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Sparks of Change 2018 Evaluation Report

In spring 2018, Oranim College International School facilitated two Sparks of Change delegations of Jewish and Arab young people from Israel, one to the United States and one to Canada. This was the third year that Oranim International School, led by Dr. Roberta Bell-Kligler, has facilitated the Sparks of Change program. The program for both groups included encounters with North American school students (Jewish and non-Jewish), home hospitality, and touring. The program aims to promote coexistence and to help North American students better understand Israeli society, life in Israel, and Arab-Jewish relationships. This was the first time that there were two delegations in one year.

Growth of the Program

The program expanded this year to reach Canada for the first time, while increasing its impact in Israel and the United States. In 2016 and 2017, Sparks of Change sent one delegation to the United States, whereas in 2018, Sparks of Change sent a delegation to Canada, in addition to the annual delegation to the United States.

With the expansion to two delegations, the program was able to reach four schools in Israel (two Jewish and two Arab), as opposed to two. This meant that Sparks of Change was able to impact four different communities in the Galilee. The program also reached more participants, with eight participants (four Jewish and four Arab students) in each delegation, for a total of sixteen students, as opposed to six students in 2017 (and four in 2016).

Two teachers, one Jewish and one Arab, accompanied each delegation. All teachers were from the schools represented in the delegations. Of these, a Jewish teacher led one of the delegations, and an Arab teacher led the other delegation. Both of the leading teachers had participated in two previous Sparks of Change delegations.

Evaluation Background

Oranim International School administered two written questionnaires to Sparks of Change participants: one prior to their travels, and one after their travels. The goal of the surveys was to evaluate the program and its impact on participants. The post-travel questionnaire included a quantitative component ("closed" questions with multiple choice answers) and a qualitative component ("open" questions to which participants responded in their own words), while the pre-travel questionnaire included only a qualitative component. In addition, the participants were all asked to write an application essay describing why they wanted to join the delegation.

This document will describe the results of the pre-travel questionnaire and the post-travel questionnaire, with additional quotes from the application essays.

Please note that some participant quotes have been edited slightly to correct language usage. Because English is a second (or third) language for all of the participants, and most of the participants responded in English, some quotes needed to be revised to make the language clear and understandable. The other participants wrote in Hebrew, which is translated here.

Pre-Travel Questionnaire

Prior to their travels, participants wrote about their expectations for the program, in both the pre-travel questionnaire and the application essays. One theme repeated by the students again and again was their hope that this delegation would enable them to connect – both to their Jewish or Arab neighbors in Israel and to North Americans. As one student wrote, “I would love to get to know my neighbors... the distance between us is small, but I feel that the difference between our cultures is so big.” A Jewish student wrote: “I would like to connect with both Arabs and Canadians.”

The students felt that by listening and sharing their experiences, they could build these connections and promote coexistence: “In order to coexist with others, you’ll have to listen to them, to share your thoughts, and that’s exactly what I, as a peace seeking teenager, as a spark of change, want to do. I want to communicate.”

Students were particularly excited about learning about new cultures through sharing experiences:

Getting to know other people outside your comfort zone is scary yet exciting, because you get to hear new stories, learn about how people live in other countries... and most importantly, you get to share your stories with people that don't already know them, you'll be able to tell them about how our lives are normal considering we live in a somewhat divided country.

Another student wrote: “I believe that every person is a world. I want to learn about worlds that are different from what I know. Meet new people, be in new places and hear different opinions from mine. Maybe I will find out that we have more in common than I thought.”

Students hoped to spread the message in North America that coexistence is possible. As one student wrote, “I’m aware of the disputes between Jews and Arabs, especially in our country, and I believe that projects like this can bring hearts closer and prove that there is another way and a solution.” Another wrote: “People throughout the world should understand that language, color of the skin, and religion are not the things we should pay attention to while getting to know each other. Everything depends on the personality. If a person is kind, helpful, and easy-going, who cares if he is Muslim or Jewish.”

Ultimately, students hoped that this project would help bring peace to their country: “It's like planting flowers, but instead we're planting kids with peaceful beliefs that will only chase peace as adults and try to fix the conflict over here.”

Post-Travel Questionnaire

For the post-travel questionnaire, students were asked to evaluate different elements of the program as well as describe the impact of the program on them. For the purposes of this report, comments relevant to the program itinerary (highlights and suggestions for the future) will be divided into two sections, United States and Canada, in order to address the two different itineraries. Discussion of the impact of the program and satisfaction rates, which were similar for both delegations, will include both of the delegations mixed together. In this way, we will be able to consider the impact of Sparks of Change in general, as well as to draw conclusions about each particular destination. The goal is not only to evaluate what was, but also to decide how to proceed in the coming year/s.

United States Delegation

The delegation to the United States included four students and one teacher from the Al Biyan School in the Arab city of Dir Al Asad, and four students and one teacher from the Ort Psagot School in the mostly Jewish city of Karmiel. Arafat Osman from the Al Biyan School led the delegation.

The group travelled to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington DC. Students wrote that highlights included joining the March for Our Lives (a student led protest in Washington D.C. in favor of tighter gun control laws), home hospitality (both with American students' families in Baltimore and Philadelphia and in Washington D.C. with Dr. Sarit Kaplan), and enjoying a snow day (a novelty for Israelis!).

Students' suggestions for improvement included more time to plan activities they led in the schools; visiting more sites related to Arab culture; and having more free time with the host families.

Canada Delegation

The delegation to Canada included four students and one teacher from the Al Bashara School in the Arab city of Sachnin, and four students and one teacher from the Asif School in the mostly Jewish region of Misgav. Evelyn Kadosh from the Asif Misgav School led the delegation.

The group travelled to Toronto, followed by two days touring in London. According to student evaluations, the highlight of the program was visiting the Canadian schools and getting to know the students and hearing their thoughts. They particularly enjoyed an impromptu basketball game in the snow at the Heschel School. As one student said: "This experience of playing with kids who live in such a different society than me really brought us together." Another highlight was meeting the young Israelis doing a year of national service in Toronto.

Regarding suggestions for improvement, many students mentioned that they would like to visit more high schools, because they feel they would connect better to students their

age (as opposed to younger students). Some requested to visit more public schools, to get more diverse perspectives. Like the participants in the American delegation, participants would have liked to visit Arab sites or schools in the United States, to understand “the other side” in North America. Lastly, the participants would have liked more time to plan the activities they led (similar to the participants in the North American delegation).

Satisfaction Rates

Overall, satisfaction rates for both of the delegations were high. 77% of respondents rated the program as excellent, 15% as good, and 7% as fair. 92% of respondents would recommend a similar program to their friends.

Impact

Students wrote that the program was meaningful and impactful, and that they learned about themselves and others. For example, one student wrote that the program “was amazing and meaningful – it changed my life.” Another student wrote:

I learned a lot from this program – about myself, about Jewish society in the Diaspora, and about Israeli society... It opened up my mind, and I hope that more kids will get to experience what I experienced, and that the program will only grow and continue to succeed.

In particular, the program impacted the participants’ relationship to the “other side” of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Israel. Following the delegation, 93% of survey respondents felt that they understand Jewish teens better (if they are Arab)/ Arab teens better (if they are Jewish). They see this understanding as the beginning of change: “Now I better understand the other side, and I think that is important, because in order to begin change we need to see and understand what the other side thinks and feels.” They now see what they have in common with the other side: “I look at them a different way. I am not scared any more. I know they’re people just like me.”

The Jewish and Arab participants developed relationships with one another, and these relationships are already having a ripple effect outward to their family and friends. As one Arab participant wrote, “Me and my Jewish roommate are still in touch. Our families met for dinner. We are planning to do it again.” Another wrote: “I’m trying to be friends with more Jews and bring my Arab and Jewish friends together.”

93% of survey respondents indicated that the program increased their commitment to coexistence. Participants wrote that they learned from the program that coexistence is possible. As one student wrote, “It made me really believe in [coexistence]. Not just talk – now I know it is possible.” Another wrote:

This experience was one of the most complicated and beautiful I have ever had...I understood so many things I've been asking questions about my whole life, like, can we and the Jews get along and be together? And the answer was yes.

As a result, they feel empowered to make change in their communities and their country: "Now I feel that all of us are responsible to change our thoughts about the 'other side' and that all of us can make a big change in this country." They hope to share their belief in coexistence with their communities:

I will do my best to make the change, and make my society know about the things that I've gone through in this experience... and make them see that not only I can have this experience, but all of them can in their ordinary lives.

Recommendations for the Future

Our vision is to expand Sparks of Change to more Jewish and Arab schools throughout the northern region of Israel, including many more teachers and students. Since the program's beginning in 2016, we have become convinced that it can create meaningful connections between Jewish and Arab schools and communities, building cooperation and respect for diversity.

We have already seen the ripples of change in several powerful examples: the principal of one of the Arab schools convened an assembly prior to the delegation's departure and explained to the entire school how the delegation was representing the school, the community, and its values. Similarly, the Jewish and Arab parents of participants in this year's Sparks of Change delegation to the United States gathered together even while their children were still in the United States at one of the parent's homes, building their own connections across the Jewish-Arab social divide. Since the return of the delegations, there have been numerous gatherings between Arab and Jewish families, some of which we learn about only incidentally. The participants and their families are already taking initiative.

Moreover, we want to make this program an integral part of training students of education at Oranim College, in order to impact the future teachers of Israel. Sparks of Change plans to include Oranim students of education in future delegations and to give those students leadership roles in preparing for and leading the delegations, as well as facilitating follow-up programming. Increased preparation is something that the participants themselves asked for, and meaningful follow-up programming will enable Sparks of Change to facilitate coexistence in the Israeli schools and communities involved in the program.

Oranim students will be chosen either from students participating in Oranim International School's academically accredited course on facilitating international and multicultural encounters or from Oranim College Forum Against Racism. The former is a course giving students of education from Oranim the tools, knowledge, and practical experience to facilitate multicultural educational programs, and the latter is a setting for students who already feel motivated to work to counteract racism in Israeli society. Sparks of Change will carefully choose the students to be involved from one of these programs.

By involving Oranim students, Sparks of Change will give the next generation of Israel's educators tools to encourage respect, empathy, and authentic dialogue among diverse people within their classroom and outside of it. This will enable Sparks of Change to impact not only direct participants and their families and schools, but also the hundreds of children whom the Oranim students will teach in the future. Oranim graduates will be able to bring to the schools where they teach a positive approach to contact between Jews and Arabs in Israel and North American communities.

Including Oranim students, as well as expanding the program to include more communities in Israel and North America, will give this project the potential to increase dramatically the level of co-existence in the Galilee, while sharing the message of hope and dialogue with the Jewish community in North America. The gradual but significant growth over the first three years of Sparks of Change in number of participants, schools, and host communities and cities visited, coupled with the enthusiastic responses of all those involved in the program has convinced us that it is both possible and important not only to keep the program going, but to try to expand it in significant ways.

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