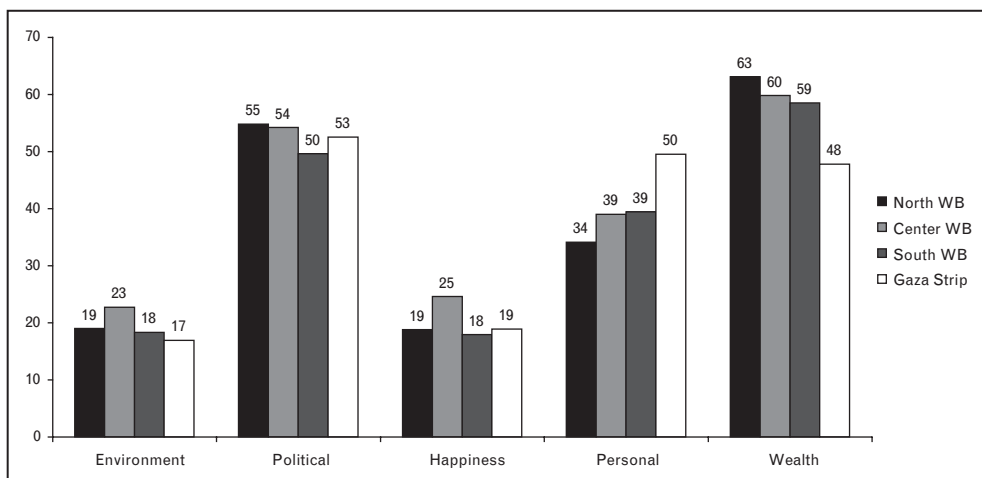
\* The fact that some children had more than one theme in their drawing explains that the number of themes exceeds the number of drawings. Likewise, the fact that some children did not write three wishes, but only one or two, explains that the number of wishes is less than it could have been.

data pool on wishes was twice as big as that for drawings, it was decided to base the remainder of the analysis on the written wishes, and will, therefore, focus the discussion of the results on the most important themes; politics, material wishes and personal aspirations.

Political themes could be found with almost equal frequency in all four geographical regions. Highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), though, were the variations in personal themes and desire for wealth as displayed

in the children's wishes. Half of the wishes of the Gaza children contained a personal aspiration, compared to a low of 34% in the north West Bank. In contrast, the Gaza children were less set on material wealth at 48% of the wishes, compared to 63% for the north West Bank.

When the difference in wishes between boys and girls was examined, it was found that significantly more girls included political, as well as happiness, themes in their wishes. Girls also had more diverse



*Graph 1: distribution of themes found in wishes per geographical region.*

set of wishes. For example, one girl might express wishes related to each of the themes: a first wish for diamonds, a second wish for a Palestinian state and a third wish to become a lawyer. Whereas boys would more often relate all three wishes to one particular theme: a first wish for an independent state, the second wish for an end to the occupation and the third wish for liberation from the occupation.

In comparing the wishes of teenagers from urban areas, rural areas or refugee camps, we found that peer groups from refugee camps more often included political themes in their wishes. One surprising result was the finding that 51% of refugee teenagers in the sample included a personal aspiration in their wishes versus only 36% of the rural and 43% of the urban children.

## Discussion and conclusions

The results show that children from all areas in the West Bank and from the Gaza Strip were equally likely to display political themes (such as: *'The liberation of Palestine'*, *'The removal of the Separation Wall'*, *'Peace'*, *'The key to Jerusalem or to the Al Aqsa Mosque'*) in their wishes. Moreover, after the wish for material gain (wealth), the political theme was the one which was most frequently represented in children's wishes. This suggests that Palestinian children, whether they live in high confrontation or low confrontation areas, are equally aware of the importance of the political situation in their lives. Surprisingly, more girls' than boys' wishes contained political themes. However, within the political themes of girls, it was the wish for peace that was more prominent. We found that more drawings of refugee children, compared to those of rural and urban children, contained political themes in their wishes. It is likely that being brought up as a political refugee, with the trauma of

displacement, dispossession and dispersion very much part of these children's cultural inheritance, accounts for this variation.

Regarding the wish for wealth (the Gaza children were less set on material wealth as the children of the north West Bank), a possible explanation may be that West Bank children, particularly those of the north and the rural areas, compared their situation to the perceived or imagined situation of other West Bank children, namely those living in the relatively well off cities, especially Ramallah. Children of the Gaza Strip on the other hand, whom as we have seen above were mainly from cities or rural areas, may have compared their financial situation to the even less desirable situation of children in the nearby refugee camps. The finding that Gaza Strip children displayed more personal aspirations in their wishes may be equally related to the probability that they see their situation as less desperate than the situation of other Gaza children who live in the refugee camps. In the Gaza Strip, over 30% of the population live in refugee camps, whereas in the West Bank this category constitutes only 5% (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

Our data show that refugee children do not lack personal aspirations. In fact, in comparison, rural children seemed the least inspired regarding their personal future. This may reflect the isolation of rural children who rarely visit the towns with its professional population, versus the closer proximity to the towns of most of the refugee camps.

Summarising the results, it may be concluded that independent of the measure of exposure to violent conflict, Palestinian children in all categories seem to be almost equally preoccupied with the political situation. The fact that overall (all regions; boys

and girls; urban, rural and refugee), 30% of children's drawings and more than 50% of their sets of wishes displayed political themes testifies to the prominent role the political situation plays in the lives of Palestinian children.

This finding, that about 40% of children's wishes reflected children's personal aspirations, stands in stark contrast to the earlier study by Elbedour, Bastien & Center (1997), who asked children aged 13–17 to draw *'whatever is on your mind'* and found that only 4% of the West Bank children and 3% of the Gaza Strip children depicted a personal future in their drawings. Such a discrepancy in findings illustrates the influence a study design and the utilising the concepts may have on actual findings. Asking children to draw *'what was on their mind'* yielded a very low percentage of children who actually depicted *'a personal future'*. However, asking children to draw and write *'wishes'* specifically, yielded a 7–10 times higher percentage of children *'depicting a personal aspiration for the future'*.

Through the *Gaza Diamond* drawing contest, Palestinian children spoke out about their world and fantasy lives. They made it clear that they want a life devoid of violence, a life that offers them the same type of opportunities that some children in other parts of the world enjoy; opportunities for education, a career, happiness. The drawings and wishes of the Palestinian children tell us that the political situation is very much a part of their life; they also indicate that material wealth is important for them, and some children see an improvement in their situation in terms of money coming to them, rather than that they focus on their own ability to make it.

The glimpse that these drawings and wishes have given us into the lives of Palestinian children raises new questions. Is

it acceptable that 50% of a nation's children in such a young age group, when asked about their wishes, would talk about political issues? How would this compare to children who grow up in a stable and secure political environment? What is the meaning of the finding that rural children and those from the north of the West Bank seem to have less personal aspirations and are more wishful of material wealth coming their way?

This study reminds us that children, no matter how adverse their situation, are capable of imagining a *'normal'* future for themselves. Perhaps this should be taken into account by international donors focusing on emergency aid. If these Palestinian children are to realise their dreams, there will be a need for long term, evenly spread and sustainable support, rather than, or in addition to, the short and medium term emergency projects.



*Drawing entry by 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl from a village near Hebron on the West Bank*

*Wishes accompanying this drawing:*

1. *Return of refugees*
2. *Liberation of prisoners*

3. *Getting to know children from Gaza and Jenin*

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<sup>2</sup> The lower rate of participation from the Gaza Strip and refugee camps is due to the fact that the drawing contest was organised by the MoEHE, and therefore, primarily aimed at government schools. Schools in refugee camps are under the authority of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

<sup>3</sup> This has the advantage of reducing the type of bias that can result from the intrusion of the researcher or the measurement instrument (Trochim, 2006). Boyden cautions against the use of precoded research instruments, because they could, in itself, act as a barrier to understanding children's responses to political violence. 'The more refined of these instruments involve some adaptation to ensure cultural fit. Nevertheless, they generally invoke a positivist paradigm which says more about the preconceptions of the researcher than the perspectives or actual experiences of children' (Boyden, 2003). It is clear that while there are some advantages to working with unobtrusively acquired data, limitations exist which present bias. Since the stories were distributed through the schools, the teachers involved may have influenced the students in the choice of what to wish or draw. We had little control over either the instructions of teachers, or the

students' understanding of the exercise. However, since the teachers were unaware that the project might lead to an academic study, their influence is less likely to bias the results of the study. Equally, such influence may have gone either way: some teachers may have encouraged the children to follow the line of the story and its focus on environment, while others may have encouraged the children to think of wishes in a more general sense. Many teachers may not have exerted any influence.

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