**“We all speak the same language”**

This paper investigated how, through the practice of a shared game in the mixed Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu-Tor, young children are engaging in building a novel construct of identity from that which their parents hope for them. This research deals with the design of a community identity composed of a movement of socialization between parents and children that operates in the encounter between the children and the reality that is constructed for them. I present the manner in which these children, acting as more than the passive absorbers of the social demands thrust upon them by their world, as constructed and presented to them by their parents, actively contribute to the construction of community identity.

This study describes a two-way educational movement that operates from parents to children and returns from children back to their parents. In this paper, soccer games between Jewish and Muslim children in East Jerusalem are examined as an arena for the study of education, through in-game socialization. Furthermore, the children’s responses to their parents’ expectations are also examined. In weekly sessions throughout the school year (from September to June), children are taught the basics of soccer, sponsored by the soccer teamInter-Milano. This article discusses the design of cultural practices performed by parents in relation to their children as they strive to achieve social change for themselves and, more importantly, for the future of their children. The parents are seen to use their children’s soccer sessions as a tool to design social outcomes.

**Education & Socialization**

Kuczynski, Pitman, Ta-Young, & Harach (2016) show that the presence of children affects parents’ lives. Their involvement in protecting their children and promoting their socialization, can challenge parents and lead to emotional experiences, as well as promoting reflection and problem solving (Kuczynski, Pitman, Ta-Young, & Harach 2016). In that study, parents report on the effects their adolescent children had on their attitudes and behaviors in religion, politics, and sports. While parents have more power than children, this unequal power must be understood as both mutual and asymmetrical. This paper examines how, in children’s mixed game experiences, parents understand the effects that this mutual asymmetry has on them.

**Games and Socialization**

Socialization is perceived a process in which children discover a world of significations and transform part of it into mutual significations, showing how a social order is mutually designed for themselves and for the adults around them. Children’s social development can be perceived as a continuous action of the social construction of a world of action and content. This world is anchored in the social circumstances the children encounter, and it helps them cope with the knowledge, demands, and the constraints to which they are exposed via their contact with adults (Corsaro & Streeck, 1986). I studied how adults use mixed games as an part of the cultural construction process that they actuate for their children, reinforcing the ideological demands of the project for themselves (Hadley, 2003; Bluebond-Langner, & Korbin, 2007). Orum and Cohen (1973) show how African American children in the United States, who find themselves in their day-to-day lives in encounters with a political routine charged with racism show a hypersensitive understanding of the reality of mixed groups. In the neighborhood of Abu-Tor, children playing soccer express their parents’ voices, in a reality that has been constructed for them by their parents. These children’s games form a stage upon which the socialization of the entire community in Abu-Tor is present.

In the footsteps of Geertz (1973) and Goffman (1971), Handelman (1990) describes how, in games, players express a certain idea of reality. Games are an interpretive means whereby the social condition of the participants is presented. In such games, the central components of the circumstances of the players’ lives are projected and emphasized. In games, children assist the socialization of the community. The adults use this space to design the cultural construction process that they use for their children to charge their community identity, while at the same time, the children assist in this social construction by presenting reality to the adults and confirming it. Levy (1998) adds another layer here, adding his interpretation to Goffman’s game rules, claiming that playing games enables relationships and communication that would not have existed outside their framework. Moreover, games provide an opportunity for groups to construct their own uniqueness. Early childhood education presents a dynamic movement intended to bring children to learn and experience their social position, and status. It is also used to build up a child’s self and social identity (Stirrup, Evans & Davies, 2017).

**Sports & Education**

Elementary school marks a critical period in a child’s mental, emotional, and behavioral development. Participating in sports can help reduce anxiety and stress and promote self-realization (Koo & Lee, 2014). Sport activities are a powerful means that parents can use to convey their values to their descendants. The social context is therefore crucial if positive results are to be obtained from sports activities. This role performed by adults indicates the quality of the experience and its consequences. If the social context nurtures a sense of belonging and cooperation, creating a warm and caring environment, a range of positive influences is possible (Danioni, Barni, & Rosnati, 2017).Bhana shows how through sports, the gendered idea of an opposition between masculine strength versus feminine weakness, as well as themes of aggression and competitiveness (Bhana, 2008).

The involvement of the parents in children’s sporting activities was correlated with a significant improvement in the value of the activity.The more strongly teenagers feel able to understand their parents in relation to their sporting activity, the greater their willingness to accept sports values without active parental involvement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

The complex role that parents play in relation to their children’s practice of sport is the focus of this study, in particular, on parental satisfaction as a necessary basis for parental commitment to the sports organization. This commitment provides the basis for the socialization in relation to sport. We examine how this sport-related socialization facilitates children’s socialization.Eliasson (2015) claims thatit is necessary to re-define power relations between children and adults to allow the children to be more active in building sports values. In socialization, an imbalance appears in the power relations between children and parents. There is a risk that the norms and values created will be centered on the parents’ perspective than on the children’s. The need to center the child’s perspective in sports practices of children and youth is recognized in some sports policy programs, such as in Sweden (Eliasson, 2015).

**Education and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict**

Recent studies have tested cooperation between Israeli Jewish and Muslim children in sports during leisure time to examine possible improvements to the peace process (Lidor & Blumenstein, 2011; Friedman, 2010). Work on this topic remains unable to show effects on society in general, although it does show how participant children are able to approach each other. Galili, Leitner, and Leitner find significant potential for mixed-game projects between the groups (Galili, Leitner, & Leitner, 2013). This study examines a mixed community in the East Jerusalem neighborhood Abu-Tor. Resident Jewish and Muslim children take part in soccer games sponsored by the Italian soccer club Inter-Milano.[[1]](#footnote-1) Through this initiative, the community hopes to increase the amount of mutual respect between the groups and to reduce violence.

This study will examine the social benefits of these games by examining their meaning in a deeper sense, as well as investigating the potential they have to achieve closeness between the groups and reduce aggression and rivalry types of thinking.

**Research setting**

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used, including observation, interviews, and questionnaire surveys, to obtain better insight into social interactions.

Overall, this study adopted an interpretative–qualitative approach (Seidman, 2003). It investigated the world of the parents of the children who were participating in the soccer games and their construction of reality from their point of view.

Twelve in-depth interviews were carried out in this study, supplemented by observation and conversations with coaches, parents, and others connected to the initiative, conducted over five months of investigation. Among the interviewees were coaches and parents. The interviews were conducted in the homes of the research participants, and they were asked to describe their experience of the project and their children’s point of view on it.

The questionnaire survey contained items on proximity and distance between groups to understanding the meaning of the project for the parents in a deeper way.

**Findings and Discussion**

The results of two questionnaire surveys present an optimistic point of view among the parents, indicating a belief in an ultimate peace between the groups to create a better future for the Israeli society.

Figure A- I think the project is capable of contributing positively to the relationship between the groups.—81.3% responded to this prompt with a high level of trust in the project to support improvements in the relationship between Jews and Muslims.

Figure B- Thanks to the project, minority groups in Israel will be able to achieve a better social position.—85% responded to this prompt with the expression of a high level of belief in his project as a way to create real change in society.

These results indicate the focus that the parents place on their children’s re-socialization and their desire to accomplish this.

In a conversation I had with the Muslim parents of two brothers from East Jerusalem, 8 and 9 years old, who were taking part in the soccer games, they discussed the difficulties they faced while taking part in the project.

**Souheer**: We are absolutely into it! And we really think that there is a good chance here for a different way of life. We are ready to make sacrifices to make it come true. We do pay a social price; some of our neighbors do not speak with us anymore because of it. The boys also suffer due to the bad behavior of other children because they are participating in this mixed project with Jews. However, we really believe that change is beginning now, and it will continue into future generations and during our children’s maturity. It may be that we will not live to see peace, but they have a good chance!

Here, these parents express their hope for peace and their strong motivation to promote the project. They understand the social price that they must pay, but they considered the program worth it because it pursues their ideological goals.

A Jewish father told me the following anecdote:

At first, my boy was sure that the other children were not passing the ball to him because he is a Jew! I told him to be more focused, play well, and you will see: they will pass it to you. In the end, he did improve and scored a goal. From that point on, they passed to him, and it all changed for the better.

Here, we can detect signs of deeper stereotypes. The child only wanted to play soccer without any social thinking or considering others’ feelings. However, something happened to cause a deeper perception to arise. A moment of loneliness, disappointment, and despair brought forth a stereotyped feeling that might have its foundation in the past and could threaten the atmosphere of brotherhood. The father’s words of encouragement presented his faith in the potential of the game potential, together with his hope for a better future for the next generation. His words allowed his son to manipulate his fears of being outside and to obtain peace within the game. Here, we see a spontaneous short observation of routine mixed games, which had the potential for tension if it had not been for the parent's intervention. The father saw an opportunity, which he took with both hands, of presenting the narrative of peace through the game. This incident is an illustration of the hope that parents have for their children to shape a new society.

Following from this incident, we can pass to observations of coaches’ instructions and how this guidance prompts children to focus on passing the ball, which expresses the bonds of affection within the game.

During training, the coach showed this on the field: guys, Inter-Campus is not only soccer! It is friendship above all! We are playing together, and nobody is alone! It doesn't matter who you pass to, but you must pass! You must co-operate because we are playing as a team!

The perspective of the coach highlights the great effort that the participants show to ignore the differences between the groups and show harmony and brotherhood. The action of passing the ball is a practice of bonding more than a mere soccer technique, showing that there is no differentiation by position. This means that it does not really matter what the location is or the function of the player on the field, the pass itself shows deep insight into the re-socialization of the children and adults.

A Muslim coach from Abu-Tor described his expectations of the mixed project based on his knowledge of neighborhood history.

**Muhamad**: This project has a very deep meaning for the good relations in this neighborhood. It can help reduce violence. When I was a child here, there was no issue related to Jewish–Muslim relations. We used to play with the Jews very freely, and we were friendly, with no questions and no problems. One day, ten years later, during my adolescence, we met a border guard dealing with some youth disorder in the neighborhood. He came to us, and we remembered him from our childhood! We grew up together! It was obvious that we needed to respect each other, and we stopped the disorder. This is the point! It can start here! That is why we must mingle with each other and not separate.

This coach attaches his past to the future of society through the present, in the form of the children he is coaching. His adolescence taught him a way of life, so he chose to make the effort to reproduce this history among the children. For him, soccer is the way to a peaceful life, and the children must play together now to make a different future for society.

The project was closed with a final event that brought together many public personalities, politicians, and organizational sponsors.It was hosted in Ramla, a mixed Jewish–Muslim city.

Here, two speakers are quoted, presenting their perspective on the mixed soccer project.

-The German ambassador in Israel:

You are the proof that on the field, we are equal, identical! Look at you: girls, boys, religious, secular, from the center, from the periphery, Jewish, Muslim, Cristian, we are all peaceful athletes! Let us speak the language of peace!

-The vice-mayor of Ramla:

In you, we see the future. You are all our peaceful future! You will prevent the next war! You will make our dreams come true! You are our dream!

In these clear words, a clear, simple, and easy message is delivered to the children. The speakers’ expectations are placed upon the games of the naïve children, and the children are asked to live out the adults’ dreams.

**Discussion**

The findings in this article show more than any adult effort to design a better future for children. This was a practical attempt that expresses a strong belief in the transformation of reality, while extending beyond any faith in the way that it was done. The adults understood that children’s games were an exceptional opportunity create a reality of brotherhood and partnership that would be very difficult to create within one’s daily routine. This game is a bi-directional socialization tool that functions in two directions. First, it moves in a powerful hierarchical direction, from top-down, and it also moves in the opposite direction, from bottom-up, as a power coming from the world of children that can affect the adult world (Friedman, 2010). The parents are complete the reality of their children’s encounters with their ideology through the top-down socialization. Then, the children must act to achieve the ideology and bring it into being, creating bottom-up socialization. Sports sessions are effective for allowing children to achieve personal and social goals (Bhana, 2008; Koo & Lee, 2014; Danioni, Barni, & Rosnati, 2017). Social efforts to cooperate between social political or ethnic groups through sports are a subject of research (Carrington 1996; Cockburn 2017; Richardson & Fletcher 2018). In Israel too, this issue is also studied in the context of determining the chances of reducing the rivalry between the Israelis and Palestinians (Friedman 2010; Lidor & Blumenstein 2011; Galili, Leitner, & Leitner 2013). Unfortunately, these studies are unable to pinpoint any change in reality except in the desire to change. The political figures who spoke at the final ceremony expressed the large weight of expectation for peace that they placed on the children’s young shoulders, but the parents and the coaches also added their own hopes and meanings. This study examines the hidden and visible intentions of adults in the project. The warm words of the two coaches, the Muslim parents, and the Jewish father presented a pure and naïve reality. The coach represented the code of the Inter-Milano football club: pass the ball, it does not matter who you pass to. The Jewish father expressed a similar point of view, and he passed it on to his son, who showed for a moment a lack of confidence in the prospects for peace and partnership. His father strengthened and encouraged him to just pass and be a friend. In this way, he showed that he considered the game to be stronger than the differences between the players. The Muslim parents from East Jerusalem described how their participation in the project was a true social sacrifice. They’re aware of this and expressed themselves ready to let their personal lives go for the sake of the future. The Muslim football coach presented his worldview to us based on his adolescence in the mixed neighborhood of Abu-Tor. He reported that he never experienced stress between the communities in his childhood, and he wished to pass that feeling on to his children. Familiarity with his Jewish neighbors allowed him to prevent a conflict with the border guard who shared his childhood in the neighborhood. The ultimate story here is that authentic, spontaneous soccer can work for change. Future peace rests on the feet of children.

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1. <https://intercampus.inter.it/programma/israel-2/?lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)