

Social and Emotional Learning in Palestinian K-12 Schools

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1 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 have realised that it is not enough to have students equipped with the technical skills and knowledge required for their future careers. Equally as important are the soft skills on which social and emotional learning focuses. Therefore, education systems would like students who are socially skilled, respectful, live responsibly and safely, and have great work and life habits to contribute to a successful, happy and fulfilling life.

Education authorities around the world began to place an emphasis on 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 school; on the other hand, the lack of such skills leads to social challenges (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). A meta-analysis of 213 studies conducted by Durlak et al. (2011) found that engaging students in high quality evidence-based social and emotional learning programmes improved students' academic achievement, prosocial behaviour, and positive attitudes toward themselves and others, and decreased misbehaviour and emotional distress. These positive outcomes were also confirmed by another meta-analysis conducted by Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, and Ben (2012). Furthermore, SEL programmes that have clear benchmarks enable students to have better SEL instruction, improve school engagement and become better learners (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley (2015) found that there is a strong correlation between students' social and emotional learning skills at an 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 to this, during

high school, they were less likely to experience alcohol abuse, 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 endeavours to teach SEL, and suggests a number of recommendations on how to address the challenges that they encounter during the process.

2 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 was the development of 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 responsible for 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 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 required safe schools, healthy environments and competent and well-trained teachers. It is worth mentioning that in the years (1987–1993) before the creation of the PNA, education in Palestine was in a very poor state. The schools' infrastructures were in very bad condition, and the teachers' and students' psychological and health conditions were very poor. Therefore, designing a curriculum that meets Palestinian students' social and emotional needs was considered to be of paramount importance.

3 Current Policy on Social-Emotional Learning

The K-12 Palestinian education system relies mainly on textbooks to the extent that textbooks 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). Furthermore, it is grounded in its religion (Islam), Arab culture and the 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 documents 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 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 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 drop-out. Although neither the curriculum, nor the Education Law nor the Inclusive Education policy explicitly mention the terms Social and Emotion Learning, some of the core skills of SEL are echoed throughout these documents.

4 Current Practices Related to Social-Emotional Learning

Even though the Palestinian education system does not have a specific programme that focuses on Social and Emotional Learning, this does not mean that educators do not attempt to develop SEL in school children. There are currently several practices that Palestinian teachers and school leaders follow in order to develop and nurture SEL skills in their students before they 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 centres 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 the addition of 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 Civic 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. Furthermore, it aims to encourage 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 Civic 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 behaviour (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 a critical thinker, independent life-long learning, 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 skills such as empathy and understanding others, respecting diversity, respecting and understanding one's 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 emphasises responsible decision-making skills with students developing the capacity to make ethical choices based on their skills to empathise 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's 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, etc.), case studies, magic moments and incidents, and students' behaviour at school. For instance, to assist students in developing self-awareness and self-management skills, a teacher may use a recent incident that happened at school or in the community where some people or students expressed emotions and attitudes that hurt their friends' feelings. A teacher might dedicate a whole 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 to (a) recognise 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) self-regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, manage stress, control impulses and develop honourable goals for ones' life; and (c) 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 social and emotional skills. In order to develop students' skills to respect others from different backgrounds and cultures, and to empathise and feel compassionate and understanding towards 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. Furthermore, teachers use materials that reflect values to develop and nurture students' relationship skills such as communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating with others, solving conflicts constructively, and behaving appropriately.

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 depends on several variables, such as their level of education, their awareness of 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 observing their 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 Centres. 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 centres are considered to be some of the most important places where children receive direct and explicit instruction on social and emotional skills. Such centres 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.

5 Challenges and Recommendation in Implementing Social-Emotional Learning

Implementing an effective, explicit social and emotional learning curriculum in the Palestinian education system is challenging for various reasons. There is no government legislation that mandates schools to offer SEL programmes in their curriculum. On the other hand, the explicit emphasis on social and emotional learning with benchmarks is a recent trend of which not many Palestinian educators are aware. Thirdly, not all education leaders support the implementation of SEL programmes, arguing that most, if not all, the SEL skills are covered through other areas in the curriculum, schools activities and programmes. Furthermore, students' daily schedule is already overloaded with daily classes to cover all the curriculum subjects. Sometimes teachers 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. Teachers are already under pressure to complete the curriculum for each subject area, as shown by the priority given in inspections and annual appraisal reports. 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 another challenge for developing and implementing effective successful SEL programmes. Training school leaders, teachers and support staff on effective SEL programme implementation and assessment is crucial for success, but presently there is a dearth of such training and trainers in Palestine. Finally, the lack of parental engagement and support is another barrier to the effective implementation of SEL in Palestinian schools. Despite the efforts of the educational authorities to invest in parents' engagement in their children's schools, family engagement is mediocre at best. Many families believe that it is the responsibility of schools to educate their children, develop their character and instil 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.

One of the main tasks in overcoming these challenges is to develop and offer an explicit social and emotional leaning curriculum: To get the utmost benefit and prepare students for the 21st century it is important that the Ministry of Education should make SEL one of its priorities and include it in its

education strategy, and 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 to develop a SEL curriculum that serves all students at all levels, with programmes for the Lower Basic stage (Primary), the Upper Basic stage (Middle), and the Secondary stage respectively. This should be accompanied by SEL benchmarks to guide programme implementation: Having clear standards that guide educators in implementing SEL programmes assists them in engaging in quality instruction and delivering programmes effectively (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Osher & Kendziora, 2010). It is also imperative to have a well-trained cadre of school leaders and teachers on the most effective methods of delivering SEL in schools. School teachers are already overloaded and under compensated, and without adequate training and support it is not recommended to start such a programme. School principals and teacher education programmes thus need to include 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 will also make them aware of such programmes and deepen their knowledge and capacity to take the initiative to develop such programmes at their schools.

Raising parents' awareness about the significance of SEL and harnessing their support in the schools' efforts in SEL is another task for the way forward in Palestinian schools. It is imperative that schools engage the parents' school council in the selection and implementation of the SEL programmes. Holding conferences or workshops at school in the weekend or in the evening to raise parents' awareness about the programme and recruiting volunteers to assist schools in implementing the programme will increase the chances of having a successful and effective programme. Organising activities and workshops where families may participate with their children 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.

Establishing strong partnerships with community organisations, such as churches, mosques, sports clubs, and after school programmes is another method that reinforces the development of social and emotional core skills in children, adolescents and adults. It is also important to collaborate with organisations such as Save the Children and the World Bank to develop SEL programmes. Such non-government organisations could at least fund the establishment of such a programme similar to other programmes such as the Inclusive Education programme. The Ministry of Education also needs to cooperate with other government agencies avoids redundancy and a waste of the scarce resources, cuts costs, and allows for trained and expert professionals

from the respective entities to provide schools with better services related to SEL.

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. (Courbage, Abu Hamad, & Zagha, 2016, 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 programme. 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

One of the instructional practices that aids the development and improvement of 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. 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.

6 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 a SEL curriculum

adapted to the Palestinian context and provision of adequate resources to facilitate effective delivery in schools.

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