

Social and Emotional Learning in Palestinian K-12 Schools

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Introduction

All societies strive to raise and educate children who are caring, responsible, socially competent, open-minded, knowledgeable and good citizens. Education systems around the world realized that it is not only enough to have students equipped with technical skills and knowledge required for their future careers. Equally vital are the soft skills on which social and emotional learning focuses. They would like students who are socially skilled, respectful, live responsibly and safely, and have great work and life habits to contribute to successful, happy and fulfilling life.

Education authorities around the world began to emphasise social and emotional skills in their curriculum explicitly or implicitly as research has consistently shown that effective practices of social and emotional skills lead to healthy well-being and high academic achievement at schools; on the other hand, the lack of mastery of such skills leads to social and social challenges (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). A meta-analysis of 213 studies conducted by Durlak et al. (2011) found that engaging students in a high quality evidence-based social and emotional learning programmes improved students' academic achievement, prosocial behavior, positive attitudes toward themselves and others, and decrease in misbehavior and emotional distress. These positive outcomes were also confirmed by another meta-analysis conducted by Sklad et al. (2012). Further, SEL programs that have clear benchmarks aid students in having better SEL instruction, improve school engagement and become better learners (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Further, Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley (2015) found out that there is a strong correlation between students' social and emotional learning skills at early age and positive outcomes in adulthood. They found that students with social and emotional learning skills were able to graduate from high school, complete university education and maintain full employment. In

addition, during high school they were less likely to abuse alcohol, have trouble with the police and take medication for emotional and social problems.

This chapter focuses on the current policies and practices of social and emotional learning in the Palestinian education system. The author will also discuss the challenges that Palestinian educators face in their endeavors to teach SEL, and suggests a number of recommendations on how to address the challenges that they encounter during the process.

Background

The Palestinian education system was under the supervision of several occupying powers for many years. These include the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. As a result of the Oslo Agreement and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1993, the Palestinian educational system in West Bank and Gaza, for the first time in history, fell under the responsibility of the Palestinians. One year later, in 1994 the Palestinian Ministry of Education was created. . Among the first priorities, that the Ministry embarked on developing was a unified Palestinian curriculum for the West Bank and Gaza who used to follow the Jordanian and Egyptian curricula respectively. The Ministry of Education established the Palestinian Curriculum Development Center (PCDC) that was charged with developing the new Palestinian curriculum.

The implementation of the new Palestinian curriculum began in 2000 with the adoption of national textbooks in all subjects. All Palestinian grade 1-12 students used the Palestinian national textbooks by the beginning of the academic year 2006-2007. The PCDC introduced is the teaching English as a foreign language in the first grade instead of the fifth grade. Other significant changes included the introduction of new subjects such as civics education, national education, Christian education and technology.

The implementation of a new curriculum represented in new national textbooks for all grades require safe schools, healthy environments and competent and well-

trained teachers. It is worth mentioning that in the four years (1987-1993) before the creation of the PNA, education in Palestine was in a very poor state. Schools' infrastructures were in very bad conditions. Teachers' and students' psychological and health conditions were very poor as a result of the occupation. Accordingly designing a curriculum that meets Palestinian students' social and emotional needs was considered of paramount importance.

Current Policy on Social Emotional Learning

The K-12 Palestinian education system relies mainly on textbooks to the extent that texts books are considered as being the curriculum. When educators use the Arabic word Minhaj (curriculum) they refer to the textbooks being used for each content area. The new curriculum is based on the philosophy that “efforts are directed and oriented towards developing the individual and his physical, psychological, emotional and mental abilities” (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 6). Further, it grounded in its religion (Islam), Arab culture and its political situation of Israeli occupation. It states that:

[t]he Palestinian curriculum is based on the general educational philosophy of the Palestinian Arab society. Its principles have been derived from our heritage and religion, from our Declaration of Independence, and from our ambitions for the future of our people, and our understanding of the role of education in developing this society (Palestinian Curriculum, 1998, p. 5).

Even though in its policies and principles, the curriculum does not explicitly use the term Social and Emotional Learning, it is implied in the document and textbooks. “The Palestinian curriculum concentrates on producing a psychologically and socially balanced people aware of others' limitations and themselves’ (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.10). Further, according to the Palestinian Education Law (2017) “the education system aims to ... [p]rovide safe environments that enhance education and school health’ (p.10). Providing safe and welcoming schools is also echoed in the Palestinian Inclusive Education Policy (2015):

We believe that delivering quality education to every citizen of Palestine – regardless of their personal and social status will be achieved through reforming our education system into an inclusive, learner friendly education system. That

is, a system built around principles of universal design, which welcomes and supports all learners in regular education settings; provides responsive learning opportunities (through flexible and adaptive teaching and learning methods, curricula and assessment systems, within an infrastructure that is accessible, safe and welcoming); and actively strives to challenge and stop discrimination in any form within education (and thus also within society) (Ministry of Education, 2015, p.10).

The inclusive education policy document also refers to the Palestinian Law pertaining to compulsory education up to grade 10 and preventing school dropout. Although neither the curriculum, nor the Education Law nor the Inclusive Education policy mention explicitly the terms Social and Emotion Learning, some of the core skills of SEL are echoed throughout these documents.

Current Practices related to Social Emotional Learning

Even though the Palestinian education system does not have a specific program that focuses on Social and Emotional Learning, this does not mean that educators do not attempt to develop SEL in school children. There are several current practices that Palestinian teachers and school leaders follow in order to develop and nurture SEL skills before students complete high school. First, some of the social and emotional skills are nurtured explicitly through Civic Education that the Ministry of Education introduced for the first time in 2000, and other subjects such as Religion and Arabic. The hidden curriculum is also one of the main approaches which promotes social and emotional learning. Parents, families and the communities (through religious centers such as mosques and churches) also play a major role in developing and nurturing the social and emotional skills among children.

Civic Education

Since the Palestinians took charge of their education system, they embarked on changing its expectations through the development of a new curriculum and adding new subjects such as Civic Education. The main goal of introducing this new subject was to develop responsible citizens in a democratic society. The system is hoping to enable

students to make ethical decisions and overcome challenges effectively by making the right decisions.

Some of the core skills of social and emotional learning are being taught through Civic Education. As stated in the Civics Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1998) the general goal is to assist students in becoming good, responsible and effective citizens who play a major role in the Palestinian society, both socially and politically. Further, it aims at encouraging students to consider ethical, safety and societal issues when making decisions, applying decision making skills responsibly when dealing with social situations, and contributing to the well-being of one's community.

The Civics Education curriculum is based on four key principles. First, patriotic principles in which the curriculum emphasises the right of Palestinians to live freely and democratically like all other nations around the world. The curriculum stresses the establishment of a democratic Palestinian independent state enjoying peace with its neighbours and mutual respect and understanding with all countries in the world. The second principle focuses on societal foundations. It emphasises empathy and understanding others, respecting diversity, and understanding social and cultural norms of behavior (social awareness). The third principle is being knowledgeable, namely being open minded towards other cultures and ethnicities, achieving cognitive and spiritual maturity, being creative and critical thinker, independent life-long learner, and taking initiative. The fourth principle focuses on the individual's psychological well-being in general.

From the above discussion, it appears that Civic Education addresses the social aspect of social and emotional learning, fostering such skills as empathy and understanding others, respecting diversity, respecting and understanding own social and cultural norms and other cultures and religions, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, communicating clearly and effectively, cooperating with others and solving conflicts constructively. In addition, Civic Education also emphasizes responsible decision-making skills with students developing the capacity to make ethical

choices based on their skills to empathize with others and see their perspectives. The other two core areas of Social and Emotional Learning (Self Awareness and Self Regulation) are missing from the Civic Education curriculum. There are other avenues, however, where children are exposed to self awareness and self management.

Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum includes those lessons that students learn at school just by being at school. These include unstated norms, values, and beliefs transmitted to students in the classroom and the school social environment (Giroux, 1983). Social emotional skills are transmitted indirectly to students through the hidden curriculum using a variety of strategies such as role models (teachers, famous characters ...), case studies, magic moments and incidents, and students' behaviour at school. For instance, to assist students develop self-awareness and self-management skills, a teacher may use a recent incident that happened at school or the community where some people or students expressed emotions and attitudes that hurt their friends' feelings. A teacher might spend a whole class lesson on how students may become more aware of their emotions and learn to express them constructively.

Religious Education

Three of the five main emotional and social areas are addressed in the religious Islamic curriculum. These include self-awareness, self-regulation and relationship skills. The school system devotes two 45-minute long classes a week to teach, develop and nurture such skills in students. Through explicit instruction using case studies, stories, religious information from the Quran, Prophet Mohammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) life and sayings and famous historic leaders, students are given the opportunity a) to recognize their thoughts and emotions, understand how they influence their behaviour, build their self-confidence, and identify their strengths and the areas that need improvement; b) to self-regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, manage stress, control impulses and develop honorable goals for ones' life; and c) to establish and maintain healthy relationships, cooperate with others and solve conflicts constructively.

Arabic Language

The Arabic language curriculum is not only designed to teach students the Arabic language. The readings selected to teach Arabic are chosen very carefully to teach students some of the social and emotional skills. In order to develop students' skills to respect others with different backgrounds and cultures, and to empathise and feel compassionate and understand others (Social Awareness), curriculum designers select readings such as short stories, poems or case studies that indirectly teach students such social norms in addition to the linguistic goals of the lessons. Further, to develop and nurture students' relationship skills such as communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating with others, solving conflicts constructively, and behaving appropriately, teachers use materials that reflect such values.

Parents and Home Environment

The home environment is the first school in which students grow and are nurtured. Parents play a crucial role in developing social and emotional skills in their children. The extent to which parents do so and the effectiveness of their role depend on several variables such as their level of education, their awareness of the social and emotional learning, their availability, their engagement in their children's education and their schools. In Palestinian families, children learn how to build relationships by observing their parents relating with family members, relatives and people in the community with respect and kindness. Children develop their listening skills by watching parents listening actively when others speak. Considering the hardships that Palestinian people live under, most Palestinian parents delegate responsibilities to their children at an early age, allowing them to make decisions and appreciating their accomplishments and efforts. Such actions help to build their children's self-confidence and autonomy.

Community Centers

Community centres such as mosques, churches, and sports clubs play a significant role in developing and nurturing some of the key emotional and social skills in students. These centers are considered one of the most important places where children receive

direct and explicit instruction on social and emotional skills. Such centers have full-time employees and volunteers responsible for organising workshops and activities that promote values such as honesty, perseverance, self-regulation, gratitude, kindness, teamwork, empathy, optimism, courage, hard work, sense of responsibility, integrity, respect, emotional intelligence and social skills.

Challenges Implementing Social Emotional Learning

Implementing an effective, explicit social and emotional learning curriculum in the Palestinian education system is challenging for the following reasons:

- **Lack of Awareness:** the explicit emphasis on social and emotional learning with benchmarks is a recent trend of which not many Palestinian educators are aware.
- **Lack of support:** not all education leaders support the implementation of SEL programs arguing that most if not all the SEL skills are covered through other areas in the curriculum, schools activities and programs.
- **Enough scheduling time:** Students' daily schedule is already over loaded with daily classes to cover all the curriculum subjects. Sometimes teachers take leave out SEL- related subjects such as art and physical education so as to be able to finish the syllabus of the other academic content areas
- **Lack of space to integrate SEL skills in the other subject areas:** teachers are already under pressure to complete the curriculum for each subject area. This issue is given priority in inspections and annual appraisal reports.
- **Lack of resources on Social and Emotional Learning:** In general, it is very challenging to get recent textbooks and other resources to the Palestinian Occupied Territories due to travel restrictions and delays in receiving material from abroad. Having the adequate resources is vital for developing and implementing effective successful SEL program.
- **Competent Educators in Social and Emotional Learning:** training school leaders, teachers and support staff on effective SEL program implementation and assessment is crucial for success. Presently there is a dearth of such training and trainers in Palestine
- **Ministry Support:** There is no government legislation that mandates schools to offer such programs in their curriculum. This is a serious barrier to the implementation of SEL programs in Palestinian schools.
- **Parents' Engagement and Support:** In spite of the great efforts that the Palestinian Ministry of Education is investing in parents' engagement in their children's schools, family engagement is mediocre at best. The reason behind such a trend is cultural and historic. Many families believe that it is the

responsibility of schools to educate their children, develop their characters and instill in them the values that help them to be good citizens. Consequently, harnessing families' support and engagement for the development and implementation of SEL is a major challenge.

Recommendations

- **Developing an explicit social and emotional learning curriculum:** To get the utmost benefit and prepare students for the 21st century it is urgent that the Palestinian Ministry of Education embark on developing a SEL curriculum that serves all students at all levels. It could develop such a program in three stages, namely at Lower Basic stage (Primary) Upper Basic stage (Middle) and the secondary stage respectively
- **Developing social and emotional learning benchmarks to guide program implementation:** Having clear standards that guide educators in implementing SEL programs assists them in engaging in quality instruction and delivering programs effectively (Osher & Kendziora, 2008 and Jones & Bouffard, 2012).
- **Training school leaders and teachers in the implementation of social and emotional learning:** It is imperative to have a well-trained cadre of Palestinian school leaders and teachers on the most effective methods of delivering social and emotional learning in schools. Further, participating in the program should be voluntary or rewarded in any way possible. School teachers are already overloaded and under compensated, and without their training and support it is not recommended to start such a program.
- **Raising parents' awareness about the significance of social emotional learning:** equally important is harnessing parents and families support in SEL. It is imperative that schools engage the parents' school council in the selection and implementation of the SEL programs. Holding conferences or workshops at school in the weekend or in the evening to raise parents' awareness about the program and recruiting volunteers to assist schools in implementing the program will increase the chances of having a successful and effective program.
- **Building family and community partnerships that support the delivery of social and emotional learning:** establishing strong partnership with community organization such churches, mosques, sports clubs, after school programs is another method that reinforces the development of the social and emotional core skills in children, adolescents and adults.
- **Collaborating with non-government organizations such as Save the Children:** The Palestinian Ministry of Education has the opportunity to collaborate with organizations such as Save the Children and the World Bank to develop SEL programs. Such nongovernment organization could at least fund the establishment of such a program similar to other programs such as the Inclusive

Education program. For instance, Save the Children provided funding for this program by securing all resources, and providing training for school leaders, teachers, counselors and instructional supervisors.

- **The Ministry of Education should make SEL one of its priorities and including it in its education strategy.** The Ministry, following a consultation exercise with the major stakeholders, should include SEL as a key priority area and secure funding, including international funds, to provide the necessary resources to schools.
- **Use effective disciplinary practices that do not cause physical and emotional abuse.** Unfortunately, Palestinian teachers and school principals still revert to physical and verbal punishments to reprimand students. According to United Nation's Palestine 2030 Report:

Violence remains a critical issue in schools, especially at boys' schools. Almost one in every five children in Palestine has experienced violence at the hands of teachers, and one in every 50 children had experienced violence by Israeli soldiers and settlers (almost all children are exposed to this latter type of violence). These figures were higher in Gaza and for males than females (P.211).

Such punitive measures cause physical and emotional abuse among students. It is very critical that the Ministry of Education issues a policy prohibiting physical and emotional abuse in its all forms. This is a pre-requisite for establishing and implementing an effective and successful SEL.

- **Use project-based learning as teaching and learning strategy effectively.** One of the instructional practices that aids in developing and improving some of the core social and emotional skills is project-based learning. To use this strategy effectively education leaders and decision makers need to build capacity and train principals, instructional supervisors and teachers on how to apply this strategy in their teaching practices.
- **Encourage self-reflection as an assessment strategy.** Self-reflection is an important strategy for effective SEL so. Being able to reflect constructively on ones' skills such as self-confidence, communication, relationships, dealing with stress and other skills could yield great results in improving these and other social and emotional skills
- **Develop a restorative disciplinary program.** Restorative disciplinary practices such as community building circles, collaborative negotiation, peer mediation, and restorative circles assist schools in building safe and respectful school communities. Such restorative practices develop and reinforce many of the core skills of social and emotional learning.

- **Develop school activities that build communities and bring students and families together.** Schools are the heart of communities. School leaders should use schools to bring students and families together. Organizing activities and workshops where families with their children may participate is a great way to engage parents in SEL. This is particularly vital for the K-12 schools because parent and family engagement in their children’s schools requires major improvement.
- **Integrating SEL programs in teacher and school leaders’ pre-service education programs.** Palestinian principals and teacher education programs need to include on how SEL may be implemented in schools as part of the curriculum. This will not only develop prospective school leaders and teachers emotional and social skills but also make them aware of such programs and deepen their knowledge and capacity to take the initiative to develop such programs at their schools.
- **The Ministry of Education should cooperate with other government agencies particularly Ministry of Social Affairs and the Health Ministry.** Cooperating with other government organizations such as the aforementioned two ministries avoids redundancy and waste of the scarce resources that these ministries have, cut costs, and allow for trained and expert professionals from the three entities to provide schools with better services related to SEL.

Conclusion

The Palestinian education system addresses the social and emotional needs of its students in various ways and through various subjects in the curriculum, but there is not yet a specific SEL curriculum. However, there is a need, particularly in view of the social and emotional difficulties many Palestinian children go through, to invest more in SEL, with the development of an SEL curriculum adapted to the Palestinian context and provision of adequate resources to facilitate effective delivery in schools.

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