

Reality and Aspirations

Khalil Alawneh and Mahmoud Abdel-Fattah summarize deaf education in Palestine

Introduction

It is important to understand the history of the political and humanitarian context in Palestine in order to understand the consequences of such history on the different aspects of Palestinian life, including education.

The Palestinian Authority was established in the West Bank and Gaza in May 1994 as a result of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The Palestinian Ministry of Education (MOE) was created in August the same year. Since then, the MOE has unified the education systems that are used by the supervising parties who provide education for students in Palestine: MOE, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), and the private sector.

The General Census of the schools in the scholastic year 2018/2019 showed that there are 3,037 schools (2,300 are in the West Bank, 737 in the Gaza Strip) overseen by the supervising bodies: 2,234 are governmental schools, 370 are UNRWA schools, and 433 are private schools, with a total number of 1,282,054 students attending schools, of whom 9,383 are special needs students enrolled in governmental schools (6,160 in West Bank, 3,254 in the Gaza Strip) and about 3,100 special needs students with 'different disabilities' enrolled in private sector institutions.

The main findings of the census in 2017 showed that the total percentage rate of disabilities in Palestine had reached 5.8%, with a total number of 255,228 disabled persons from a total population of 4.78 million in the same year. The percentage of the deaf was 1.6%, which means that there are 76,480 deaf or hard of hearing persons, 46,080 in the West Bank, and 30,400 in the Gaza Strip.

Background

Deaf people in Palestine face many challenges and problems in their society and in all walks of life: education, work, media, social relations and interpretation. However, there are deaf people who are employed and studying, fighting for their rights and working hard against all obstacles.

The deaf community was first cared for through benevolent societies and NGOs (non governmental organizations). The first deaf school was opened in 1971 in Bethlehem. This school has basically used the oral approach until now. In 1992 more deaf schools were established after the first Palestinian sign language dictionary was published. These schools basically used the total communication approach in teaching deaf students using the sign language dictionary. Currently, 17 NGO institutions (schools) provide educational services for the deaf in the West Bank and Gaza, with an approximate number of 900 deaf students, and it is estimated that 1,700 students who are deaf and hard of hearing are at public schools (MOE, 2019). Disease was considered to be the main reason that caused deafness, while heritage was

considered to be the second cause. About 17.4% of deaf students use hearing aids, 3.2% use cochlear implants, and about 10% use sign language in their communication.

Ministry of Education policy and quality of education

The Palestinian authority adopted inclusive education (IE) in 1997. At the time, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) had, together with most countries in the world, adopted 'Education for All' as its educational policy.

Then, only five types of special needs students, the ones that were the easiest to identify, were integrated in normal classes: students with vision, hearing, mobility, speech, and mild to moderate cognitive disabilities. Meanwhile, other kinds of disabilities were probably 'integrated' in normal classes without any specialist attention and support.

MOE succeeded in dealing with some of the above disabilities correctly; the visually impaired were provided with a syllabus for blind students in Braille, as well as some equipment and materials. Students with mobility-related disabilities were supported by making changes to the school environment, as well as providing them with the necessary equipment. However, teachers are still not fully qualified to deal with all types of special needs. For example, deaf, cognitive disabilities, or autistic students did not receive a special syllabus or attention, and this can be clearly seen in the low level of academic achievement of these students. This is why many challenges have not been successfully solved so far.

Challenges facing deaf education in Palestine

The deaf community in Palestine faces many challenges that can be summarized as follows:

- 1 The data available regarding the total number of deaf students who should be in schools are still inaccurate.
- 2 The government school environment has not been adapted successfully to integrate the deaf and hard of hearing students in school buildings and classes.
- 3 Deaf and hard of hearing students are using the same government curriculum, and this has not been adapted to be suitable for the students. However, nowadays, there is a debate on having a special curriculum for deaf students or adapting the current one for their needs.
- 4 The majority of teachers employed in government schools are not qualified to communicate and deal with deaf students because of their lack of knowledge of Palestinian Sign Language. The teacher must deal with all kinds of special needs students integrated in the class.
- 5 The Ministry of Education used to integrate students with mild and moderate disabilities in public schools with no fees, while the lucky severely deaf student

might be enrolled in a deaf school with monthly fees that caused financial problems for many families even though the Ministry of Education used to support these schools with teachers whose salaries were paid by the government.

- 6 Deaf and hard of hearing students used to sit for The General Secondary Certificate Exam like other students. The Ministry used to give the same adjustments for the exam, such as hiring interpreters for deaf students, giving them 30 minutes additional time to enable them to finish the exam, omitting some topics especially comprehension in Arabic and English, and having the correction (resit?) of the exam for all students take place at one correction (resit) center; nevertheless, the percentage of success was always low.
- 7 The Ministry of Education used to employ 5% of the graduates with special needs to work in the field of education; however, the deaf graduates are still not getting the full chance to be employed in positions at the Ministry of Education.

Schools for the Deaf

There are 17 main deaf schools that offer education for both deaf and hard of hearing students in Palestine. Two of them are in the Gaza Strip, which are run by the government. Special schools for the deaf started to open at the beginning of the 1990s when the first sign language dictionary was published by the Benevolence Society for the Deaf in Ramallah City. In total, these schools teach around 900 deaf students. There are no recent studies that give the figures for the total school enrolment and deaf student enrolment in both private and government schools. The situation of teachers in deaf schools is also a key issue. Of the 235 teachers, 99 percent were women, of whom 102 teachers were employed by MOE to support deaf schools. Some deaf schools have a complete staff team, others do not. Teachers have different educational levels; some teachers have been schooled up to the 12th grade and have completed courses in teaching deaf people, others have only got a diploma, while the majority have bachelor's degrees in different subjects. Only two teachers have a master's degree.

The schools also have different levels of resources. More than 90 percent have their own website, computer labs and alarm systems. The differences are chiefly in the main human resources, like the number of teachers and the level of education.

Challenges Facing Special Education Schools

Special education schools in Palestine face many challenges that make it difficult for them to function and deliver suitable services for their enrollees:

- 1 The majority of deaf schools have no clear strategy for advancing the education for the upper grades of high school. The majority of schools stopped offering teaching after the eighth or ninth grade. This was mainly linked to the availability of resources, mainly financial. Today, only four deaf schools offer education for deaf students up to the 12th grade .

- 2 Most of the deaf schools are located in the main cities and, therefore, many of the deaf students are unable to attend their educational institutions especially when they are hampered by Israeli checkpoints, curfews, financial problems due to the poverty of many families, or transportation difficulties.
- 3 The location of some of these schools is not suitable, or the maximum capacity is not sufficient, to accept more deaf students. For this reason, many deaf people are on waiting lists while others go to mainstream schools.
- 4 All deaf schools are non-government institutions (NGOs). Each school has a different policy with independent financial and administrative work not subject to interference by government institutions. The Ministry of Education issues educational certificates for schools to be eligible for teaching deaf students according to special criteria. The Ministry also helps in providing teachers for these schools by covering their salaries (a total of 62 teachers). The schools cover the salaries of the other teachers.
- 5 There is a big difference between the monthly salaries paid by the Ministry (around \$900) and the salaries paid by the deaf schools (\$400). This will reflect negatively on the job satisfaction of many teachers.
- 6 There is still a shortage of teachers and educational specialisations, as well as a shortage of training that all teachers should obtain in the field of teaching deaf students.
- 7 All the schools are using the same curriculum in teaching deaf students that is used for teaching regular students, with the same evaluation given to hearing students and so on. There are many problems related to this: there is not enough time to complete the whole syllabus in one school year, and many of the schools do not have all the tools and educational materials to succeed. There are limitations in the sign language used as well as with the relevant materials, which are only available up to the seventh grade. There are also limited possibilities to work individually with deaf students in the class.
- 8 The use of Palestinian Sign Language in teaching varies. All deaf schools are using Palestinian Sign Language and the educational sign language dictionary but this only covers signs up to the seventh grade syllabus. Some schools use the total communication model perfectly, while others use sign language without being systematic. Some prefer not to use sign language at all and instead opt for the oral teaching method.

Deaf clubs

The deaf clubs started opening in 1991 after the publishing of the first sign language dictionary. The first deaf club was founded in Ramallah City and currently there are five deaf clubs with a combined membership of one thousand deaf members.

The founding of the deaf clubs was important. It was a sign of an awakening: the club gathered deaf people to form a special entity of their own, and to foster their own

culture. This led to the opening of institutions and educational clubs, particularly aimed at deaf people as in many places there were no schools for the deaf. The clubs were also important in spreading sign language through courses for parents and children as well as connecting experienced translators with the society. Deaf people understood that they were the owners of their language and it was their duty to spread it in society and teach it to others. Also, in the deaf clubs it was understood that deaf Palestinians were able to communicate with other deaf groups outside Palestine through meetings, conferences, workshops and creating relations with them.

Usually, deaf clubs help in giving a notification card for their members to show that they are deaf, which helps them if they apply for entry into Israel. Clubs also provide interpretation through their interpreters when their members face communication difficulties or, for example, if Israeli police detain them inside Israel.

Sign language interpreters and interpreting

Interpreters and interpretation services are a key issue for the lives and rights of deaf people. It is important that there are interpreters and that they are professional and officially recognised. It is important that they have a professional degree and follow the ethics of interpretation. It is not unusual for a deaf person to be abused or cheated by an interpreter who is not qualified.

The situation in Palestine is worrying in this sense. None of the interpreters in Palestine have higher education in sign language, that is before there were sign language programs available in any local university. Recently in 2019, a government university has started to give a diploma in sign language; however, this program has not yet been evaluated to see how effective such programs are. It is the deaf clubs that are the main education places for the interpreters together with the deaf schools, especially when they have a deaf employee at the school. The ability of an interpreter to practice interpretation depends on the deaf club members and their knowledge of signs and concepts, as well as the time spent by the interpreter among the deaf. A hearing interpreter or an expert in deaf education is usually the one who teaches sign language among hearing people and parents.

Birzeit University, a well-known local university in Palestine, launched a sign language course for registered students in September 2014, for the first time in Palestine. This project was completely supported by Finish Evangelical Lutheran Mission FELM for the first two years in cooperation with the Benevolent Society for the Deaf in Ramallah.

Conclusion

In general, deaf people in Palestine face many challenges and problems in their society and in all walks of life: in education, work, media, social relations, and interpretation.

The challenges are very often faced individually; it is left to each individual to get the services they need. This is due to a situation where the Deaf Union is weak and inactive. The Deaf Union is not strong enough

to defend the rights of deaf people in Palestinian society. Deaf adults are not supported adequately. Their capacities are not strengthened and there are very few opportunities to develop skills or complete basic schooling for those who did not have the chance to go to school as children. There are no professionals or experts working with deaf adults and there are very few expert teachers in the schools. The Ministry of Education is now working on the evaluation of the NGO schools and finding the exact number of deaf and hard of hearing students who are at school age school, in cooperation with other related stakeholders.

The Disability Rights Law in Palestine (1999) has not been fully applied. However, it is important for improving the situation of deaf people. The delay in applying this law may be due to the difficult situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, the political instability, and the financial difficulties. The Ministry of Social Development is now working on a renewed Disability Rights Law in Palestine at the first draft, and a research study to give the estimated budget of the cost of implementation of the law.

In addition, deaf people in Palestine need a formal representative association that would protect the rights of all deaf people, both children and adults.

Language-planning is important for Palestinian Sign Language. The language still lacks signs in many fields that will become necessary if deaf learners were to study further and have higher level professional careers. Palestinian Sign Language needs to be taught more widely; there is a need for community members and relatives to learn to use it to enable them to communicate with deaf people. ■

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