

SURVEYING SIXTH AND SEVENTH GRADERS

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For this project, Bilal Muta interviewed 6th and 7th graders at MEEI in order to understand and construct a narrative from children growing up with a long history of regional conflict. The students were asked about their everyday lives--about friends, family, religion, and future goals. They were also asked if they “could tell someone in the United States about themselves, what would it be?” Muta gathered information through formal and informal discussions with the faculty, staff, and students at MEEI. Respondents shared some of their concerns and obstacles to education, which included lack of funding and overcrowded classrooms. Despite obstacles, many of the teachers said they loved teaching and felt Mar Elias was an important institution, not only for the children that they teach, but for Israel’s peaceful future.

A total of 88 surveys were collected, 38 respondents were 7th graders and 50 were 6th graders. Ten or 20% of 6th graders were students in the gifted school. The demographic data collected shed some light on the circumstances in which these students live. Seventy-six percent of the students lived in Ibillin. Surrounding villages, such as Kabul, Sakharin, and Shafa, were home to the other 24% of the students. Eighty percent of the students reported belonging to households with more than five people and 20% live in households with more than seven people. It took 75% of the students less than ten minutes to travel to school, while it took 20% of students more than 30 minutes to travel to school. Eighty-five percent of the students travel with at least two other people to school, with the most common answer being sibling or parents. Twenty-five percent of the students traveled at least part of the way to school by city buses. Less than 10% of students participated in afterschool activities. Due to lack of funding, Mar Elias cannot afford to provide regular afterschool programs. Students reported a great deal of interaction with others of different religious backgrounds. Only 2% of students reported having friends only from their own religious group. Sixty percent identified themselves as Christians and 38% as Muslim. Two percent of the students did not report a religion affiliation.

Respondents were also asked about causes of stress in their lives. Many of the students reported having stress from school and home. More than 60% of the students reported that the stress at home related to violence around them and recent conflicts with neighboring Lebanon. Despite the stress from recent violence, more than 85% of the students were happy in Israel. Seventy-two percent expressed interest in higher education, which included receiving

a Ph.D. Those students also stated that there were more obstacles for them educationally and vocationally being Arab and living in Israel.

Students were very open when they were asked to share something with a student their age in the United States. Many offered email addresses and wanted to be contacted as penpals. Many responses alluded to hopes for a peaceful future. For example, one student wrote, "Fear from war and tension at school. Studying is very hard. We are smart and will overcome any problems." Another student wrote, "Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible. We can all be friends and respect each other's customs and traditions. We can overcome the negativity that leads to killing people. Faithful friends are the best thing in life and our generation must be peaceful because we don't want to fight with anyone and we don't want to be forced to leave our homes. We want to be friends and work together with everybody."

When many think of the conflict in the Middle East, they think of religions clashing. Depending on your perspective, that clash is due to the traditions and cultures in each faith or due to other issues. Perhaps the resolution to the regional conflicts lies in the words of one 6th-grade boy who wrote, "Friendship is great. Our life is fine. Our tradition is great. We go to school together. We play together. We should all come together as Muslims, Christians, and Jews because we all worship one God. Peace should be everywhere between all people."

This project has provided some valuable information about the perspectives of the young students as they go through the Mar Elias Educational program. These students are passionate youth, filled with hope and peace. This message of tolerance and respect regardless of political affliction or religious background should be spread. This is especially true as we move toward a more global society. Children in the United States will be interacting with people all over the world as they grow up and step into their careers. If a seed of peace and justice is planted in them at a young age now, then one day society will be able to reap the fruits of justice from our future leaders not only in the United States but across the globe. This information along with informal taped interviews of faculty and live discussions with students will be used to share another side to the conflict in Israel.