

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF PALESTINE

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BACKGROUND

Any consideration of Palestinian educational system must be made against the unusual situation of the area in which they live. In this chapter, Palestine refers to the Gaza strip and the Eastern part of 'Mandate Palestine'. These geographically separated areas form an emerging political entity of some 3 million people. Following the establishment of an Israeli government in 1948, the Gaza strip came under Egyptian administration; while the Eastern part of 'Mandate Palestine' came under Jordanian administration. Nineteen years later, in 1967, both parts were occupied by Israel.

For occupied Palestine, all rules and regulations concerning the content and structure of the education system, including textbooks, examinations, holidays, length of school year, etc., corresponded with those of educational institutions in the host countries (Egypt and Jordan). After 1967, the Israeli military authorities controlled the administration of Palestinian education. By appointing an Israeli official to oversee all matters concerning Palestinian education, they effectively denied Palestinians the right to have any say in administering or running their education system. The role of the education officers running the education offices in all districts of occupied Palestine was diminished to that of unquestioning implementation of Israeli policy. They had no freedom to influence policy or submit plans or programmes for the development of the education system.

The Israeli military government has complete authority over matters relating to the financing of, and the hiring and firing of staff in government schools. Moreover, Israeli authorities have compiled a long list of books which are banned from the schools. Any explicit references to versions of Palestinian

history and culture of which the authorities disapprove are suppressed. Needless to say, these restrictions make teaching, particularly in the social sciences, problematic. (Heiberg, 1994, p.133)

In May 1994, the Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza and Jericho following the signature of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, and an Agreement signed in September 1995 extended autonomy to other districts of occupied Palestine. In August 1994, the education services were handed over to the Palestinian authority.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The school system in Palestine is divided into the following four cycles: kindergarten for students of four to five years old; basic for students of six to sixteen years; and secondary for students of 17-18 years of age. The secondary stage offers three options or streams literacy, scientific and vocational. About 70 per cent of the students attend the literacy stream, 27 per cent attend the scientific stream, and three per cent attend the vocational stream. The division of students into one of these streams is determined by their academic achievement in the 10th basic class. At the end of the secondary cycle, a matriculation examination (*tawjihi*) is held, for which all students sit.

In terms of supervising authority, there are three types of schools:

1. government schools: the responsibility of the Jordanian and Egyptian governments prior to 1967 became the responsibility of the Israeli military government after June 1967. Government schools, which form the largest sector of the school system, 64 per cent, provide services at all levels.
2. UNRWA schools: these schools were established by the United Nations in the early 1950s to serve Palestinian refugees. UNRWA schools provide services for the basic cycle only. Students who wish to continue beyond this level join government schools at the end of

the basic level. UNRWA schools amount to 23 per cent of the Palestinian school system.

3. private schools: these are run by various local and foreign institutions, mainly church-oriented organisations. Private schools constitute 13 per cent of the school system in Palestine. Some private schools provide only pre-school (kindergarten) education, while others continue to the end of the secondary cycle.

The following information was included in the Ministry of Education and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics' publications (1998/1999):

Total number of schools including kindergartens	2,514
Total number of teachers	30,162
Total number of students	889,895

There are some Co-education schools in the private sector, but mostly, schools are separated for boys or girls only.

THE CURRICULUM

For the past five centuries, outside powers have imposed their own system of education on the Palestinian people. The Ottoman Turks and later the British Mandate failed to supply Palestinians with an educational system which held relevance to their history and culture.

In my time, we sat for the British General Certificate of Education (GCE). Of course there were some good things. We studied Shakespeare and European history and we learned good English, but our Arabic was not so good. (Hashweh, 1997, pp.19-20)

After the British Mandate, there was no national Palestinian curriculum. All schools were required to follow the Jordanian or the Egyptian curriculum. After 1967, textbooks were supplied by Jordan and Egypt and were subject to the approval of the Israeli military administration, which might ban a book or censor parts of it. In the latter case, the censored version was reprinted by the Israeli authorities for sale to Palestinian schools. The Israeli authorities deleted any references to Palestine, Palestinians, and Israel and might replace deleted information with their own insertions before reprinting.

The Jordanian and Egyptian curricula were based on a traditional pedagogy and thus their textbooks did not employ the latest advances in teaching. Social studies textbooks were out of date and contained incorrect and misleading information. In general, the curriculum in all three educational sectors was irrelevant to the Palestinian culture or life and emphasised rote learning, reliance on textbooks, and teaching as preparation for examinations. Moreover, all schools are obliged to use the same textbooks.

THE PEDAGOGY AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The beleaguered state of education in Palestine is evident from recent reports, such as the 1994 World Bank Report entitled "Emergency Assistance to the Occupied Territories", the 1995 "Palestinian National Programme of Action" prepared by the Palestinian Ministry of Education, the "IIEP Newsletter" (UNESCO, 1997), and the "Palestine Human Development File" for 1997 issued by Birzeit University in co-operation with the UNDP. These reports indicate that the major problem which lies in the education system in Palestine is one of the quality of basic education and consequently secondary and higher education.

Palestinian students who previously ranked high in international educational achievement tests are now falling behind students of neighbouring countries. One of the main reasons for the falling quality of education is the deterioration of teaching conditions in Palestine. (IIEP, 1997, p.3)

They have found Palestinian students in general graduate from the secondary stage without reaching the required standards, many of them are incapable of critical and logical analysis, and are weak in scientific research methods based on fact-finding procedures. They also suffer from the absence of independent thinking with a feeling of responsibility.

The Israeli administrative control over education under the military occupation produced not merely a stagnation of the system, but its degeneration in real terms by virtue of minimal intervention and overt repression (UNESCO, 1995). As one report sets out:

The education being provided to children living in the Occupied Territories does not meet reasonable quality standards... the present system of education affords children few opportunities to participate actively in learning; to apply their skills in formulating researchable or solvable problems; or in drawing on a wide range of knowledge, skills and analytical methods to illuminate real world problems. (World Bank, 1993, pp.40-45)

Unattractive teaching methods, together with the poor condition of school buildings, unadapted curricula, lack of good quality textbooks, and the general shortage of teaching materials are among the significant problems which plague the present education system in Palestine. Teaching is bookish, and teaching methods pay little attention to the activity of the learner. Knowledge is presented as a collection of facts to be memorised and remembered on examinations. The different disciplines are never presented as creative human endeavours that produce knowledge that is continuously being tested, modified and, in some cases, drastically changed. Knowledge as a product rather than a process is what is often presented in schools and even universities in Palestine. As to what the Palestinian Human Development Profile (1997) concluded, teaching methodologies presently in use are very traditional without an emphasis on experimentation or research. In most cases the teacher adopts the repetition method and sometimes the question and answer approach (p.53).

SCHOOL QUALITY

The Palestinian Human Development Profile (1997) indicates that Palestinian schools lack many basic services, such as a constant supply of water, electricity and sanitary facilities. It was found that 43 per cent of schools lack one or more of these basic services. Schools also lack educational facilities such as libraries, laboratories and drawing rooms which are only found in a small number of schools, usually at the secondary level. In spite of most schools having playgrounds, these are unsuitable to meet student body needs and include a limited number of basketball, volleyball and football courts.

Indeed, during the 30 years of occupation, Israel failed to fulfil its responsibility as an occupying power and a supervising authority in the area "Israel forgot to invest in the educational field" (Hashwah, 1995, p.94). *No new schools were built during the first ten years of the occupation and very few have been built since then. The expansion of school facilities and the*

hiring of additional teachers have not kept pace with the growth in the student population since 1967. Overcrowded classrooms are a major problem, especially in the government and UNRWA school sectors. It is not uncommon to have more than 50 students per class. Many governments and UNRWA schools are forced to work a double shift because of an insufficient number of classrooms and schools, or because the military has closed a school permanently forcing the entire student population of that school to use another school.

In a few of these latter cases, the double shifts at a school include two cycles: one shift for elementary students and another shift for preparatory students. When this happens, and the school site is an elementary school, the preparatory students are deprived of the facilities normally found at a preparatory school. The UNESCO *Newsletter* (1997) indicates that many school buildings have deteriorated so much that they need to be demolished and reconstructed, or completely renovated. Additional schools will have to be built to relieve pressures on existing ones. Many schools are accommodated in rented buildings which were not built for educational purposes, and many of the facilities are unsuitable. However, some schools in the private sector have better facilities such as up-to-date, fully equipped science laboratories, adequate bi- or tri-lingual libraries, and recreational areas.

TEACHERS

In Palestine, as mentioned in previous sections, there are 30,162 teachers. 19,282 of them are in the government schools where the Israeli authorities had total control over teacher selection and would exclude from the profession, teachers who were politically affiliated or even those who in their teaching expressed a strong sense of Palestinian national and cultural identity. Many practising teachers were dismissed, often on the basis of hearsay alone, for attending popular meetings or for taking part in other forms of political activity. Teachers could be fired for participating in strikes

or for signing documents which oppose the military administration. Thus, in school, teachers had to avoid all politically controversial issues in their classes to protect their jobs even if the students initiated such issues.

Furthermore, the low salaries paid to government school teachers have made it difficult for these schools to maintain their good teachers or to attract good new ones. Low salaries compel many teachers to seek a second job to supplement their family income.

In the UNRWA and private schools, teachers have made good use of the greater academic freedom and pedagogical flexibility that they have in comparison with what teachers have in the government schools. In addition, the higher salaries paid by UNRWA and the private sector help it to attract the more qualified teachers and enable it to be more selective in its hiring of teachers.

The degree of educational attainment of teachers is variable. The Palestinian Human Development Profile (1997) point out that there are 55 per cent of teachers who have a diploma (two years study after school), 37 per cent have a bachelor's degree, six per cent have a general secondary certificate or lower, and 2.2 per cent have a Masters or PhD degree.

Concerning the salary scales, the Profile indicates that the monthly salary of a teacher with a university degree is less than \$375 per month, while the poverty level for a family of six is \$500 per month.

Teachers in general are not prepared to initiate change or to implement it. They lack the pedagogical as well as the subject matter knowledge needed to teach in a way that takes the active role of the learner into consideration, or that does not compartmentalise knowledge, but shows the interactions between knowledge and society, thus rendering knowledge to be more useful to the individual and society. Teachers continued to follow the traditional method of teaching - consisting of rote learning and the spoon-feeding of students with information to be regurgitated in examinations - and

they had no opportunity to improve or change this restricted and out-moded methodology.

In the prevailing educational atmosphere in Palestine, teachers are not expected or encouraged to play an active role in their own professional development or in broader public debates about education. They learn to dismiss their own experiences and know-how, and to defer to higher authorities for solutions to the problems they face, isolating themselves in what Paulo Freire described as a culture of silence (1972).

The Current Situation :

When the Palestinian Ministry of Education assumed control in 1994 the system was in a state of neglect. There were over crowded classrooms, and many schools buildings were in disrepair. Teacher were rarely offered any in-service education opportunities during the period of occupation.

Students had to use Jordanian or Egyptian curricula that in many cases, were unrelated to their local environmental culture and authoritarian teacher centered teaching methods were in use, they are poorly trained in problem-solving and higher-order and critical thinking skills.

The Palestinian priorities focused on building new schools and repairing existing ones, and they set low priority to improving the quality of education. Postponing tackling this issue to a later stage. However, with the very high population growth among Palestinians, they are forced after almost five years of taking control of the educational system to stay grappling with the quantitative problem of providing education for all rather than improving the quality of education.

Palestinian schools emphasize the development of lower-level cognitive abilities and neglect the development of higher-level intellectual skills or the development of effective and psychomotor aspects. Additionally, schools tend to focus on fostering limited aspects of intellectual development while neglecting the development of social, aesthetic, practical, and spiritual dimensions.

The top down centralized efforts to change the educational system by the Palestinian ministry of education , though commendable in terms of the effort and time spent, have not been very effective in changing the quality of education. For instance, thousands of hours in in-service teacher education courses and workshops have been offered by the ministry with no clear impact and with no evaluation.

Nowadays, the Ministry is developing a new five-year plan for educational development, and a Center for curriculum Development has been established that will develop Palestinian curricula during the period 2001 to 2005.

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