

Curriculum wars: national identity in education

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This paper explores the politics of education in countries affected by conflict. Drawing particularly on the Palestinian experience, it looks at the power relations among internal and external actors that shape the curriculum-building process. In the increasingly politicised world of international aid, especially in the Middle East, it challenges the idea that international agencies and donors can take a neutral approach to education. Unlike the other three pillars of humanitarian response – food, health and shelter – education is never neutral, it is intrinsically ideological and political.

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In situations of conflict, students, teachers and policy-makers often have to confront the issues that go straight to the heart of the conflict itself. Subjects such as history, geography, religion, language, literature and even music become battlegrounds that reflect the lines of conflict inside and outside the classroom. Whose history do we teach? Whose language? Whose religion? Indeed, these are not only questions for communities affected by violent conflict, they are present in educational debates everywhere and are integral to how we understand citizenship. In the UK, for example, the question of whose history should be taught in schools reflects wider political positions and contested understandings of multiculturalism. It is not surprising, therefore, that in countries affected by violent conflict the question of identity in education can be much more explosive. This paper looks at the politics of education in conflict, drawing particularly on the experience of building a national curriculum in Palestine and interviews with those involved. It examines how the political domain of education is shaped by both internal and external power relations and in doing so raises questions for the growing humanitarian discourse on the role of education in conflict and post-war reconstruction.

Whose knowledge is of most worth?

The educational theorist, Michael Apple, has long argued that curriculum development is not only an educational issue but also one that is 'inherently ideological and political' (Apple 1990, vii). Writing in the US, Apple explores the issues of power in education and what constitutes legitimate knowledge, from policy-making to the classroom. He takes the central question 'What knowledge is of most worth?' and re-phrases it to reflect what he sees as the profoundly political nature of the debate: 'Whose knowledge is of most worth?' According to Apple, what is included and what is excluded in textbooks is revealing of who holds the power in a society.

In most countries around the world, the education system intimately reflects the dominant culture and values of a society. Education is the story that society tells about itself. What we teach our children is who we are, or who we want to be. In countries emerging from conflict, there is an extra dimension: the external one. In internationally assisted processes of post-war

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reconstruction, education systems are likely to be buffeted by a range of internal and external actors. From politicians to international donors, teachers to humanitarian agencies, the individuals and institutions involved in post-conflict educational reform reflect a variety of domestic and international agendas. This internal–external interface opens up a number of related issues: Who is involved in the policy-making process? Who is excluded? Who has the power to make the decisions?

The role of education in conflict

It is only relatively recently that the issue of education in conflict has come under the spotlight of international policy-making, research and debate. At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, education in conflict was identified as a new international priority for the promotion of mutual understanding, peace and tolerance. In the last few years, the UK Department for International Development has also been prompted to conduct studies into the relationship between education, conflict and international development (DFID 2001, 2003). There is an increasing awareness of the need to address the fact that 43 million children are out of school as a result of conflict (Save the Children 2006), and a growing belief in the benefits of making education a ‘fourth pillar’ of humanitarian response, alongside more basic survival needs of food, health and shelter.

Placing it firmly on the humanitarian agenda, many international development agencies advocate that education in conflict and post-conflict settings has a range of benefits, from helping to restore normality in children’s lives by providing for their protection and psychosocial needs, to contributing to the overall solution of a conflict by integrating peace and reconciliation initiatives. At the same time, however, there is increasing debate around the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ faces of education in conflict (Bush and Salterelli 2000). Education specialists from the World Bank to the UN are acutely aware that education can be one of the key contributors to conflict and as such they are faced with a conundrum: on the one hand, they recognise that schools are often a key cause of conflict by reproducing the values and attitudes of dominant groups in society; on the other hand, education is also seen as an important means of reducing the risk of conflict and healing the wounds of a society (World Bank 2005, xv). In short, education has come to be seen as part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

In peacetime, a country’s ministry of education normally has full responsibility for coordinating education and deciding educational policy. In emergency situations, that reality is often turned upside down as the role of the ministry becomes diminished, even sidelined, and control and responsibility shifts towards international agencies. The education in emergencies literature refers to ‘sanitising’ and ‘purging’ offensive content from school textbooks in the first phase of humanitarian intervention. Significantly, this is often an internationally led process, with varying degrees of local participation. For example, in Kosovo, the UN sponsored a process whereby textbooks were scrutinised for offensive material prior to printing and distribution. In Iraq, during the months following the US-led invasion, the Coalition Provisional Authority quickly reprinted school textbooks without pictures of Saddam Hussein and symbols of the old regime, and in cases where this was not possible, ‘children were supervised in the tearing out of offensive pictures and pages’ (World Bank 2005, 53).

In countries affected by civil war, culling the divisive aspects of old curricula is an important step towards promoting integration and reconciliation in the wider society. However, this ultimately needs to be an internally led process in order for it to be effective. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, education was neglected in the immediate post-war period at great cost, resulting in the creation of different education authorities and three separate curricula that were divided along ethnic and political lines. Despite belated efforts to ‘harmonise’ the three different

curricula in operation, internationally driven reforms have faced great difficulties in the implementation stages, partly as a result of lack of local ownership over the process. There is still no state-level body to coordinate reforms and ensure educational standards, while the harmonisation process has focused on ensuring consistency in non-contentious subjects such as maths and science, but has left identity-related subjects such as literature, history, geography and music to be developed separately by the 'three constituent peoples'. The reform process has so far avoided the fundamental questions of national identity in education and how to rebuild a lost sense of 'unity in diversity' in society to the detriment of future cohesion in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In the increasingly politicised world of international aid, particularly in the Middle East, it is also important to pose the question of 'legitimate knowledge' when examining international involvement in the reform of national education systems in post-conflict reconstruction. The experience of education reform in Iraq is one pertinent example. After the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority abolished the existing national curriculum by decree on 7 July 2003 and began a process of 'de-Ba'athification' of teachers. In the same year, UN agencies stressed the importance of Iraqi ownership over the process of educational reform, cautioning that, 'it must be up to the Iraqis themselves to decide structure and contents of their future education system' (cited in Velloso 2005, 6). Others have argued that the language of participation and ownership used by international organisations in Iraq, such as USAID, is symbolic. One such critic, Vongalis-Macrow (2006) examines the roles of donors, aid agencies and what she sees as the marginalisation of Iraqi educators in rebuilding the education system in Iraq. Challenging the 'neutral' politics of reconstruction, she contends that, 'the rebuilding of education systems is a political process, the politics of which are evident in the way that critical agents, such as teachers, are being reshaped in the image of the new regime' (ibid., 99).

While the humanitarian discourse on education makes an important contribution to understanding the role of education in conflict, there are three significant problems with it. The most fundamental relates to the fact that the guiding principle of humanitarian action is neutrality. As a result, humanitarian actors do not grapple with education as an inherently political process; indeed, their approach is to depoliticise it. But unlike the other three pillars of humanitarian response – food, health and shelter – education is never neutral, it is intrinsically political and ideological. Secondly, the education in emergencies literature is unreflective when it comes to questions of power between internal and external actors in the processes of post-war reconstruction, and as such there is little consideration of how this power dynamic shapes educational reform and what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Finally, the education in emergencies literature is written by and for international agencies working in emergency situations and consequently there is little that relates to internal perspectives.

The experience of building a national curriculum in Palestine

Much of the literature on contested national identity in education relates to countries that are affected by civil war. It is mainly concerned with representations of 'the Other' with a view to reconciling communities in order to create a more inclusive sense of identity in education. In Palestine, the issue of national identity is not internally contested as Palestinians have broadly the same sense of identity and history; it is externally contested.

Education under occupation contends with a variety of issues, from the military closure of schools and universities – as took place during the first Intifada when pursuing an education was effectively criminalised by the Israeli authorities – to the daily difficulties of reaching the classroom due to military checkpoints, movement restrictions, and the routine harassment of

students, faculty and educational institutions by the Israeli army. At the same time, Palestinian education has played a key developmental and aspirational role in the society, representing a vision of the future that is free from external rule. The collective value that is placed on education in Palestinian society is strongly connected to this enduring hope for national as well as individual advancement (Barghouti and Murray 2005).

The Palestinians took over control of education from the Israeli authorities in 1994 after the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA inherited not only a system nearly thirty years out of date, but also overcrowded classrooms and double and triple shifts in many schools. Despite a catalogue of underdevelopment, however, the main educational issue for Palestinians prior to 1994 was the fact that they had no control over what their children were being taught. The Egyptian curriculum taught in the Gaza Strip and the Jordanian curriculum taught in the West Bank and East Jerusalem had created a divided education system for Palestinians that was unrelated to the Palestinian context. Moreover, at the hands of the Israeli military censor, the textbooks in use denied any expression of Palestinian identity. In the classroom, Palestinian history, culture and geographical presence did not exist.

Even after the creation of the PA and a national Ministry of Education in 1994, the long awaited goal of representing Palestinian identity in education for the first time still proved to be problematic. The Oslo peace process committed the PA to conceptualising 'Palestine' within a fragmented statelet still under Israeli occupation and with undefined borders, while international pressure and controversy over representations of Palestinian history and society in the new textbooks placed both the international donors and the Ministry under enormous political pressure. To date there remains a sense that the development of a critical, revisionist narrative of Palestinian history for the school curriculum has not yet been fulfilled. This is largely due to excessive external interference, but also due to the inhibited position of the Ministry of Education in the absence of a clear political settlement.

As one member of the first Curriculum development team, Dr Ali Jarbawi, asked in 1996:

What Palestine do we teach? Is it the historic Palestine with its complete geography, or the Palestine that is likely to emerge on the basis of possible agreements with Israel? How do we view Israel? Is it merely an ordinary neighbour, or is it a state that has arisen on the ruins of most of Palestine? (Cited in Moughrabe 2001, 14)

As soon as the Palestinian Authority published its first textbooks in 1998, there began what can only be described as a political campaign against the newly emerging Palestinian curriculum. An Israeli organisation called the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP) led the allegations by publishing a series of pamphlets that presented claims that the textbooks demonised Israel and used terminology that is associated with war and violence. The majority of surveys led by international, Israeli and Palestinian researchers have since found the allegations in the CMIP reports to be largely false or misleading. As Nathan Brown, a professor at George Washington University who is among the prominent commentators on the Palestinian curriculum concluded:

The Palestinian curriculum is not a war curriculum; while highly nationalistic, it does not incite hatred, violence and anti-Semitism. It cannot be described as a 'peace curriculum' either, but the charges against it are often wildly exaggerated or inaccurate. (Brown 2003b, 99)

Despite many of the claims being refuted by independent studies, the long-term impact of the international publicity against Palestinian textbooks was 'nothing short of disastrous' (Moughrabe 2001, 13). In December 2000, referring directly to one of CMIP reports, the Italian government – the major donor behind the Palestinian Curriculum Development Center – informed the Palestinian Authority that it could no longer fund the development of the Palestinian curriculum. At the same time, the World Bank diverted the money it had allocated

for production of textbooks and teacher training to other projects. UNESCO began to take a much less involved role and the rush to judgement had a domino effect on other donors who either withdrew from the education sector completely or reallocated funds away from curriculum development to projects such as school construction. The issue went to the Italian, Irish and Finnish parliaments (among others) and the European Union as well as to various UN bodies. The US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, came under pressure from lawmakers 'to use her good offices to make sure that UNESCO and the World Bank stop funding the publication of textbooks by the PA'; the US Congress demanded that the UN stop using the textbooks in UN-run schools; and in 2005, Senator Hilary Clinton reiterated her denunciation of Palestinian textbooks, which she had first made in a letter to President Bush in 2001, condemning 'this violence ... this dehumanising rhetoric', in the Palestinian school curriculum (Clinton 2005).

Looking at both Palestinian and Israeli textbooks, the Israeli educationalist, Ruth Firer (1998, 2004) argues that textbooks cannot be properly analysed if they are abstracted from their cultural, historical and political contexts. For Palestinians, that context is continuing military occupation and struggle for independence. Furthermore, the introduction of the Palestinian national curriculum has taken place in the context of the second Intifada, which erupted in September 2000, the same month that the first series of Palestinian textbooks were delivered to schools. As the Deputy Director of the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre has said: 'This was supposed to be a peace curriculum, we never expected to have to put it together in a war situation' (cited in Murray 2006). The period since 2000 has seen the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the beginning of the second *Intifada*, while students, teachers, schools and universities continue to be obstructed and harassed by the Israeli army.

The impact of internal and external politics on Palestinian education

The Palestinian experience challenges the idea that international agencies and donors can take a neutral approach to education and acutely highlights the impact of the external on the internal. One member of the first Palestinian curriculum development team regretted the fact that the writing of Palestinian history for school children had ever become subject to negotiation between internal and external actors:

The question of how to teach Palestinian history, this should not have been subject to donors. In 1995, we should have said, 'this is our national priority for the next ten years', and allocated funds from the national budget so as not to be held hostage to the Italians or the Belgians or whoever. We should be able to teach the history of Palestine, whether this entity exists today or not. (Cited in Murray 2006, 77)

At the same time, however, the preoccupation with representations of Israel in Palestinian education has also obscured a deeper, internal debate that has also taken place in the curriculum-building process about teaching methods, the future of Palestinian society, the meaning of citizenship and societal values such as democracy. In his analysis of the Palestinian curriculum, Brown (2003a, 2003b) argues that the internal Palestinian debate is of far more significance than the international controversy. Brown believes that that since the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, 'no longer has contestation over Palestinian education focused on nationalist issues; increasingly it is democracy that is at issue' (Brown 2003a, 231). But those who have been involved in the curriculum-building process tend to make less of a distinction between the internal and external, and instead point to an experience that has been influenced by politics and debate at all levels. As one of the authors of the Palestinian civic textbooks described:

As soon as I became involved I found that there were certain restrictions. There were different levels of censorship on what was written. The Curriculum Development Centre was definitely

subject to censorship because their donors were so concerned with the image of Israel in the books. But it was not only this. The Ministry people were themselves conservatives and reserved about new ideas, especially in the areas of women's rights and democracy. They were concerned about the image of the PA. For example, we would write something like 'elections should be monitored' and they would say, 'no, stop'. They were constantly interfering with the representation of formal institutions. Or another example was when I represented a woman as an engineer and they came back to me, 'no'. Another problem was that they didn't know the difference between 'civic' and 'national' and would always try to bring it together.

She went on to conclude:

Overall, I feel that this could have been a great opportunity for creativity and innovation, the Palestinian curriculum could have led the way in so many new areas, but in the end much of it was copied from the Jordanian and Egyptian curricula. As for civic education, in the Arab world only Tunisia and Lebanon are teaching civic education so we had to look to the American and British curricula for ideas. Our guiding principle was 'how to create a good citizen'. We tried. In the end I would say that maybe 65–70% of what we wanted was left out – either cut or changed. (Cited in Murray 2006, 65)

'How to create a good citizen?' 'What kind of society do we want?' These are the fundamental and visionary questions that must be posed about the role of education in shaping the development of any society. Whether or not these questions are asked in a meaningful way has a huge bearing on the outcomes of the development process. Despite the major achievements of putting together a Palestinian national curriculum under enormous political pressure, and in a wartime situation, there is a sense of lost opportunity among many Palestinians who were involved in the education development process. As one member of the first Palestinian curriculum development team expressed:

A number of questions need to be radically addressed when building a national education system: What kind of society do we want in future generations? Who generates the educational process and in whose interest? How does education meet the needs of society at local and national levels? All these elements should have been present in the development of the Palestinian curriculum but weren't – the whole process was wrong. Our original plan in 1996¹ was clear about its objectives for Palestinian education based on the type of society we aspire to, values such as pluralism, critical thinking, and so on. This was an opportunity to buck the trend, to go against the current, not only in Palestine, in the whole Arab world. But the potentially innovative ideas were cut out; they could not be accepted politically.

The Palestinian case reveals a great deal about the politics of education as it throws light on both the internal and external ideological battles that take place. It demonstrates that not only is education itself political, international aid and support for education are also political. The development of school curricula in conflict and post-conflict situations must negotiate pressing internal issues of nation building, identity and the writing of history. The intervention of external agencies in these internal processes raises further questions about the power relations between the various actors involved and what constitutes 'legitimate knowledge'.

Notes

1. The first Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre's 600-page report was produced in 1996. It was a damning indictment on virtually every aspect of the existing educational system and recommended far-reaching methodological changes and the implementation of new pedagogical ideas.

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