GIRL POWER

Personal Moral Compass in Middle Schools in the Periphery

JONATHAN KASLER, AYELET SHAVIT, NOFAR HAREL, ADI SHARABI-NOV

Tel Hai College, Upper Galilee, Israel

KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
Moral Compass *Values* *Well-being* *Children* *Gender* *Palestinians* *Jews*	*The aim of this study was twofold. First, we sought to map the personal moral compass (PMC) of children in the periphery – girls and boys, Palestinians and Jews – to better understand how nationality and gender affect their values – as activated in their lives. Second, we examined the relationship between personal moral compass and measures of well-being.* 1001 *children aged 12-13 years living in the geographic northern periphery of Israel were asked to write short compositions on enactment of their values and completed questionnaires on sense of hope, general belongingness, and life engagement. In choice of values, clear differences between Palestinians and Jews were revealed, but gender differences were less salient. We also found that Palestinian and Jewish girls mentioned values more often and demonstrated deeper commitment to their PMC than boys did. Examining personal moral compass emerged as a valuable tool to learn about children's inner world.*

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ACADEMICS

Introduction

Researchers and educators search for effective avenues to guide children in the direction of a healthy balance between responsibility to the community and personal success, but children construct their own understanding of the world; they are not empty and passive vessels to be filled with content by responsible adults (Dreitzel, 1973). It seems that a collaborative approach is necessary to draw children into a useful dialogue and foster a moral as well as a pragmatic approach to the future. Damon (2008) found that young persons inspired and committed to a noble purpose of their choice tended towards healthy and wise behaviors that served to reduce the risk of drifting into maladaptive lifestyles. However, as children develop a sense of identity and try to determine their place in the world, the values to which they become committed will likely serve as guides in times of stress and decision making and as signposts toward future goals.

In a controversial move, the city of Chicago recently decided to require high-school seniors to present a plan for the future as a condition for receiving a high-school diploma (CNN report, Ray Sanchez, 8 July 2017). Radical as it was, this measure reflects a growing concern that schoolchildren need to be better prepared for adult life. William Damon's seminal book, *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life* (2008), and research inspired by his work have shown that a sense of purpose contributes to a healthy and productive future. However, choice of purpose as well as many other life decisions are deeply affected by our values. According to Malin, Liauw, and Damon (2017), individuals find purpose on the basis of a set of clear values, and are "driven by those values to act on them" (p. 1202). We maintain that it is one's personal moral compass (PMC), composed of a set of core values, that serves as an inner guide in major life choices. Educators need to understand what matters to children, how they see the world, and, crucially, how their evolving PMC guides and motivates them.

1.1. Personal Moral Compass, and Well-Being

In the present study, we examined the values of middle-school children as they are actively expressed in their behavior. We focused not on abstract core personal values, but more importantly, on how children express them in their daily lives, where values serve as a guide to their actions.

We also focused on how the expression of values is related to well-being. Accordingly, in addition to the compositions, we administered three measures of well-being. The first, children's perceived sense of hope (Snyder et al., 1997), measures confidence in goal setting, as well as overcoming obstacles along the way. The second, general belongingness (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012), is understood to be a key measure of well-being (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). The third, life engagement, is a measure of purpose (Scheier et al., 2006).

1.2. Demographic Variables: Gender and Nationality

In light of the possibility that demographic variables would affect children's responses to the research questionnaire, we examined the impact of two salient variables, gender and nationality, on the content of PMC as expressed in children's compositions. We chose these two parameters because findings of recent studies have demonstrated how children construct their moral outlooks from their social experience (see, e.g., Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014). This inevitably includes the sociopolitical environment, tensions between different national groups, and other aspects of the world in which they live. For example, Jewish and Palestinian children growing up in the Galilee are exposed to atrocities occurring in nearby Syria on the television screen. This situation has engendered increasing research interest in the resilience of children who live in such areas (Ajdukovic, Kimhi, & Lahad, 2015; Miller-Graff & Cummings, 2017; Shachar-Dadon, Gueron-Sela, Weintraub, Maayan-Metzger, & Leshem, 2017). The results of previous research suggest that most children continue to thrive and demonstrate resilience despite uncertain, sometimes dangerous, and frightening experiences (Hamill, 2003). However, there may be concerns regarding the effect of these negative life experiences on some children's abilities to articulate PMC, as well as their well-being in general. Also, differences between Jews and Palestinians, and especially, unequal power relations between these national groups living in the constant shadow of a chronic violent conflict, may affect children's value choices as well as general well-being (Ayer, Venkatesh, Stewart, Mandel, Stein, & Schoenbaum, 2017).

Van der Graaff et al. (2014) found gender differences in perspective taking and empathetic concern among adolescents, with girls displaying higher abilities and more prosocial abilities than boys. However, differences in physiological development might explain some gender differences in adolescence; adolescent girls are around two years ahead of boys in some aspects of cognitive development (Silberman & Snarey, 1993). In an Israeli sample of adolescents, Kulik (2005) found that girls tended to identify less with gender stereotypes than boys did, and this tendency decreased with age, regardless of sex. This suggests that, beyond the impact of gender on cognitive development in adolescence, children may be less constrained by gender stereotypes today than they were in the past.

In addition, nationality and gender may intersect. Some researchers and commentators have described Palestinian society as relatively patriarchal and collectivist (Efrati, 2004). In contrast, in a more recent study, Greenberg and Sagiv-Reiss (2013) found that the traditional ties to family and accepted gender-based norms are currently being challenged in this society. Therefore, any assumptions regarding gender roles in this national group should be viewed with caution, but there is also a need for research on how gender impacts PMC in the context of national groups.

1.3. Composition Writing and Analysis

Banyard, Hamby, Aubin, and Grych (2015) found that children's writing exercises on morality, in particular when expressing their personal outlook, potentially stimulate their interest and may foster emotional as well as physical health. Moreover, research on the impact of self-affirmation has shown that writing about treasured values often leads to prosocial behaviors (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), and there is also some evidence that it can serve as a buffer to stress (Brady et al., 2016).

Analyzing children's compositions with a focus on values can provide rich data on what children find most important to them. For example, Veljkovic & Schwartz (2001) found that a composition competition provided an outlet for the expression of children's "laws of life." Elias (2008) discussed the effectiveness of such activities in enhancing resilience; Stepney, Elias, and Epstein (2015) found that content analysis of children's compositions could help identify children at risk. Therefore, asking children to write about their values and how they apply them in their daily lives could provide them with an opportunity to consider which values are important to them and how these values affect their day-to-day lives. Such information could provide researchers and educators with a window into the world of adolescents.

1.4. The Present Study

We defined PMC as a set of values that serve as rules of thumb for each child when encountering obstacles and challenges that require responsible and considered decisions and choices. Therefore, to identify PMCs, we asked the children who participated in the study to write short compositions articulating how they put their personal values into practice, based on two questions: Do you have any value or values that are important to you personally, and how do you put them into practice in your daily life?

We also administered questionnaires on the three measures of well-being listed above, in order to gather information regarding well-being. In addition, the participants completed a demographics questionnaire, to help determine the impact of gender and national identity.

We studied the PMC of middle-school children in a geographic periphery. The premise was that their expressions of commitment to values would provide information about what they cared about and how they saw themselves as active agents in their daily lives, but more importantly, how these values were directly related to behavior. However, the present study was not intended as an intervention, and it did not include the initiation or evaluation of any related programming.

1.5. Hypotheses

Based on the research literature, we posited the following hypotheses:
1. Children will be able to identify values that are important to them and to describe how they put them into practice in their day-to-day lives.
2. Values expressed will be associated with gender as well as with national differences.
3. Children who do not write compositions will score lower than children who do on measures of well-being.
4. General belongingness, children's perceived sense of hope, and life engagement (LET) will predict evaluated commitment to values (EC) as expressed in compositions.

2. Method

In order to examine these hypotheses, we chose a mixed-methods approach, in which quantitative as well as qualitative data were collected and analyzed. For the qualitative data, we asked children to write short compositions about their values. Based on data from the compositions, we calculated a measure of their commitment to values (EC) in order to investigate the relationship between PMC and measures of well-being. We also administered three standardized questionnaires to evaluate children's well-being: children's perceived sense of hope, general belongingness, and life engagement. We then performed regression analysis in order to determine the degree to which these measures predicted evaluated commitment (EC). In addition to analyzing the results for the children who wrote about their values and answered the questionnaires, we also examined the results of the questionnaires completed by children who refrained from writing compositions.

2.1. Participants

The research sample was comprised of 1001 eighth-grade girls and boys aged 12-15 who were attending seven middle schools in the Galilee, Israel. There we-

re 422 males, 486 females, and 98 students who did not mention their gender; 337 were Jewish and 664 were Palestinian. In Israel, Palestinian and Jewish children study in separate schools. The two systems, both supervised by the Israeli ministry of education, differ in language of instruction (Palestinians study in Arabic, and Jews, in Hebrew). The two different cultures are reflected in their respective curricula, but they share a common core of subject matter. We made every effort to reach a sample typical of children in the Galilee including both Palestinians and Jews. To obtain a representative sample, we included all the children studying in all regular classrooms in each school, all in public institutions providing education to children studying in regular frameworks.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

All research conducted in the public education system requires written permission of the chief scientist of the education ministry. We obtained this before approaching the school principals, whose permission was also required. Following the instructions of the chief scientist, we made sure that parents of the participants were aware of the research and its content and were given the option of refusing to allow their children to take part. After completing our initial analysis, we returned to the participating schools, reported the results to the management and teachers (untraceable to any child or class) and participated in a proactive discussion on its consequences. In addition, we hosted the Palestinian children at Tel Hai College, had them meet with Palestinian role models in the campus –students and faculty – and thanked them in a moving ceremony with members of the campus management.

2.3. Design and Procedure

Research assistants met the participants in their classrooms during the school day and guided them in filling out questionnaires and writing compositions. We also provided written instructions. The children wrote the compositions in the classroom without the presence of teachers and were given unlimited time to complete the questionnaires; most of them took around 20 minutes to do so. Some children wrote short compositions of 3-4 lines; others completed up to half a page of writing. In a few exceptional cases, the compositions were longer.

2.4. Instruments

Written composition. The children were asked to write a short composition addressing two questions: (a) do you have a value or values that you personally identify with; and (b) how do you put it or them into practice in your daily life?

The Children's Perceived Hope Scale. Snyder et al.'s (1997) Children's Perceived Hope Scale contains six items, three representing agency (e.g., "I am doing just as well as other kids my age") and three representing pathways (e.g., "When I have a problem I can think of lots of ways to solve it"). In the initial validation studies (Snyder et al., 1997), the reliability scores for CHS ranged from $\alpha = .70$ to $\alpha = .86$, with a median alpha of $\alpha = .77$. In the present study, an acceptable level of reliability was attained ($\alpha = 0.75$).

General Belongingness Scale (GBS). Malone, Pillow, and Osman's (2012) questionnaire contains twelve items that are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For this research, we used two of the subscales of GBS: acceptance/inclusion (e.g., "When I am with other people I feel included") and rejection/exclusion (e.g., "I feel like an outsider"; these items were reverse-scored). The authors of the scale reported high and stable reliability ($\alpha = .92$; Malone et al., 2012). In the present study, an acceptable level of reliability was attained ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Life Engagement Scale (LET). Scheier et al.'s (2006) questionnaire, designed as a measure of life purpose, contains six items (e.g., "To me, the things I do are all worthwhile"). Scheier et al. (2006) obtained acceptable reliability scores in all cases, ranging between $\alpha = .72$ and $\alpha = .87$, average $\alpha = .80$. In this study, a less than satisfactory level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.62$) was attained.

Demographic questionnaire. The children were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire about age, gender, religion, and place of residence.

2.5. Content Analysis of the Compositions

Before analyzing the children's compositions, we prepared a protocol for content analysis and held a training workshop in which initial coding of compositions was conducted. Four trained graduate students – two native Arabic-speakers and two native Hebrew-speakers – served as research assistants (RAs); they conducted content analysis of the compositions written in Arabic and Hebrew, respectively, employing the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The Arabic-speaking RAs analyzed the compositions written in Arabic, and the Hebrew-speaking RAs analyzed those written in Hebrew (each composition was read by two RAs). At an early stage of this analysis, one of the researchers conducted an independent content analysis of a sample of 60 compositions (30 in Hebrew and 30 in Arabic), to ensure that the protocols were being followed, the four evaluators and the entire research team met to compare results.

2.5.1. Protocol for the content analysis

1. To identify the main themes, each RA completed a standard form constructed to obtain the following information regarding themes: (a) name; (b) definition; (c) number of times the theme was mentioned in the composition; and (d) the estimated power of the theme (a scale of 1–9, low to high). The RAs arrived at these estimates based on the number of repetitions, word choice, and degree of detail. The estimated power was considered a relative factor, because it was based on comparison of all the themes elicited from the compositions.

2. The RAs assessed each child's overall commitment to values mentioned in the composition, based on repetitions, power of themes, word choice, and level of detail (using a scale of 1–9, low to high). We called this evaluated commitment (EC). This estimate was also relative, because it was based on comparison by the RAs of the compositions of all the students.

3. The research team met to compare their results, with the goal of reaching a consensus. A protocol was developed to resolve the differences between evaluators; most of these were semantic and therefore easily dealt with. In the few cases of significant disparity between RAs (each composition was evaluated by 2 RAs), one of the researchers served as adjudicator.

The data from the questionnaires were then loaded into the SPSS statistics tool for further analysis.

2.6. Statistical Analysis

Missing data. We assumed that any missing data was random, and did not employ ad hoc methods to address this issue. Thus, the missing data caused by children refraining from responding to all items in the questionnaire was not included in the analysis. It accounted for 5.3% of responses for the children's sense of hope measure, 5.8% for belongingness, and 9.9% for life engagement. A significant number of children did not write compositions but did complete the self-report questionnaires. We used this as an opportunity to test the differences between those who did and those who did not write compositions, as described in the section, Composition Writing.

Mixed methods analysis. We employed Fisher r-to-z transformation to assess the significance of the difference between two correlations – Jews and Palestinians (see Table 2). We also performed multiple regression analysis to explain variance in evaluated commitment by nationality, gender, belongingness, hope, and life engagement (see Table 3).

Composition writing. In light of the significant number of participants who did not write compositions, we performed an independent t-test to examine the differences in hope, belongingness, and life engagement between those who wrote compositions and answered the questionnaires and those who only answered the questionnaires. A separate test was performed for each group (Palestinians and Jews). We also performed independent t-tests to examine gender differences in hope, belongingness, and life engagement among those who did not write compositions.

3. Results

3.1. Theme Mapping

The content analysis of the compositions indicated 17 themes, which we then organized into three main categories: values; types of behavior (activities and actions related to values); and justifications, explanations, and motives for belief in a value (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categorized Themes Extracted from Participants' Compositions

	Category	Theme*	Definition	Example
1.	Values What respondents believed in and actively promoted	Honesty and morality	Being truthful and straightforward	I play a fair game and if I lose, I lose.
		Respect	Considering others' feelings and rights	I must respect all people, it doesn't matter if they're young or old.
		Tolerance	Accepting that others have different opinions and behaviors	I have friends with different political views then mine. It upsets me, but I respect them and keep my anger to myself.
		Being true to oneself, love of life and freedom	Upholding one's own beliefs and not accepting societal norms and pressures automatically. Defining freedom as a Value as well as a pathway to self-expression and creativity	It's very important to be myself, it means to keep my own style and point of view.
		Loyalty to others	Commitment to the social environment	Family is very important, I need to invest in relationships.
		Justice and equality, accepting others	Encouraging justice and opposing injustice; accepting others, expressing a desire to help the excluded, weak, and alienated.	I accept all, I don't care if he's gay, trans, straight or Arab.
		Helping others	contributing to society	I help reconcile between to friends when there is a fight
2.	Behaviors and frames of reference Types of behavior, activities, and actions related to values	Activism for change in environment	Promoting a value; commitment to act for the sake of others	I go to demonstrations against animal abuse and the meat industry and pro vegan diet.
		Value justification within the family framework	Justifying a value only within the family or close personal framework	I want my parents to be proud of me
		Value justification within a general social framework	Consideration of others who are not necessarily known personally, based on a universal social outlook	I love my country and hope to live in my homeland in peace and security.
		Determination to realize a goal	Belief that determination to achieve long-term goals is a value and a personality trait	I don't give up when I face a challenge, there is a future waiting for me.
		Critical reflection regarding expression of value	Critical reflection on the appropriateness or feasibility of acting according to values; awareness of the limitations of oneself and other in maintaining values	Sometimes, out of recklessness I do not implement all the (religious) commandments.
3.	Justifications Explanations and motives for belief in a value or behavior intended to promote it	Social justice	Seeing a value from the perspective of society and justifying it as serving the greater good	If we all keep the environment clean, we'll all live a healthy lifestyle.
		Emotional justification	Justifying a value based on past experience and a desire to protect oneself or others; an emotional motive for upholding a value	Volunteering and helping others gives me a sense of fulfilment, it makes me happy.
		Justification motivated by self-interest	Justifying a Value based on self-image, ego, or attainment of a material or abstract advantage	I help my parents in a lot of stuff, that's why they love me.
		Rational justification	Justifying a value based on a logical explanation	If you respect others, then others will respect you.
		Tradition and religious belief	Justifying a value or behavior based on tradition or religion	Because my religion taught me this value.

3.2. Theme Repetition and Mean Power

The degree of commitment to (mean power) and repetition of the selected themes were examined by group (Palestinian and Jewish) and by gender.

Comparison between the Palestinian and Jewish groups. The results of the comparison between the national groups are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The most frequent themes among Palestinians were determination to realize a goal (57.7%), critical reflection (50.3%), loyalty to others (45.2%), and close framework (43.0%). Determination to realize a goal ($M = 5.2$) and loyalty to others ($M = 5.0$) were also the most powerful themes, and activism ($M = 5.2$). The themes most frequently mentioned by the Jewish participants were being true to oneself (59.0%), general framework (46.8%), and close framework (44.9%).

Figure 1. Theme distribution according to mean power and repetition, Jews.
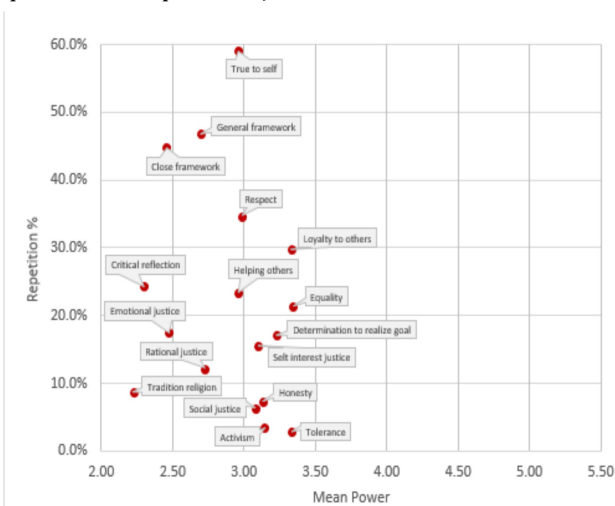
Comparison by gender. More than 40% of the female participants mentioned the themes of critical reflection, close framework, determination to realize a goal, being true to oneself, and loyalty to others (the themes repeated most frequently by the female participants). In comparison, only 25 to 35% of the male participants mentioned these themes.

Figure 2. Theme distribution according to mean power and repetition, Palestinians.
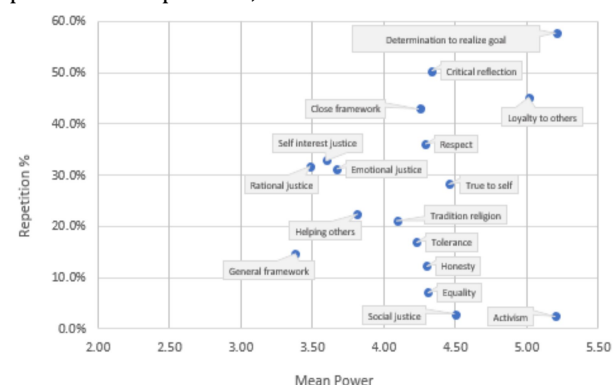
3.3. General Belongingness, Children's Perceived Hope, Life Engagement, and Evaluated Commitment

Table 2. Pearson Correlations, by National Group

	Evaluated commitment	Belongingness	Hope
Jews			
Evaluated commitment	-		
Belongingness	-0.038	-	
Hope	0.072	0.448***	-
Life engagement	0.063	0.380***	0.482***
Palestinians			
Evaluated commitment	-		
Belongingness	0.069	-	
Hope	-0.149*	0.152**	-
Life engagement	0.210**	0.492***	0.587***

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

National differences. The results of the Fisher r-to-z transformation are presented in Table 2. The dark areas in the table show significantly higher correlations in the Palestinian group, compared with the Jewish group, except regarding children's sense of hope.

Prediction of evaluated commitment. The results of multiple regression analysis for the prediction of evaluated commitment are shown in Table 3. The Jewish respondents expressed higher commitment compared with the Palestinians ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$). Belongingness ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and hope ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of commitment whereas gender and life engagement were not; together they explained 25% of the variance.

Table 3. Multiple Regression to Predict Evaluated Commitment by Nationality, Gender, Belongingness, Hope, and Life Engagement

	B	S.E.	β
Sample	0.89	0.33	0.10**
Gender	0.40	0.28	0.05
Belongingness	0.07	0.01	0.26***
Hope	0.36	0.05	0.31***
Life engagement	0.09	0.07	0.05
$F_{(5,599)}$		40.49***	
R^2		0.25	

**p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Comparison of children who did and did not write compositions. Among the Jewish participants, the only significant difference between those who did and those who did not write compositions was in life engagement. Those who wrote compositions scored higher on life engagement than those who did

not (25.1% and 23.8%, respectively). We observed the same trend in the Palestinian group (24.0% and 22.3%, respectively). In contrast to the Jewish group, in the Palestinian group, significant differences, all in the same direction, were found between those who did and did not write compositions in the subscales of the hope questionnaire (see Table 4).

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Differences in Dependent Variables Between Children Who Wrote and Did Not Write Compositions, by National Group

Sample	Questionnaire and subscales	Composition (n = 206)		No composition (n = 131)		F	p	Eta²
		M	SD	M	SD			
Jews	Hope							
	Agency	9.1	1.8	8.9	1.9	0.418	0.518	0.002
	Pathways	9.2	1.9	8.9	1.8	1.547	0.215	0.006
	Belongingness							
	Acceptance	23.1	2.5	23.0	2.9	0.031	0.860	0.000
	Rejection	28.4	5.4	27.4	4.6	2.730	0.100	0.009
	Life Engagement	25.1	3.5	23.8	4.2	2.682*	0.008	0.034**
Palestinians		(n = 471)		(n = 193)		F	p	Eta²
	Hope							
	Agency	8.8	2.2	7.9	2.7	19.035	>0.001	0.029
	Pathways	9.1	2.2	8.1	2.4	24.706	>0.001	0.038
	Belongingness							
	Acceptance	22.9	3.7	22.4	4.6	1.347	0.246	0.0012
	Rejection	28.9	6.0	27.0	6.4	12.242	0.001	0.019
	Life Engagement	24.0	4.5	22.3	5.8	3.378*	<0.000	0.27**

* t-test, **Cohen's d

4. Discussion

In this study, we first investigated children's PMC and how core themes that arose in the research were affected by gender and by national group, and we then examined the relationship between evaluated commitment to values (EC) and three measures of well-being. The research produced several interesting findings.

We found that in general, the children in this study were able to express their values well and to describe how they implemented them in their lives, confirming Hypothesis 1. The findings regarding demographic variables confirmed Hypothesis 2, in general. In both national groups, the girls identified more strongly with values and scored higher on evaluated commitment than the boys did. This was not surprising; the children who participated in the research were 12 and 13 years old, an age when most girls are cognitively more advanced than boys are (Silberman & Snarey, 1993). Interestingly, the gender differences among the participants were notably less pronounced than those by nationality. This supports the findings of Kulik's (2005) research, in which gender stereotypes were largely absent from an adolescent sample. Nevertheless, in the present study, 40% of girls mentioned critical reflection, close framework, determination to realize a goal, being true to oneself, and loyalty to others, and these values were markedly less prominent in the boys' compositions. In addition, we found no significant gender differences in the general measures of well-being.

Furthermore, although more pronounced among the female participants, there were significant diffe-

rences between the Palestinian and Jewish subsamples irrespective of gender. According to the compositions, determination to reach a goal was the leading value among Palestinians; being true to oneself was most salient among the Jews. This is consistent with Gross's (2013) finding that Palestinian schoolchildren tended to display extrinsic motivations, and Jewish children tended to be intrinsically motivated, in correspondence with the priorities of their respective school systems.

Another way to explain this finding is sociopolitical, based on the difference between a hegemonic and a minority population. The minority group of Palestinians in Israel — and the same could apply to the Hebrew- or Mandarin-speaking communities in the US — competes and strives to win by "the other's" standards, so that it makes sense to invest in external and universal standards, such as grades; in contrast, members of the hegemonic Jewish group might be able to succeed simply by being "true to oneself" since they comprise the dominant group. It is also possible to interpret the findings of this study by recognizing that the participants displayed differences by nationality rather than by gender. The dominant narratives in Israel emphasize ethnic or national conflict (Oren, Nets-Zehngut & Bar-Tal, 2015), and living in a geographically peripheral area of the country would not be expected to provide an environment free of such emphasis.

Changes in Palestinian society may explain the lack of gender differences among Palestinian children; research has suggested accelerated change towards gender equality among Palestinian girls (Weinstock, Ganayiem, Igbaryia, Manago, & Green field, 2015). If young people are actively engaged in writing their own stories, they may be inclined to express a more egalitarian social outlook, but maintain cultural differences. However, the Jewish research participants ascribed equal importance to their close family and friends and general frameworks (wider society) as areas for value enactment. In contrast, the Palestinian children largely saw their close framework of family and friends as the place for value enactment. This might reflect a more open society among Jews, compared with their Palestinian peers, who, in spite of rapid social changes may still have a more inward outlook on life, which is dominated by the extended family. However, further research is required to substantiate this explanation of results.

4.1. Writing Compositions

A substantial portion of the children, and particularly of the boys, completed the questionnaires but did not write compositions. Comparison of all the children who wrote compositions with those who did not showed that the latter scored significantly lower on life engagement. In the Palestinian group, the children who did not write compositions also scored lower on children's sense of hope than those who did.

In general, not writing compositions might reflect difficulties in self-expression, even in simple language, but it seems that at least some of these children felt that they had little to say on the subject of values. This might suggest that this group should be considered children at risk for a range of difficulties, because a lack of expression of moral compass along with depressed scores in the measure of life engagement indicate lower identification with positive purpose. Damon (2008) found that children with a sense of purpose grounded in prosocial values are likely to live healthy balanced lives, and those who lack a sense of purpose may not. Marcia (1980) termed children without purpose as "adrift" and likely to experience a range of psychological difficulties.

Furthermore, the Palestinian children who did not write compositions scored significantly lower on sense of hope than those who did. The children's sense of hope scale speaks to the ability to think ahead, set personal goals, and have confidence in the ability to attain them. Therefore, we suggest that identifying children who do not relate to personal values will provide educators with an opportunity to concentrate efforts on encouraging them to develop a personal moral compass, along with other life skills that will help them develop a positive sense of purpose in life.

Hypothesis 4 was not fully confirmed. This is discussed further in the Conclusion.

5. Conclusion

As a large-scale replication of an earlier study of children's values choice in middle school (Kasler, Shavit, Harel, 2014), the present research enabled us to focus on the significance of gender and nationality across a broad sample that included children from Jewish and Palestinian backgrounds. The regression analysis showed that children's perceived hope and general belongingness significantly predicted evaluated commitment as an overall measure of personal moral compass, but life engagement did not. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported, suggesting a relationship between two of the three measures of well-being and evaluated commitment as expressed in compositions. It may also be instructive to examine the children's dominant values to further understand the relationship of personal moral compass with well-being. For example, the fact that most of the Palestinian children in the present study mentioned determination to reach a goal would suggest a commitment to working towards a better individual future. In contrast, the emergence of being true to oneself as a dominant value among the Jewish participants indirectly suggests a search for meaning and authenticity, perhaps revealing that other, less material needs are more pressing. This contrast might be best explained within the context of a poorer, marginalized minority (the Palestinian citizens of Israel) as opposed to the dominant Jewish majority. Perhaps

Palestinian children look ahead with determination to carve out a better future for themselves, but the Jewish children are more concerned with what might be considered more spiritual needs.

In general, there was an absence of significant gender differences, perhaps indicating a balance between what were once considered traditionally "male-oriented" values (e.g., determination to reach a goal) and those that were more often identified as "feminine" (e.g., concern for others). Another interesting difference between the Palestinian and Jewish participants was the preference of the former for a close framework (usually family and friends) as the arena for enacting values, while the latter were more evenly distributed in both close and general frameworks (wider society).

Finally, the size of the research sample allowed us to examine a group that didn't write compositions as requested, although they did complete the self-report questionnaires. These children scored significantly lower on life engagement than their counterparts who completed both parts of the research. Within this group, the Palestinian children also scored lower on children's sense of hope. Educators should be cognizant of those children for whom expression of their values or moral compass is difficult, and work with them to strengthen essential life skills strongly promoted by professionals and researchers in the field (Elias, 2014; Snyder, 2014).

5.1. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The present research was conducted in a specific geographical area, and therefore the results may be difficult to generalize. Further research comparing children living in the center of the country and the periphery, or between the children in the Israeli periphery relative to other peripheral localities in other countries, is therefore needed. Nevertheless, the results provide essential data that should inform further research. In addition, the well-being measures we chose did not provide a full picture of the psychological characteristics of the children in the study, but did highlight children who may be at risk. Moreover, the study was limited to a specific age group (ages 12 to 13), and therefore one should be cautious about inferences regarding children of other ages. Furthermore, disparities in the cognitive maturity of girls and boys in this age group are likely to have affected the results. One methodological weakness in this study was the probability of priming; the writing of compositions preceded questionnaire completion and may have therefore influenced their answers. Finally, the reliability measured in the study for the life engagement scale was low and this may lessen confidence in research results. Despite these limitations, the present research

contributes to the discussion of the significance of values children regard as important to them in their daily lives.

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