

Education: National Curricula

Israel and Palestine: Gender and the Schooling of Palestinians

The schooling of Palestinians has historically been undertaken by a succession of non-Palestinian political regimes, leaving Palestinians with limited control over school curricula. Struggles and controversies over the “knowledge” included in Palestinian curricula are indicative of the political forces – local, regional, and global – that affect contemporary Palestinian society. Within the national contexts in which Palestinians live – and particularly in Israel and the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip which are here reviewed – school curricula operate as highly contested and contentious spaces. In these two contexts, competing notions of the nation, social difference, and gender are constructed and deconstructed, debated, legitimized, or discarded. The battle over curriculum and textbooks is heavily imprinted with power struggles that contend over the shaping of Palestinian subjectivities.

Since British mandatory Palestine’s political dismemberment in 1948, schools serving the Palestinian Arab citizens living in Israel depend on national curricula developed by the ministry of education. In Israel, Palestinian Arab and Jewish students study in ethnically segregated and highly unequal school systems. Al-Haj points out that the curriculum used in schools serving Palestinians “has been sanitized of any national content” and that “there has been no attempt to foster a civic culture in which the Arab citizens are a separate but equal component” (2005, 52). Schools for Palestinians are banned from commemorating national Palestinian events such as the Nakba (Catastrophe), which marks the dismemberment of Palestine in 1948 and the displacement and destruction of entire Palestinian communities (Adalah 2003).

The State of Israel’s discriminatory practices result in the allocation of meager resources and inadequate budgets to Palestinian schools (Human Rights Watch 2001). Benavot and Resh (2003) found that many Arab schools limit the offering of advanced high school courses in the humanities and the social sciences, with Palestinian Arab students having to choose almost exclusively mathematics and the sciences. These subjects are usually taught in lecture mode without basic laboratory equipment.

Statistics show that Palestinian female students successfully graduate from high school at higher rates than their male counterparts. Some view these trends as capturing the modernizing effects of the Israeli educational system on gender roles within a dominantly patriarchal Palestinian Arab society, liberating women “to transform their society and act as agents of gender role and social change” (Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shapira 2005, 178). Others, however, point out that the gendered effects of institutionalized discrimination in Israel lower the holding power of schools and the economic returns on schooling, particularly for Palestinian men for whom income returns for each additional year of schooling is negligible beyond the eighth grade (Klinov 1990). Palestinian men drop out at higher rates than women and are more likely to join the labor market at a young age as unskilled workers (Sa’di and Lewin-Epstein 2001). Unemployment rates are higher among educated Palestinians, creating an inverse relationship between education, occupation, and income, whereby Palestinians enter jobs below the level of their educational attainment (Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 1993). The lower quality of curricula in Arab schools, and their disconnect from occupational mobility, are part of the broader reproduction of marginality and subordination of Palestinians in the Israeli economy and polity, exacerbating ethnic, class, and gender stratification and reinforcing internal patriarchal relations.

The persisting emphasis on national, cultural, and religious narratives within the broader context of the conflict between Palestinians and Israel limits the critical examination of gender perspectives in school curricula. The contradictions and tensions that underpin gender roles and gender power inequities remain largely unexamined within Israeli schools (Tatar and Emmanuel 2001). Some argue that the state is reluctant to engage with aspects of Palestinian culture which may be perceived and resisted as an intrusion into the social fabric of a national minority. Yet, state curricula effectively reinforce patriarchal structures through the development of differential textbooks for Muslims, Druze, and Beduin Palestinians as discrete and essentialized sociocultural communities served by their respective sub-school systems. Such curricular policies aim to foster differential and mutually exclusive

identities that normalize the political fragmentation of the Palestinian society in Israel, facilitating state control (Al-Haj 1995). Further, Palestinian community associations and educational leaders have generally shied away from addressing prevailing power inequities that pervade school practices. For instance, access to executive positions within school administration serving Palestinians remains associated with male-dominated power networks, often keeping women in the community from exercising educational leadership, particularly in high schools (Mazawi 1996).

In the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip – controlled respectively by Jordan and Egypt from 1948 to 1967, and since then by Israel – schools operate under a different set of political constraints. Until the mid-1990s, two national curricula were in effect, Jordanian in the West Bank and Egyptian in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli occupation authorities maintained these curricula while amending or censoring textbooks. Moughrabi observes that the “word ‘Palestine’ was removed from textbooks, maps were deleted, and anything Israeli censors deemed nationalist was excised” (2001, 6).

The first national Palestinian curriculum was developed following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 over parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This meant not merely revising the incoherent components of previous curricula, but further offering for the first time a curriculum reflecting a vision of history, land, community, and self that would be inclusive of the experiences of diverse Palestinian groups including gender and religious groups, refugees, returnees, Beduin communities, rural inhabitants, urban elites, and the diaspora. Exacerbated by the pending conflict and more particularly by the deterioration of political negotiations with Israel since 2000, many central issues were left unsettled and unresolved in the new textbooks. This includes the lack of agreed upon international borders between Israel and a Palestinian state, the expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands, the right of return for refugees, and sovereignty over Jerusalem. The difficulties associated with the development of a Palestinian curriculum under these conditions were well captured by al-Jirbāwī: “Which Palestine should we teach? Is it historical Palestine with its comprehensive geography, or is it Palestine that would result from the accords signed with Israel? And how should Israel be treated, is it just a neighbor or is it a state built on the ruins of most of Palestine?” (1997, 454).

The Palestinian national curriculum plan was made public in 1996 by the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre (PCDC). The subject

guidelines were released in 1999 and textbooks were introduced over a six-year period beginning in 2000. Upon publication, the textbooks drew heated international exchanges and criticism, a “battle of the textbooks” of sorts. This was mainly due to controversial allegations regarding the textbooks’ lack of representation of Israel, Zionism, Jews, Judaism, and peaceful relations (Moughrabi 2001, Brown 2002a, 2002b, Da’Na 2007).

The new curriculum plan is seen as “an important component in the [exercise] of educational sovereignty by the Palestinian people” (Abu-Lughod 1997, 7). It foresees three stages of schooling: a “preparatory stage” lasting four years and starting at age five; an “empowerment stage” lasting five years; and a “take off stage” lasting three years and ending at age 17. The “take off stage” avoids the dichotomy between academic and vocational tracks by providing an inter-disciplinary “academic-technical” common core.

The plan stipulates that Arabic will continue to be taught as the national language but English will also be emphasized, with the possibility of teaching French or Hebrew as a third regional language. The plan also criticizes the fragmentation resulting from the joint use of Jordanian and Egyptian curricula, and views neither as acceptable as a basis for a new Palestinian curriculum (al-Jirbāwī 1997, 444–5). Devising a new and unified Palestinian social science and civic education curriculum is thus perceived as “*one of the most important means, if not the most important, to ensure the integration of the West Bank and Gaza Strip*” (ibid., emphasis in original).

A gender analysis of PCDC Palestinian school textbooks introduced since 2000 was recently undertaken by the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research. Variations in the way gender is depicted emerge across subjects. Multiple conceptions of gender roles were found to coexist alongside each other, reflecting the broader ideological tensions within which this curriculum is debated within Palestinian society and among donor countries which finance the reconstruction of Palestinian education. For instance, in the Islamic Education textbooks for Grades 1–3 and 6–8, Reiss points out that “all women and almost all girls – even prepubescent girls – are depicted with veils and clothes which cover them from head to toe, even in a home setting” (2004, 6). Nordbruch analyzes several textbooks. Regarding the National Education textbook for the elementary grades he observes that “girls and boys as well as women and men are depicted in similar surroundings, potentially occupied with identical activities. While

women above school age can be seen both veiled and unveiled, no girl of the pupils' age is shown veiled, with the exception of illustrations showing a boy and a girl during religious instruction... [I]llustrations in the textbooks consistently mirror situations in mixed schools in which girls and boys share desks, lessons and activities" (2002a, 3; see also Nordbruch 2004).

In the case of the Civic Education textbooks used in Grades 1–9, Nordbruch observes that "the presentation of women and men in their respective activities breaks away from traditional gender roles and mostly avoids depictions of women which could be seen as strengthening patriarchal structures." For example, in illustrations dealing with housework, education, and employment, men and women, and to a large extent children, "are presented as equal parties" (Nordbruch 2002b, 5). Reviewing the Population Education textbook for Grade 11, he points out that the authors frequently refer to the equality of women as being a central goal for Palestinian society (Nordbruch 2002c).

Abu Nahleh's 1996 study, *Gender planning, vocational education and technical training (VETT) in Palestine*, sheds critical light on the gendered aspects of the much neglected vocational high school programs. Abu Nahleh found that VETT programs are "underdeveloped and fragmented," especially organizationally, due to staff employment policies which result in an overrepresentation of women in the lower administrative echelons and the absence of gender aware career guidance, and economically, being "almost non-functional" and disconnected from infrastructural and labor market needs. Abu Nahleh also found that high school "streaming" (tracking) is associated with the reproduction of existing gender, spatial, and socioeconomic disparities in the wider Palestinian society. Students' knowledge of VETT opportunities was based more on information derived from informal sources (such as family members and friends) than from institutional sources (such as community colleges and schools). Girls had even less knowledge and information about VETT, being more dependent than boys on informal sources (Abu Nahleh 1996, 69).

Particularly revealing is Abu Nahleh's discussion of the schools' organizational culture and the way it marginalizes married high school female students. Married girls were granted the right by the Palestinian ministry of education to continue their high school studies although this is not consistently enforced. Yet, ministerial rules require girls, but not boys, to wear a mandatory school uniform,

thus accentuating the gender bias within the system (ibid., 136–40).

The bulk of existing research on Palestinian curricula remains focused on its contributions to state formation, nation-building, economic development and employment, and more recently to peace education. The continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, its internal dislocation of Palestinian areas, harsh economic conditions, curfews, military operations, school closures, the arrest of educators and senior ministry of education officials, and the disjoining of Gaza from the West Bank all negatively impact and challenge the feasibility of a coherent process of curriculum planning and implementation (Al-Haq 2005). At the same time, Palestinian educators appear to be entrenched in a generic educational discourse that avoids broader issues of social justice and the questioning of gender barriers within Palestinian society. Educational leaders remain rather silent on the hegemonic underpinnings of a patriarchal Palestinian social order and its implications for the formulation of a liberating, socially just, and inclusive Palestinian educational philosophy. Some argue that avoiding explicit reference to these issues lessens the potential for conflict with ideologically-minded groups, whether conservative, nationalist, or Islamic, active within Palestinian society. Palestinian curriculum planners navigate a difficult and largely uncharted territory. Issues of social change and transformation are politically volatile in terms of the resistance and opposition they may trigger from various quarters.

Non-governmental educational organizations, research centers, and grassroots networks, some already active under the Israeli military occupation, are intensively involved in curriculum development, whether that related to specific subject matters or to informal curricular activities (such as citizenship education, aesthetic education, community development, and preschool and kindergarten curricula). They bring new voices and concerns into the education of Palestinian children and youth beyond the formal aspects of curriculum planning by the ministry of education. Moreover, reconnecting curriculum planning and empirical educational research within schools is a long-standing concern, the absence of which had devastating impact on the quality of teacher education, teaching, and learning. In this field, for instance, the Al Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) in Ramallah (West Bank) and its affiliate in Gaza City (Gaza Strip) tried to introduce new curricula and critical thinking teaching modules in various subjects. The QCERD also spearheaded the

introduction of action research and ethnographic research into Palestinian schools, making available to researchers, educators, and policymakers an array of Arabic and locally adapted professional sources and curriculum development strategies. These tools seek ways to facilitate the generation of new approaches and insights into self-reflective and critical discourses of policy and practice (see <<http://www.qattanfoundation.org/>>).

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Sudan

The post-colonial challenge in Sudan, as in many African nations, has been to create a unified educational system, a standardized national curriculum, and equal access for all citizens. Reforms in the early 1990s established a national Islamic curriculum with Arabic as the language of instruction. The reforms did not significantly alter the original colonial educational aim of providing civil servants to fill administrative roles. Consequently, among the general population there still is a feeling that the primary curriculum is not related to the needs of Sudanese children and is not flexible to accommodate women's needs. Teaching methods are highly traditional with emphasis on rote memorization. Curriculum development is weak on job and practical life skills and reflects a