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History of Education in Palestine

Time to Reconsider

By **Jehad Alshwaikh**



Motivated by the desire both to explore Palestinian schooling practices during the past century and to learn about some educational innovations, I carried out a small research project entitled “The History of Mathematics Education in Palestine,” which was supported by the Scientific Research Committee at Birzeit University. Given the paucity of documentation of the educational system in Palestine, I believed that there would be significant historical value in understanding how Palestinians have been learning (and teaching) mathematics over time. The study draws a detailed image of the daily life in schools (teaching, classrooms, etc.) and the educational discourse before and after the *Nakba* as it poses questions



UNRWA Photo, Al-Shati [Beach] Camp, Gaza Strip.



UNRWA Photo, Al-Jalazon Camp, West Bank.

such as: How was classroom teaching conducted? What aids or means were used? Were there textbooks? How many students were in the classroom? What kinds of facilities were used?

I interviewed 17 people (in their 60s and 70s) in the West Bank and Gaza. Because of travel limitations imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli occupation authorities, I could not interview Palestinians in Jerusalem or in Israel. However, I interviewed one person from Nazareth who was visiting Ramallah, and my graduate students interviewed two respondents in Jerusalem. The interviews in Gaza were conducted by a researcher from Gaza.

Telling the story of educational life in schools and understanding the discourse of Palestinian education has significant benefits. First, education has always been central to Palestinian life. Half of all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are currently in the general or higher educational system, either as students or teachers, and therefore education is a potent tool for change and development. I want to explore the connection between changes in Palestinian society, including increasing passivity, and views of education – for example, relying solely on teachers to give students knowledge or engaging together to actively construct knowledge. Exploring the history of education provides insight into current

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social trends and the possibility for change.

Second, the performance of Palestinian students in mathematics is very poor, as indicated in international studies (e.g., Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS); Matar, 2009) and at the national level (Masad, 1998). Understanding the history of mathematics education has intrinsic value for helping to improve performance.

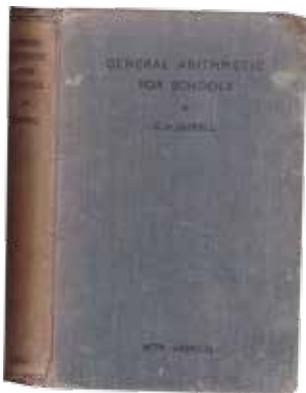
Third, I chose mathematics not just because it is my specialisation and interest but also because it is a subject

of “power” over people. Mathematics is taught as though it were cross-cultural and universal, having nothing to do with people’s lives. For example, one reads this statement in our mathematics textbooks (and in many other textbooks around the world): “The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees” – in Arabic this statement has neither verb nor doer/subject. Some studies suggest that connecting the teaching and learning of mathematics with personal and historical narratives could improve pedagogy and performance (Fauvel and Maanen, 2000).

These stories have the potential to inspire the current generation of teachers and learners by grounding them in their history and infusing them with a sense of possibility and hope. On one hand, studying the way mathematics has been taught throughout the generations in Palestine is a powerful tool for analysing social and political changes in Palestinian society (Fasheh, 1997). On the other hand, understanding the evolution of mathematics education as a social practice carries real potential for improving student performance.

Some preliminary results

There are some preliminary results from this study. (I should mention that there is still a need to analyse all the interviews before coming to any general



Math textbook that was part of the curriculum in 1955.

conclusions.) The first finding is that Palestinians take pride in and value education; they have considered it a priority for a long time. This was also revealed in the interviews. In addition to the fact that most students had to walk long distances to get to their schools, Palestinians during the *Nakba* built tents and used them as school classrooms. Abdel Qader (originally born in Sabbareen, Haifa, before 1948; his family lived in Jenin for a year after the *Nakba* and later moved to Tulkarem) remembers: “The school in Janzour (near Jenin) was in tents.... During an intense storm in 1950 the tents were destroyed by the wind and the rain.”

Furthermore, the school – because of the small number of students and the difficulties in transportation – had more than one grade in the same tent, and teachers were teaching two different grades at the same time. As far as I understand, this practice also existed in schools in some Palestinian villages at least until 2010.

Another issue is the role of teachers. Most of the interviewees described their teachers as honest, devoted to their profession, and well-respected among the people. One interviewee commented, “It’s different from the current situation where new teachers are ready to leave the school for another job.” Although interviewees described their teachers as devoted, the modes of teaching were similar to the current mode – rote memorisation. This was also the case for mathematics.

Most of the people I interviewed could not remember the details of how they learnt mathematics; neither the kind of problems to be solved nor the tools used in teaching. However, they still remember the topics: algorithm, algebra, and geometry. No textbooks were found. But there is still a need to investigate more about the quality of teaching and learning mathematics.

A final relevant issue is the arrangement of the class, which was very similar to

the current situation: desks arranged in rows that face a blackboard on which teachers write.

While these impressions were common among the interviewees, it is clear that there is an urgent need to explore some of the innovative educational experiences of the past, such as those of Khalil Sakakini and Khalil Abu Rayya; and *Hisab Li-Htaita*.

Innovative educational experiences

Khalil Sakakini is a well-known educator, though his vision and philosophy are not yet widespread among Palestinians. Dr. Munir Fasheh has much to share about the experience of Sakakini in establishing various schools in Jerusalem and in challenging the educational policy of the British Mandate in Palestine. In addition to his educational vision, Sakakini had a political position and, in my opinion, they were intertwined. (I wonder whether it is even possible to separate education from social, cultural, and political realities.) According to Fasheh, for example, one of the main educational contributions of Sakakini is the belief that learning occurs in context. I agree with Fasheh and would suggest that a consequence of that vision is that we Palestinians have to (re)think our own way of learning and teaching, taking into consideration our context, especially during this time in our history when most, if not all of us complain about general and higher education.

Sakakini’s educational and political approaches are revealed in the titles of his books:

الاحتذاء بحذاء الغير (Wearing Someone Else’s Shoes) and *وعليه قس (By the Same Token)*. The former is a critique of adopting others’ values and practices uncritically without adapting them to one’s own context. The latter is giving the learner an agency of learning (Arabic, in particular), since Sakakini, rather than giving rules for teaching Arabic grammar, presents examples and asks the students to extract the methods and principles and apply them to other new problems.

Although Fasheh was not taught by Sakakini himself, he considers himself lucky since the principal of his school was Khalil Abu Rayya, a student of Sakakini. “In 1956 when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt (Tripartite Aggression) ... all our studies and everything else were connected to what was happening in Egypt,” Fasheh recalls. “In deference to Sakakini’s ‘learning in context,’ Abu Rayya arranged weekly hiking trips designed to get to know Ramallah. There would be



no school on Saturdays, so teachers and students could walk in nature.” Fasheh’s eyes sparkled with excitement as he remembered those days: “I have loved hiking ever since, and it has become my favourite hobby.”

Hisab Li-Htaita: One of the issues I explored is whether Palestinians ever used textbooks in school before the *Nakba*, and if so, whether any of them are still around. Most people indicated that there were no textbooks. One of the people I interviewed, Mr. Mohammad Batrawi (who has since passed away), told me that his mathematics teacher Mr. Hussain Nijm used to teach them algorithm (*hisab*) from a text that he had prepared, entitled *Hisab Li-Htaita* (حساب الحطيطة). This was in the 1940s in Isdud (Ashdod). Mr. Batrawi could not remember anything from that text. I hope to find the text since it is a nice example of innovation and care on the part of some teachers, and it is an important piece of educational history. It might also be an indication that some teachers had to tailor materials to suit student needs, as opposed to the present situation, where textbooks are given as set lesson plans.

Conclusion

This is a modest attempt to talk about education in Palestine, and I chose to focus on the importance of studying the history of education in order to gain a greater understanding of the Palestinian education system. There are two issues that I would like to highlight in this context. First, the mode of teaching in Palestinian schools is dominated by rote learning and memorising facts and events rather than by critical and creative thinking. This issue makes me wonder how much education in Palestine has improved in terms of what we teach and how we teach it. Here I want to point out the time-related urgency of conducting this research now, before the pre-*Nakba* generation of students and teachers passes on.* Second, there is a vital need to study

successful innovative experiences such as that of Sakakini. Speaking about the advantages of the Dostoreyah School in 1911, Sakakini made a statement that is, in my opinion, inspiring, even if more than 100 years have passed: “The principles upon which the school is based include honour of the pupil rather than humiliation; growth rather than regression; and an increase in freedom rather than in restrictions. In addition, there will be no punishment, no rewards, and no grades.” (http://www.schoolarabia.net/toroq_tadrees_arabi/khalil_alskani/ktha_ana/1.htm)

The documentation of such innovative practices will offer hope for new generations.

Jehad Alshwaikh is assistant professor of mathematics education at the Faculty of Education, Birzeit University. He is interested in communication and representation in mathematics discourse where he focuses on diagrams, language, and gestures in learning and teaching mathematics. His last research project (2012–13) was entitled “Analysing Palestinian School Mathematics Textbooks” in cooperation with Professor Candia Morgan (Institute of Education/University of London) and supported by the British Academy.

Article photos courtesy of UNRWA.

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* Unfortunately, three of the people I interviewed have already died.