

Rethinking education

Palestinian education challenges under occupation

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| Palestine |

abstract

Palestinian education suffers from various struggles and constraints due to Israeli occupation. Therefore, many teachers and learners have been impacted by one or more contextual disadvantages and vulnerabilities. This has created a situation in which many have not been able to access educational services. However, education has been one of the key elements that Palestinians rely on for their pursuit of freedom and to emancipate them from their struggles. Therefore, many grassroots groups have recognised the importance of the participation of learners and teachers in the educational process, working toward a democratic education that empowers their voice, liberates their mindsets and enables them to exercise their rights.

Keywords: *Education under occupation; vulnerability; emancipatory education; rethinking the aim of education.*

Education under occupation

Since 1984, Palestinian teachers and students have faced various challenges owing to

Israeli occupation, whether they be political, economic or cultural. Human rights violations have continued in parallel, creating a reality in which Palestinians face a fragmentation of their land, and a problematic economic and political status keeps many Palestinians beneath the poverty level. Many students drop out of school to work or to marry early, and this is especially true for girls in secondary education. Families fear for their safety, from settler attacks, checkpoints, and difficulty in transportation. These factors have kept Palestinians from exercising their full rights.

Palestinians are exposed to different levels of struggles and limitations on their access to rights, particularly their right to education. That is, Palestinian teachers and students have been impacted by disadvantages and vulnerabilities related to location, exposure to violence, economic factors, institutional and political factors and social-cultural norms (UNDAF, 2017). These factors are closely related to education and often restrict students from accessing schools, an effect compounded by marginalisation and a lack of student inclusion, especially for students with learning disabilities.

Vulnerability in Light of Occupation

Discourse around the term “vulnerability” has recently become prominent in discussions of human rights and bioethics in relation to spaces of power, designating parties as “vulnerable” according to categories and assumptions. However, the Palestinian context under occupation has allowed the vulnerability of Palestinian teachers and students to be exaggerated. According to a 2016 UN “common country analysis” document, all Palestinians are relatively vulnerable on account of the occupation, though some are systematically more disadvantaged and vulnerable than others. UNESCO has identified 20 groups presenting key forms of vulnerability: “adolescent girls; women exposed to gender-based violence

(GBV); food-insecure households headed by women; children facing obstacles in accessing schools; children in the labour force; children subject to violence; out-of-school children; youth; the elderly; communities in Area C; Bedouins and herder communities living in Area C; Gaza residents without access to clean water or sanitation; Hebron H2 residents; persons living in the Seam Zone, persons with disabilities; individuals in need of urgent medical referrals; refugees living in abject poverty; refugees residing in camps; small-scale farmers, non-Bedouin herders, fisherfolk; and the working poor” (UNESCO, 2016 p. 43).

The Challenges Ahead for Emancipatory Education

Therefore, for Palestinians, education is a key element in emancipation from occupation and in freeing ourselves of colonial traces, achieving self-determination and sovereignty. Education plays an important role in producing and reproducing colonial modes, thinking, and post-colonial aspirations, as schools can offer ideological space for the reflection of dominant philosophies and agendas (Said, 1994). The scope of this discourse has affected other aspects of education as well, such as policies, curriculum and pedagogies.

In the Palestinian discourse, Edward Said has criticized the label of “postcolonial” and has instead discussed the current forms of colonial discourse and practice in terms of their effect on vulnerable and marginalised peoples, explaining the relevance of colonial power to the issues of identity, representation and cultural exchange, ultimately contributing to an enhanced understanding of the “knowledge-power” related to problems in education (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006).

As economic imperative and globalisation affected educational policies and practises in the Global South, Palestinian found themselves, as citizens, forced to fill in the gaps and deprivation in the economic sector, applying changes to the design of the educational system to fit the market and contribute to building State capacity. The overview of the complex situation shows gaps in policy and practise that affect teachers and students, especially in attitudinal barriers such as stigma and discrimination.



Photo: Tamer Institute for Community Education | 

Rethinking Education... Changing Mindsets

This setting has affected the aim and the purpose of education, as education is about, as [hooks \(2003\)](#) noted, “empowerment, liberation, transcendence,” learning to be fully engaged in the present, and understanding ourselves in the world we live in (p. 43), rather than receiving information and preparing for jobs. She also described the consequences of practises in educational institutions that weaken the process of democratic education, discouraging students from being active learners, losing the joy of learning, and making education repressive and oppressive, widening class and gender divisions.

Pedagogical practise in Palestinian schools is historically teacher-centred. Lecturing is the main teaching method used, and students are required to memorise curriculum material. Classrooms are organised in rows, and movement and freedom for conversation are controlled and minimised. Students perceived to be “excellent” receive more attention, while others are neglected. This reduces capacity for addressing the individual needs of each learner and for achieving the right to equal learning opportunities ([Al-Ramahi and Davies, 2002](#)).

Unfortunately, this education system and design was enforced after the British mandate on Palestine as part of the colonial policy in colonised countries. These systems were maintained despite the presence of innovative and liberating educational methods such as that of Khalil Sakakini, who was well-known for his educational model oriented toward discovering the nature of Palestine by walking, having students walk across villages and hills as part of their curriculum. This curriculum was built on Arab and Palestinian culture and nature, involving learning processes that embrace life experiences and knowledge ([Sukarieh, 2019](#)).

The existing teaching pedagogy fails to support critical thinking and student awareness of

their situation and aspirations. Therefore, developing an understanding of the aim of education should go beyond schoolhouse doors, developing philosophies, approaches and pedagogies that can be used as effective emancipatory education, changing mindsets and opening minds to new perceptions of freedom.

However, we also cannot neglect the power of hidden curriculum activities and informal education that Palestinian teachers could use to create space for dialogue and democratic engagement, raising consciousness and exploring different understandings in the face of teacher limitations. The importance of emancipatory education for Palestinians is to advocate for understanding and to challenge the social and political forces that disempower us.



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Embracing Change

Recently, many grassroots movements have recognised the need for emancipatory practices in response to Israeli repression and the restraints on education provision during the first *Intifada*, anticipating and improving political awareness in order to mobilise action for a more socially just society. These initiatives focus on emancipatory models and approaches in learning and teaching, and encourage teachers to use more participatory interventions and engagement with their communities, establishing new understandings of citizenship and allowing students to reach their proposed potential.

The Palestinian emancipatory education initiatives have been listed by [Ramahi \(2015\)](#) in nine diverse organisations and individual initiatives: [Tamer Institute for Community Education](#), [Salamn Halabi Forum](#), [Teacher Creativity Forum](#), [Afkar for Educational and Cultural Development](#), [Campus in Camps](#), [Ziad Khaddash](#), the [American School in Palestine](#), [Filastiniyate](#) and the [Ashtar Theatre](#).

These initiatives and programmes offer various methods and approaches. Initiatives range in nature from programs that advocate for community education, forums, debates, social projects, youth newspaper participation, and theatre training for marginalised groups unable to access services. The initiative also offers programs to enable teachers to transform their schools' teaching conditions, associating theory with action through praxis. Community interventions also ensure equitable participation of Palestinian women and youth to promote gender awareness, empowerment and protagonism.

While the Palestinian educational system suffers from various gaps in curriculum, policy and practices, these programs hold the potential to create atmospheres for valuing the participation of students and developing critical thinking — especially when extended to formal education, reaching and influencing the majority of teachers and students across Palestine. This would indicate, in the Palestinian context, the development of guidance in policy and innovation in pedagogical practices.

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