Palestinian youth and non-formal service-learning: a model for personal development, long-term engagement, and peace building

Trae Stewart

Palestinian youth face developmental, cultural, and political barriers that impede them from fully engaging in civic life. Non-traditional, youth-centred pedagogies of engagement, like community-based service-learning, have shown their potential to motivate marginalised populations and provide space and roles for them to form individual identities while developing civic skills. Using data collected through focus-group interviews, this article considers the impact on West Bank youth who participated in an NGO’s community-based service-learning leadership programme. Six themed findings are discussed, and the author suggests that non-school-based service-learning may have a central role to play in the civic-identity development of Palestine’s most populous group of citizens.

Jeunesse palestinienne et apprentissage de services non formel: un modèle pour le développement personnel, l’engagement à long terme et la construction de la paix

Les jeunes palestiniens se heurtent à des barrières développementales, culturelles et politiques qui les empêchent de participer pleinement à la vie civique. Les pédagogies d’engagement traditionnelles centrées sur les jeunes, comme l’apprentissage de services au sein des communautés, ont démontré leur potentiel au moment de motiver les populations marginalisées et de leur fournir un espace et des rôles leur permettant de former des identités individuelles tout en développant leurs compétences civiques. En utilisant des données recueillies grâce à des entretiens en groupes de réflexion, cet article considère l’impact sur les jeunes cisjordaniens qui ont participé à un programme de leadership d’apprentissage de services au sein de la communauté. Six résultats thématiques sont traités, et l’auteur suggère que l’apprentissage de services en dehors de l’école pourrait avoir un rôle central à jouer dans le développement de l’identité civique du groupe qui compte le plus grand nombre de citoyens de la Palestine.

Jovens palestinos e serviço-aprendizagem informal: um modelo para o desenvolvimento pessoal, engajamento de longo prazo e construção da paz

Os jovens palestinos enfrentam barreiras de desenvolvimento, barreiras culturais e barreiras políticas que os impedem de engajar-se totalmente na vida cívica. Pedagogias de engajamento não-tradicionais centradas nos jovens, como a do serviço-aprendizagem voltado à comunidade, têm mostrado seu potencial para motivar populações marginalizadas e oferecer espaço e
Palestinian youth and non-formal service-learning

funcões a elas para criarem identidades individuais enquanto desenvolvem habilidades cívicas. Utilizando dados coletados através de entrevistas de grupo focalizadas, este artigo avalia o impacto sobre jovens da Cisjordânia que participaram de um programa de liderança de serviço-aprendizagem voltado à comunidade de uma ONG. Seis resultados temáticos são discutidos e o autor sugere que o serviço-aprendizagem não baseado na escola pode ter um papel central no desenvolvimento da identidade cívica do grupo de cidadãos mais populoso da Palestina.

Jóvenes palestinos y proyectos no formales de aprendizaje-servicio: un modelo de desarrollo personal, de compromiso a largo plazo y de construcción de paz

Los jóvenes palestinos enfrentan obstáculos culturales, políticos y de desarrollo personal que les inhiben participar en actividades de la sociedad civil. Las pedagogías de participación no tradicionales y centradas en los jóvenes – como el aprendizaje-servicio en la comunidad – han demostrado que pueden motivar a poblaciones marginadas y a la vez crear espacios y roles que promueven su identidad personal y fortalecen sus habilidades cívicas. Basándose en estadísticas de entrevistas a grupos específicos, este ensayo expone el impacto entre jóvenes de Cisjordania que participaron en el aprendizaje-servicio no escolar de un programa de liderazgo realizado por una ONG. Se analizan las conclusiones centradas en seis temas. El autor sugiere que el aprendizaje-servicio no escolar podría jugar un papel importante en el desarrollo de la identidad cívica entre este grupo mayoritario de la población palestina.

KEY WORDS: Social sector; Arab States

Developmental and civic needs of Palestinian youth

Citizenship is a socially constructed space in which the powerful citizenry defines membership requirements according to its own practices, attributes, and beliefs (Pinson 2008). These processes discursively construct boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘centres’ and ‘margins’ (Isin and Wood 1999). As a result, non-group ‘others’ are relegated to a private or individual sphere, the periphery of the civic arena (Pinson 2008). In Palestine, for example, adults do not recognise youth (those aged roughly 13–25 years old) as capable citizens, and they do not create spaces for them in which to participate. Young people are seen as immature, inexperienced, and costly burdens on society. Ironically, youth in Palestine outnumber older citizens significantly: 60 per cent of Palestinian society is below the age of 30 years (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2008).

In addition to cultural barriers, politics further constrains the civic engagement of Palestinian youth. Israeli occupation limits a young person’s ability to seek experiences beyond his or her permitted travel zones. A form of structural violence, such ghettoisation can be as deadly to a young person’s realisations of personal potential as direct physical attacks can be (Schwebel and Christie 2001). Young people internalise messages of distrust from the constant questioning, monitoring, and regulating of their movement and behaviour.

Limited opportunities to participate in the civic sphere pose a serious threat to the prospect of a stable and independent Palestinian democracy. Bored, marginalised youth question why they should care for a society that does not seem to care for them – an attitude which results in extreme civic apathy. Worse yet, disenfranchised youth may begin to see themselves as the ‘other’ and (un)consciously assume a deviant counter-identity. The maintenance of this role requires participation in irresponsible, destructive, and even deadly community activities which offer young people a more immediate escape from their socially prescribed state of developmental limbo.
As a response to the civic apathy and disengagement of Palestinian youth, formal education holds little promise. The civic-education curriculum centres on past events and adopts an emotionally based anti-Zionist approach. Because of its narrow intellectual and practical focus (Salomon and Nevo 2001), Palestinian civic education appears unable to contribute to the formation of an independent Palestine. Youth-centred pedagogies of engagement such as service-learning which blend together social integration, health support, economic assistance, positive social roles, peace education, and youth participation have been identified as more viable alternatives (Wessells and Monteiro 2001).

For this reason, there have been calls for Palestinians to integrate young people into civic affairs through programmes offered by non-government organisations (Seif 1999). After the First Intifada in 1987, NGOs took increasing responsibility for the provision of services to Palestinian populations whose access to opportunities, services, and information is limited by mobility restrictions and curfews. NGOs have become an integral mechanism in the process of social transformation and the strengthening of civil society in Palestine (Daq 2005), because of their flexibility, their ability to function in difficult circumstances, and their dedication to high levels of performance.

Using data collected through focus-group interviews, this article reports how West Bank youth who participated in a non-formal, community-based service-learning leadership programme were affected by their involvement. Findings are thematically grouped and linked to long-term civic engagement and peace building within Palestine.

Community-based service-learning and youth voice

Service-learning is an educational method which engages participants in volunteer service that addresses genuine community needs and has been explicitly connected to learning objectives through ongoing reflection activities. Community-based service-learning is conducted outside the formal school environment by community-based organisations that have expertise in working with the particular population being served (for example, young, elderly, or disabled people).

Through contextualised practice in real-world settings, effective service-learning attends to social needs, enhances learning, and develops civic responsibility simultaneously, thereby benefiting both society and learner. In short, service-learning can be a catalyst for young people to become responsible adults and contributing members of their communities and workplaces. Reported impacts on youth who engaged in service-learning include the following:

- increased social, cognitive, and interpersonal skills (Klute and Billig 2002)
- increased civic knowledge and awareness of societal issues (Melchior and Bailis 2002)
- more respectful and caring attitudes towards diverse groups (Yates and Youniss 1996)
- enhanced ability to connect academic learning to societal issues and concerns (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray 2000)
- a sense of civic efficacy (Morgan and Streb 2001)
- increased longitudinal civic participation (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997)
- reduced risk behaviours (Fredericks, Kaplan, and Zeisler 2001).

One element that is key to achieving these outcomes is the inclusion of youth voice in a service-learning programme. Fredericks, Kaplan, and Zeisler (2001) define youth voice as ‘the inclusion of young people as a meaningful part of the creation and implementation of service opportunities’. These authors posit that encouraging their input at each stage of the service-learning project allows young people to continuously scaffold their capacities towards greater responsibility. In those service-learning programmes identified as high-quality and effective, young
people have been given responsibility to plan, make decisions, and solve problems directly related to real issues in the community.

Empirical evidence suggests the positive potential of Palestinian community-based service-learning models that give a voice to young people. Analysing participant responses in pre- and post-surveys conducted with more than 200 high-school students, researchers found that if young people are involved in service-learning programmes with a high degree of student voice and ownership, their cynicism will decline, political engagement and social capital will increase, and attitudes towards out-groups will become more tolerant (Morgan and Streb 2003). They also discovered that students who had more opportunities to express their voice in service-learning projects made greater gains in political knowledge, were less cynical about government, and had a greater desire to be politically active than others. In other words, service-learning youth programmes that respond to the overtly expressed views and needs of the participants, appear to build citizenship.

The Ruwwad 30/30 model: service-learning by and for Palestinians

Recognising the needs of Palestinian youth, the potential of non-formal service-learning, and the fact that young people are assets for positive, not destructive, social change, Ruwwad, an NGO created by and for Palestinians, designed and implemented a youth-centred, community-based service-learning programme. Its primary goal is to provide leadership opportunities by (1) increasing opportunities for young Palestinians to participate in delivering humanitarian assistance and promoting self-reliance; and (2) enhancing positive citizenship for young Palestinians through community service and grassroots youth-led initiatives.

To meet these objectives, Ruwwad’s model draws conceptual design elements from ecological approaches to human development and youth-empowerment models. As in the holistic best practices identified earlier, Ruwwad acknowledges that social and human development is simultaneously mediated at various levels through myriad agents. The model allows for a smooth, purposive interaction between micro-, meso-, and macro-level elements (for example, individual, family, peers, community groups, and social institutions). Such interconnectivity multiplies the potential impact across numerous societal agents through multidirectional, focused, and continuous contextualisation of purpose, action, and change. Like other youth-focused assets-based models, Ruwwad’s approach suggests that ‘to improve youths’ situation, one needs to take a community approach that develops youths’ capacities, improves adult perceptions of youth, and increases youths’ positive role within their communities’ (Wessells and Monteiro 2001: 128).

Ruwwad’s approach to community-based service-learning centres on its unique ‘30/30’ model. Every thirty days, thirty youth are recruited to participate in a public-service training programme which culminates in a youth-led community-service initiative based on real needs. The 30/30 model has five stages: recruitment, orientation, training, placement, and coaching.

Recruitment

Ruwwad is knowledgeable about youth culture and promotes itself through direct, hands-on activities accordingly. Their grassroots-based recruitment activities include peer-to-peer marketing, flyers, media announcements, text messages, coordinator visits to youth clubs, recommendations by community members, and youth gatherings during cultural events (such as Ramadaniat). As a result of its active, varied recruitment of a diverse participant base,
almost 1500 youth volunteers and leaders had engaged in community service, and almost
17,000 young people had taken part in civic education activities by 2008.

**Orientation**

Before young people begin their training, they are hosted at Ruwwad for a one-day orientation,
when they learn about the components, goals, methodology, and activities of the 30/30 training
and associated youth-led initiatives. Participants are presented with a large amount of infor-
mation so that they are well informed about what will be required for their participation and ulti-
mate success. Small-group meetings allow them to meet with project coordinators and learn
about their roles as mentors, facilitators, and coaches. The orientation also allows Ruwwad to
collect pre-training data in order to establish a baseline to assess potential impact later.

**Training**

The 30/30 training programme lasts for three days. During these sessions, participants learn
about topics such as leadership principles, communication, self-reliance, intergenerational
dialogue, team building, motivation, creative thinking, and programme design. Content is deliv-
ered through skills development and the opportunity to experience and internalise the content
for confidence building and long-term retrieval.

The participants’ understanding of the theoretical content and skills sets is facilitated by trai-
ners’ use of a varied set of enjoyable teaching strategies and techniques. Games, cooperative
groups, project work, and discussions keep the young people interested and motivated. In
fact, one key element of Ruwwad’s service-learning programme is the requirement that
youth-led initiatives be developed and implemented by a small group of at least four young
people from different governorates across the West Bank. This requirement enables young
people to build skills while working with others, to learn about individuals and areas that
they may not have had the opportunity to visit, and establish social networks among other
civic-minded youth in contexts where social opportunities are limited.

The learner-centred nature of Ruwwad’s service-learning model is most clear in its youth-led
initiatives, where young people design and implement their own projects, receiving ongoing
mentoring from trainers and/or coordinators. The youth-centred approach is not exaggerated
to the point where young people are isolated, however. Ruwwad realises that they are
capable of achieving their goals but are still learning and will need assistance throughout the
process. Through the creation of a zone of proximal development, trainers, coordinators, and
organisation staff maintain communication and presence from the first orientation meeting
throughout the coaching and evaluation steps of the process. The young people themselves,
however, remain responsible for the ultimate success of the initiatives and their learning.

**Placement**

Young people who complete the basic training are given the chance to practise the skills that
they have learned by implementing a youth-led initiative. Because there is $5,000 funding
available for successful teams, successful programme designs are selected through a compe-
tition. The group that scores the highest points will automatically receive funding. Other
groups may also be selected for funding, but they often have to return to the planning
process to address design weaknesses. Otherwise, 30/30 trainees are also expected to take
part in their peers’ initiatives. The main components on which proposals are judged are
listed below:
level of youth participation in designing, planning, and implementing the initiatives;
- whether the initiative responds to a community need and priority;
- the level of initiative effectiveness and impact on improving living conditions and community development;
- achieving a non-formal, educational goal;
- building youth capacity and empowering participants through the implementation of the project;
- the possibility of developing and sustaining the initiative.

To date, 60 youth-led initiatives have served 13 governorates across the West Bank and Gaza (WB/G). Examples of the most successful initiatives include cleaning up beaches in Gaza, coordinating summer camps, organising recycling programmes, running breast-cancer awareness campaigns, developing youth theatre projects, and providing emergency food and medical aid.

**Coaching**

Ruwwad’s overall organisational environment is youth-centred, welcoming participants as though it is their second home. This affirming approach arises partly from Ruwwad’s policy of hiring talented, vibrant, and younger staff members who provide non-authoritarian leadership. Youth participants arguably should feel more comfortable sharing their opinions in such a context, especially in the presence of successful mentors from whom to learn. These individuals are full-time Ruwwad employees or interns who are assigned to each group during the orientation. Coaches are regionally based and communicate with initiatives groups during their planning and implementation processes to answer questions, offer support, and help groups to stay on track. They do not interfere with the initiative processes. Instead, the young participants are required to navigate the processes and systems themselves.

**Study methods**

Five focus groups were convened, consisting of 33 young people (20 males, 13 females) who had participated in Ruwwad’s service-learning programme. Focus-group sessions were held in governorates located in the north (Nablus), centre (Ramallah and Al-Bireh), and south (Hebron) of the West Bank in order to facilitate participants’ access, given inter-governorate travel restrictions/delays.

Each focus-group session lasted approximately two hours. Group attendance ranged from four to ten participants, some of whom were unable to stay for the entire meeting. Questions were posed about the participants’ service experiences, how they were prepared, what impacts they experienced from their involvement, and how their experiences and learning have since influenced other aspects of their lives and/or work. A bilingual Ruwwad staff member interpreted between English and Arabic speakers.

**Discussion of identified themes**

**Citizenship**

For Palestinian youth, being participatory citizens is complicated by a conservative cultural mentality about youth, by restrictions on movement within the West Bank, and by the
complexities of citizenship for residents of an occupied territory. In fact, several young participants explained that before joining Ruwwad they had been full of energy, ideas, and skills, but did not see how to put them into action or feel confident that they would be welcomed to do so by Palestinian society: ‘Communities still have negative views of youth. They don’t see that we can do anything and don’t trust that our efforts will go anywhere. If someone more important or older came along, then they would give them the chance instead.’ As a result, many of them were mere passive recipients of society’s resources, thinking only of their own needs.

Participants developed a stronger civic identity, and a greater sense of responsibility for others and society itself. During focus-group interviews, participants spoke of communities in need, populations without access to resources, and their role in helping to address these issues.

‘Because of the incursion by Israeli forces and the political situation, Palestine is similar to a war zone. Youth have lots of energy to release and are choosing to volunteer in organisations. They feel that they can change and do something for their community. There are women and children suffering, and we need to do something to put a smile on their faces.’

Participants’ experiences also affected their longitudinal civic plans. In fact, participants consistently offered their intentions to remain civically involved. One leader of a service initiative described the change from a self-centred to a civic-centred mind-set and the desire for increased participation in society:

‘At the beginning, I would fill my time with this and that. I then became proud after I saw the results of the initiative. Society members need work and have developed a consumer mentality as a result in recent years. We need to do something for free; just to do it for others. Now, every day I want to do more.’

Social capital/skills

For Ruwwad’s service-learners, various opportunities to establish, utilise, and/or maintain social capital were available. First, participants often learned of Ruwwad’s programmes through existing social networks, including personal friends, community acquaintances, youth clubs, or adult mentors. Their decisions to participate seemed to have been based on knowing someone who had already taken part in the activities, which encouraged an automatic trust of the programme and reduced their concern that their efforts would be a waste of time. Young people were motivated to participate also if the social or personal status of young people already participating in the programme was high.

The second means of social-network formation and support was through the training curriculum and activities. As part of the 30/30 training, young people learn the foundations of teamwork and interpersonal communication. These lessons were of immediate importance, given that most participants did not know the other participants with whom they were in training or volunteering. Whereas students might often sit through a traditional class lecture without engaging with other learners, 30/30 training includes active, hands-on workshops that require interaction within the first hour of meeting. Furthermore, the climax of the training is the placement of participants in cooperative groups through which they will design, plan, and later implement a community-service initiative.

The training and service activities created a space for the exchange of ideas and formation of action groups that are otherwise not possible: ‘I can meet young people and share experiences and ideas with them. Then, we can translate these ideas into reality while helping those in need.’
In fact, one young person who had led a service initiative realised that a large, networked group of active youth actually has significant power to make social change: ‘We are youth and we have power – physical strength and education – and free time. We can often find others to help.’

From their interactions with diverse youth and workshops on communication in the trainings, service-learners developed more effective, and culturally sensitive, communication skills to deal with the varied Palestinian sub-cultures. Interviewed participants mentioned that this insight was helpful when dealing with local merchants, when approaching volunteers, community beneficiaries, and governorate decision-makers about the service initiative, and even when manoeuvring between the different cultural mentalities among group members. This was particularly true for those who had conducted community-based needs assessments (CBNAs), where entering some of the most disenfranchised communities (for example, refugee camps, Bedouin communities) required them to show respect for others by communicating within their hosts’ cultural comfort zones.

**Intellectual/cognitive skills**

Through their participation in 30/30 and/or CBNAs trainings, youth reported that they had learned new content and practical skills, such as motivation, leadership, planning, budgeting, research methods, analytic techniques, diversity, teamwork, and communication. In the words of one 30/30 training participant: ‘Through my participation, I understood what leadership is – the role of a leader, the hierarchy of leadership, and that there are lots of ways to do leadership.’

Through their community-based service activities, the young people were able to apply the concepts and theories that they had learned. They reported that these experiences enliven the concepts and help them to contextualise the content for more long-term encoding and retrieval. In addition, they gained knowledge that was not explicitly taught as part of their workshops. Most notably, the young people who conducted the CBNAs learned about diverse communities with which they had not been familiar, and the shockingly basic needs of those communities. For example, they found that some communities (such as Bedouin groups) had no electricity, water, schools, health clinics, or even houses or streets; many Palestinian communities subsist in bleak situations, where residents must ‘concentrate only on surviving’.

Participants also learned that women and girls face even more dire problems. Because some of these communities do not have their own schools, girls must travel far to attend classes. Parents who do not feel comfortable letting their daughters travel the long distance alone choose to keep them at home. Adult women similarly face limitations, particularly with respect to reproductive health care and planning; some village women had given birth to more than 20 children – which created both physiological strain and financial problems in a context where employment opportunities for youth are non-existent.

Lastly, participants also gained insight into the political realities in Palestine and were often forced to think creatively in order to surmount project-associated obstacles. Interviewees frequently mentioned how they had to think ‘out of the box’ or ‘widen their creative horizon’ when faced with a complication. For example, a recycling project in a Hamas-governed area was delayed due to regulations attached to project funds. Another group wanted to use a public park in Nablus for a service initiative. Although the area was designated for public use, youth were restricted from using the park. In the end, participants had to learn how to ‘navigate the system and go through backdoor routes to gain access’. At other times, groups learned that crafty manoeuvring was not sufficient, and that politics could frustrate the good intent of the projects and defeat their ingenuity. One group was denied the use of the yard of the Church of
the Nativity in Bethlehem because organisational leaders had not contacted the mayor personally to ask permission.

**Personal/psychosocial skills**

Young people reported feeling a sense of belonging and opportunity from their involvement with Ruwwad. They were encouraged by a welcoming environment where it was ‘okay to express opinions, and be part of discussions’. They appreciated the fact that a respected organisation saw, named, and empowered them as leaders. They realised that their abilities and identities were not static, but that they needed to constantly seek opportunities for self-development: ‘You have to be a leader for yourself first. Then you can be a leader for others, and also be part of a team where you are able to take the collective experience to learn, and improve your work and character even more.’

Participants also reported increased self-confidence. One male 30/30 trainee from Nablus described how prior to the training and his participation in service initiatives he would become very nervous if he had to speak in front of large groups, often sweating profusely. Since joining Ruwwad, he had ‘grown more confident speaking in public and in front of large groups. I even became a leader by managing a summer camp where I feel responsible for the kids.’ Similarly, another participant had studied social services at a local university where concepts were limited to theory, with no practical application. Book-oriented learning had made him become narrow-minded, inflexible, and self-absorbed. Since he joined Ruwwad, however, he has become ‘more confident to take control while still letting everyone participate’.

For Palestinian youth, feeling empowered is important to maintaining their civic involvement and ultimately forming an identity as a citizen. Such feelings play a key role in the development of identity and self-esteem, especially in the context of experience of success, and they may dispose learners to act positively towards learning and seek similar experiences in the future. In fact, one young woman commented that after realising the impacts of her work, she was even further ‘motivated to do more to make a difference’. For youth, pride is a particularly important intrinsic motivator, not only because it increases learners’ feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, but also because personal acknowledgment verifies that they have met others’ expectations and are valued.

**Human capital/work-related skills**

‘Human capital’ generally refers to the skills and knowledge that enable an individual to perform economically-valued tasks. In line with previous findings from research in service-learning, Ruwwad participants self-reported that they had acquired job skills, developed a better work ethic, and discovered new career opportunities, all of which would positively affect their potential for future employment.

Through community service, young people were able to put into action the concepts that they had learned during training, while simultaneously acquiring additional on-the-job skills. When asked what they had gained that would be transferrable to other work environments, 30/30 trainee leaders mentioned planning, budgeting, management, leadership, advertising/marketing an event, motivating stakeholders, and working as a team. One male 30/30 trainee recounted how he was able to use his knowledge of motivation, and the practical techniques learned in training, to entertain and motivate his dabke folk-dance group partners when they became unfocused or disengaged. Other respondents reported successfully transferring their learning during internships. One former intern attributed his hiring at a radio station to the opportunities and experiences...
he had gained at Ruwwad: ‘After training I was more organised and could more effectively communicate with my team. I had better leadership and motivation, which allowed me to create a more professional atmosphere.’ Given that work-related impacts through service-learning engagement are strongly associated with the types of activity performed, CBNA participants learned different skills: how to conduct research, engage in intercultural communication, personalise questionnaires to respondent populations, collect focus-group data, and write reports.

Young people also mentioned that they had developed a better work ethic. Whereas their commitment to previous academic pursuits was driven by their own needs, participants were challenged to be more responsible, accountable, and ethical in their community-service work and internships. One possible reason for this change in mind-set is that participants were often reporting to their peers, who were counting on their attendance and participation in order to achieve project goals. They also saw themselves as accountable to the community members whom they were serving, and to those with whom they were working. Being late, unprepared, disengaged, or negative/pessimistic was embarrassing and reflected poorly on the organisation that had provided such promising opportunities.

Lastly, some participants discovered career opportunities that they had not previously considered, or even knew of. As a result of their positive experiences of working with Ruwwad and its youth-serving partner organisations, visiting government agencies as part of a service initiative, conducting CBNA’s, or being involved in particular community-service projects (for example, the Erada breast-cancer awareness campaign), some respondents voiced their intention to learn more about working for youth-development NGOs, welfare offices, or in community development and public health.

A model for personal development, long-term engagement, and peace building

Youth-empowerment approaches, coupled with a community-development focus, both of which are key elements in Ruwwad’s 30/30 model, provide a viable platform for peace building (Wessells and Monteiro 2001). First, empowerment can be seen as using active participation to gain control over one’s life, as a dynamic process which includes participatory competence, or, for youth empowerment in particular, as an opportunity to bond with model adults through meaningful roles in an environment of positive reinforcement and recognition (Kieffir 1984; Chinman and Linney 1998). While unique in itself, each initiative posits a connection between empowerment and active, meaningful participation.

Active participation has been demonstrated to enhance self-acceptance and self-confidence, and develop active roles in a community (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Generally, adolescents who feel connected and are influenced by positive adult norms and expectations that they will lead successful lives (Moody, Childs, and Sepples 2003). The potential outcomes make ‘focal those opportunities young people have to experience membership in local groups, organisations, and institutions and to practice the skills that citizens in a democracy need’ (Flanagan 2003: 259). And service-learning activities that incorporate youth voice and leadership are positioned to empower young people to be involved constructively in a community (Fredericks, Kaplan, and Zeisler 2001).

In terms of peace building, an empowerment approach can mobilise young people for pro-social rather than anti-social behaviour, enable them to achieve a positive role in their communities, strengthen attitudes and skills conducive to non-violence, and build the peer support and life skills required for establishing meaningful lives as contributing citizens (Wessells and Monteiro 2006). The movement towards a more positive psychology contrasts starkly with
the external pathologising and internalised self-destructiveness that are characteristics of Palestinian youth in general. In the Ruwwad model, young people appear to derive a positive sense of well-being, belonging, meaning, and purpose from being part of (and contributing back to) something larger and more permanent than themselves. In fact, Wessells (2002) has argued that young people’s role as peace builders may be a vital factor in efforts to limit terrorism.

Second, Ruwwad is engaging youth responsibly in community development across micro/macro levels. While individual development is important, one’s ability to operate within a multi-layered society is paramount to the realisation of both individual and societal needs/potential. For civic engagement, becoming empowered as a civic participant or social-change agent is not sufficient if an actor’s knowledge and skills are limited to a particular space or activity. Social issues and personal development are not one-dimensional, nor do they operate within a vacuum. They are caused, worsened, and ultimately solved by numerous actors and resources from various social arenas simultaneously. The altruistic intentions of individuals acting alone will ultimately result in a feeling of disempowerment and apathy when efforts to address a problem are realised to be short-lived or only surface-level quick fixes.

For peace building, community-based service-learning can fuel peace efforts by cultivating a new generation of caring, experienced, community-centred, change-oriented, self-valuing citizens. While one might argue that any age group can benefit from such programmes, young people tend to possess a wealth of knowledge about varying aspects of their communities, curiosity about issues, creative approaches to addressing problems, greater insight and capacity to act, and individual energy to sustain their involvement (Mohamed and Wheeler 2001). In Palestine, these traits are particularly vital, given the vast numbers of young people in the population.

Providing youth with community-based responsibilities challenges stereotypes of younger citizens and, in the minds of a broader audience, negative prejudices about Palestinians in general. Young people who build positive relationships while contributing to the community are seen as resources or problem-solvers, rather than as instigators of trouble. Being trusted, valued, and seen as more confident can demonstrate youth’s readiness to accept responsibilities traditionally relegated to adults. Such opportunities may have added benefit for young Palestinian females, who experience the additional burden of sexual discrimination and traditional role expectations. Ruwwad’s 30/30 model contributes directly to such outcomes by creating flexible participation, placing young participants where they can directly see the positive impacts of their service, teaming up young people for social networking and fun, and connecting them with adult mentors within and across generational groups.

Although Ruwwad offers a promising model, sustainability is necessary to both long-term engagement and peace-building efforts. Wessells and Monteiro (2006) recommend that in those territories where the local government agencies lack capacity, NGOs may be charged with the delivery of the service, while the government’s capacity is progressively built to ensure a smooth transition. Proactively, Ruwwad has established a partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports to expand a more formalised National Palestinian Youth Corps. This partnership speaks to Palestine’s interest in and continuing efforts toward development, inclusion, and change by formally recognising and celebrating the efforts of those young people ‘who become agents of change in their communities rather than allowing themselves to fall into patterns of bad behaviour and attitude or apathy’ (Ardizzone 2003: 423).

Conclusion

The Arabic word for citizenship, mowateneh, is etymologically linked to the word waten, which means ‘homeland’. Although citizenship is often understood in relation to an individual’s
national identity, the linguistic bond between identity and a specific geographic territory carries additional meaning for Palestine and its youth. It considers past and enduring foreign presence, the individual’s present notion of self, and future possibilities of freedom from restrictive cultures and politics through capacity-building approaches. Beyond their positive developmental outcomes, community-based service-learning programmes like that offered by Ruwwad will help to achieve a paradigm shift in the perceptions of youth: from agents of destruction to agents of positive social change by providing an energetic, creative population with the space and support to find their own voices and identities as citizens.

References


The author

Trae Stewart is Associate Professor in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida. He specialises in service-learning, teacher education, and international education. He holds a Ph.D. in International & Intercultural Education from the University of Southern California. <pbstewar@mail.ucf.edu>