**History curriculum in Arab schools: Between teaching and challenging the Israeli history program in Arab schools**

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**Abstract**

The goal of this study is to try to understand how history teachers in Arab high schools in Israel navigate their way between the official curriculum and their Palestinian-Arab identity. I examine how they broach learning material that contradicts their beliefs and their understanding of recent history in the region. To this end I used qualitative research based on interpretative phenomenological analysis. The participants included Arab teachers, both men and women, who we interviewed using in-depth open interviews.

In the literature review and from the findings we can see that the state, through the education system in general and through history teaching in particular, tries to disconnect the Palestinian-Arabs from their history, their people, and their national identity. These practices fit the descriptions of settler-colonialists’ behavior toward indigenous populations.

The findings show that the teachers use one of three approaches to deal with the state’s educational policy. One group of teachers focuses on achievement using the material they are given in order to stay out of trouble. Another group finds creative ways to cautiously expose the students to the Arab narrative. The third group faces the challenge head on, presenting the students with the Palestinian narrative in addition to the Jewish Zionist one.

Keywords: History education, History curriculum, Arab teachers, Zionist narrative, Palestinian-Arab narrative.

**Introduction**

The Palestinian-Arab population accounts for 20% of Israel’s citizens, constituting the country’s largest minority group (1.95 million people according to the Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The Arabs are not a part of the Jewish collective, they do not feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish state and they do not identify with its symbols and goals (Abu-Saad, 2004; Ghanem, 1998). They are not officially recognized as a national minority group, but rather as a linguistic and cultural minority group. The State regards them as a collection of religious or language groups bearing unique characteristics, while ignoring their common identity and interests as a single national group (Al-Hajj, 1996; Smooha, 1999).

Much has been written about the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel, its status in the country, its identity and the attitude of the Jewish majority toward it (Ghanem, 1998; Ghanem & Khatibk 2017). Most of the research reaches the conclusion that the state, in its definition as Jewish, cannot include the Arabs as equal citizens. The state excludes them and discriminates against them on the basis of their national belonging (Manaa’, 2017; Suliman, 1999). There are also those who claim that the state’s policies toward the native population – the Palestinians – is characterized by colonialist patterns, or that the relations between Jews and Palestinians in Israel can be described as colonialist (Halabi & Zak, 2014).

Despite this discriminatory policy, the aspiration of the Palestinian-Arabs is on one hand to maintain their Palestinian identity, and on the other hand to fulfill their roles as citizens of Israel (Ghanem & Khatib, 2017).

One of the mechanisms that the state uses in order to exclude the Arabs is education. The education system serves as a mechanism to obscure the students’ Palestinian identity, attempting instead to shape an Arab-Israeli identity that has little connection to the experience and history of the Palestinian people in Israel (Abu-Saad, 2004; Arar and Keinan, 2015). History teaching is central to this policy. History is the arena of struggle over each side’s national narrative.

The goal of this research is to try to understand how Arab history teachers broach work in the classroom when the messages that the state wishes to present to the Arab student run counter to the narratives and aspirations of the teachers themselves. I focus more on the pedagogical question and less on theoretical aspects and concepts. In analyzing the findings, I incorporate critical theory in education in combination presented above.

**Theatrical background**

I will analyse the findings of this research using literature in critical pedagogy and post-colonial theory. Theory in these fields offers an in-depth look at the mechanisms that preserve the status quo. They shed light on the manner in which the State uses the education system to shape its citizens’ awareness and establish control. In this case we specifically look at how the content of the history program in Arab schools tries to create an Arab identity that suits the establishment. I will then present the theory of resistance that complements theories of critical pedagogy and suggests ways of changing the socio-political reality.

**Critical pedagogy**

Education and the education system are mechanisms of social and political control. The dominant group uses schools and education programs to establish its narrative and to preserve its economic status and, ostensibly, its moral and cultural superiority. This group controls all educational activity: the separation of legitimate knowledge from illegitimate knowledge; the erasure of “the others’” knowledge, or its elimination from the educational program altogether. Legitimate knowledge - the knowledge of the dominate group - is then made to appear as objective and neutral (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 1987, 2003; Freire, 1997; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Manzer, 2003).

In order to advance just and equality-based educational programs, teachers must address the socio-political context in which the students live and study. They must bring the marginalized students’ life experience to the center of the learning experience in the classroom (Giroux, 1991; Pennycook, 2001). This is one of the goals of critical pedagogy. Another goal that lies at the foundation of this pedagogy is to struggle against the silence of these same students in order to advance and empower them (Giroux, 1991). However, this is not what generally happens. The government usually uses the education system to advance its interests and preserve its status by excluding and silencing the weaker groups.

Shor and Freire (1987) go on to state that it would be naïve to demand of the ruling class to conduct education that would work against their interests. From the ruling class’s perspective, it is the primary role of education to uphold the ruling ideology.

In many countries the central role of the education system is to subjugate and control native or immigrant minorities, changing their identities by attempting to replace their languages and cultures with that of the colonial power or nation-state (Halverson, Puig & Byers, 2002; Peacock & Wisuri, 2002). This is especially the case in divided societies with political tensions and conflicts. In these cases, the ruling elite conducts educational policy that restricts the minority group’s identity, shapes it or prevents the minority from giving any expression to it (Subedi & Daza, 2008). This is done by manufacturing a collective narrative and collective memory that undermine the minorities' collective belonging, and particularly in subjects such as history, civics and languages (Simmons & Dei, 2012).

**Settler colonialism - Silenced history**

Theories of critical pedagogy describing the role of the education system in social reproduction resonate with claims found in post-colonial theory. Colonialism is first and foremost the control of land and natural resources, but also control of the discourse and control of a native people's thought and will. Colonialism is, above all, cultural control, with the underlying moral justification that such control is a humane act meant to improve the situation of the natives, by enabling people without culture to become part of civilization (Cesaire 2000; Said 1993; Wa Thiong'o 2005). The colonialist alienates the natives from their own culture and language, and tries to make them forget their history; he tries to persuade them to disparage their own culture, to disparage what they are – and in this way strips them of any power of resistance (Wa Thiong'o 2005; Cesaire 2000).

Practices of European settler-colonialists usually included annihilation of the original inhabitants, dispossession of their lands, and an on-going attack on the identity of those who remained (Nicholas, 2005). The settler-colonialists use special methods and terminology in order to cut the natives off from their history. Trouillot (2015) refers to this as “silencing the history.” Schmidt and Patterson (1995) add that the settlers not only erase the natives’ history, but they invent an alternative one with new names for places and people in the land.

Wolf (2006) claims that in addition to expelling natives, taking control of and renaming the space, the settler-colonialists invent a new identity for the natives that suits the settlers’ own narrative. This narrative serves the settlers’ aim to control the original inhabitants and erase their past. Among the examples that Wolf brings is the Zionist movement in taking over a region, expelling Palestinians both physically and symbolically, and changing the names of locations.

Veracini (2006) claims that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is neither a national conflict nor a religious one. Comparing this conflict to others, he reaches the conclusion that Palestinian-Israeli relations on both the institutional and personal levels must be seen through colonialist parameters. He claims that the Zionist movement meets all the definitions of colonialism, and that the practices of the Zionist movement before and after the founding of the state are practices of settler-colonialists. He goes on to claim that the rewriting of history and construction of a Zionist-Israeli narrative is similar to what could be seen in Australia. It is a history and narrative aimed at dispossessing natives of their land by ignoring them and not recognizing institutions that existed before the settlers’ arrival.

Zionism is a political and ideological movement aimed at establishing a state for Jews in Palestine, and it realized its goal at the expense of the original Palestinian residents. It did this by dispossessing a large part of the Palestinian population of their land and expelling most of them from the country. Like every settler-colonialist movement, its ultimate goal was to take control of the native population’s land. To this end the settlers also took over land of those Palestinians who remained within Israel’s borders after the establishment of the state. Additionally, the state continuously tries to control the Palestinians’ behavior and create for them a new identity that disconnects them from their history and their people. (Salamanca et al., 2012)

**Curriculum and ideology**

Apple (2013) researched curriculum extensively, examining the connection between curriculum and the ideology of the ruling group. He claims that in determining the curriculum and the material that the students learn, the ruling elite actually shapes the students’ thoughts and consciousness according to its own interests.

Moreover, textbooks serve as a tool in the hands of the ruling government to instil particular ideals and values, such as loyalty to the homeland and legitimacy of the existing social and political order. That is to say that education is a means of applying political policy that suits that of the country’s leaders (Apple, 1993).

Kanana (2013), who researched the role of the education system in working with minorities in Israel, agrees with Apple. He sees the curriculum and textbooks of the Israeli education system as focusing on messages needed to preserve one particular group in society - the Jewish majority - and on how to ensure that these messages are passed on to future generations. These messages shape the worldview of the student, and they shape many of the student’s social and cultural perspectives.

**Resistance Theory**

Under these circumstances the weaker group often submits to and consumes the education programs that the government dictates. However sometimes group members do not come to terms with the education it is offered, and they may actively resist. In his presentation of the theory of resistance, Giroux (2003) claims that while critical pedagogy provides a good description of the reality, it ignores the capacity of subordinate groups to respond to and resist the policies that the hegemonic elites dictate through the education system. The oppressed disadvantaged groups do not helplessly submit to the will of the dominant group as is suggested in theories of critical pedagogy. The reality is more complex, claims Giroux. The school agenda dictated by the dominant group creates conflict and is met with resistance on the part of the subordinate group ­– on the part of students, teachers and parents alike.

Simmons & Dei( 2012) claim, When knowledge of the dominant and ruling group is defined as official knowledge, while the knowledge of minority groups is rejected and regarded as illegitimate, opposition among the latter is awakened and there will be those who resist the attempt to marginalize them and deny them their identity. Kymilcka ( 1995), continue and says that these minority groups will not only try to fight against the dominant narrative and against the injustice to which they are subjected; they will set about constructing an alternative narrative and they will work toward constructing their cultural identity in an attempt to restore their cultural characteristics and receive the establishment’s official recognition of their narrative .

This raises the question of the role of the teacher in such cases. To what extent are teachers aware of the situation, to what extent are they interested in changing it, and if so, what options are open to them? Apple (1986) points out that teachers generally overlook the social reality along with the class, gender and ethnic racism characterizing it, while teaching the curricular material as if it has no connection to their lives. The education system reduces the role of the teacher to that of a pedagogical tool for implementing programs that serve the capitalist, security and ideological interests of the state. Teachers who stray from the path laid out for them are ejected from the system or marginalized in it.

**History Education**

Nations and nationalism are modern terms; however, they are based on and grew out of a historical continuum of peoples with cultures, ceremonies, and heritage. This history of nations is very important to our understanding of the present and to our look at the future. In this respect, present-day nations are a product of a continuity of historical nations from hundreds of years ago (Smith, 2003).

The term “history” has two meanings. One refers to research on and exposure of the events themselves. The other refers to the story of the events in the form of a significant narrative. Different definitions have been given to research on society’s past. There were those who defined it as the reconstruction of events through the thought and interpretation of the historian, and there were those who regarded it as the stories of the different cultures. The involvement of the researcher who writes about a historical event is reflected in the manner in which the event is presented. While in the past there were those who regarded history as an objective science, today there is no longer any question that the historians’ personal involvement influences their writing (Gershon, 2001; Ferro, 2014).

I would like to focus here on the difference between two approaches the collective memory approach and the research approach. The approach that attempts to develop collective memory calls to shape and assimilate the collective identity. The focus of the learning process is on the hegemonic narrative relating primarily to events and to biographies of historical figures who symbolize the objectives of the collective. In this pedagogical and ideological approach, history instruction is a means of crystalizing the collective identity and creating a general consensus around it (Yitzhaki, Talmon and Tikochinsky, 2007). Kiezel (2012) added, that this pedagogical process is based primarily on political and military history. That is to say that particular heroes and chapters from the past are chosen with the aim of shaping a certain collective memory at the expense of an open examination of social and cultural history.

Wineburg (2017) claims that a revolution in history teaching is required in order to teach critical thinking rather than to demand of the students to memorize events and dates. He reminds us that we cannot achieve different results by repeating the same actions. History must be taught critically and as broadly as possible, without limiting the students to the viewpoint of their own society. The student cannot be expected to develop openness and gain a broad understanding of the world after being taught through one narrow perspective alone.

Because of the variety of history teaching goals and methods, reflecting a broad range of perspectives and social contexts, Barton and Levstick (2004) suggest a theory of history education that enables us to examine the different approaches toward history and to analyze the conflicts underlying history as a discipline. They turn our attention to historical thinking in different cultural contexts. Their theory of **mediated action** attempts to connect academic thinking to the popular use and representation of history. The model that they propose focuses on action that people take in the social-cultural sphere, on the agency of the individual, on the goals targeted in each social context and on the practices that individuals employ to reach those goals.

Barton and Levstick(2004), claim that historical thinking is social-cultural action that occurs in people’s minds, but is connected to social context, value judgments and political goals. People use history in various ways for various purposes and this is reflected in schools and in other realms of the public sphere. As youths and adults are active agents in learning history, their participation in different frameworks in which history is taught exposes them to the different goals of these frameworks. Barton and Levstick’s model directs our attention to the goals and the practices that these different frameworks use in order to exert their influence on our understanding of the past. The aim of this model is not only to understand the factors and variables that influence the students’ thought, but to suggest to teachers which factors are desirable. Barton and Levstick’s declared goal is to offer students, through the study of history, a way to be partners in building a future pluralistic democracy. Their concern is about how history can help citizens work together toward a common good.

According to Barton and Levstick (2004), history teachers must be committed to humanistic values for a democratic society. To this end they must use their knowledge of history and pedagogy to educate students in liberal humanistic thought, teaching them to analyze historical texts according to their perspectives and their social group belonging. Students should understand that historical texts are interpretations of those who wrote them. Students should be involved in analyzing texts and in understanding them from their own social perspectives.

According to Barton and Levstick(2004), a major problem is that teachers tend to be concerned first and foremost with teaching the history program as it is and keeping the class under control. They do this in order to be regarded by the administration, their colleagues, and their students’ parents as good teachers. In doing so they often compromise their own beliefs and values, and they may forfeit their own unique contribution and social identity in order to teach material as it appears in the curriculum without intervening. In this way the system succeeds in getting different teachers, with different knowledge and different values, to teach material the same way.

In my opinion, the most appropriate way to teach history in Arab schools is through critical thinking, and the theory that best suits the case before us is that which treats the history text as an interpretation. This leads me to see Barton and Levstick’s approach as the most effective for examining the present situation and gaining insight into the goals and means of history teaching in Arab schools in Israel today.

**History instruction in the Israeli education system**

In recent years a public debate has been going on in many countries regarding history teaching. For the most part this debate is going on in western countries where there is more openness to a multiplicity of narratives and perspectives (Wineburg, 2017). As opposed to these countries, Israel is in a state of conflict. The deep internal social divisions in the country are reflected in on-going divisions over the country’s history. These divisions cannot simply be regarded as arguments between professionals in the field such as historians, teachers, and other educators. The differences are about the identity and image of the state, the role of history, the role of the state in educating its citizens, and the state’s commitment to building a nation based on humanistic and democratic values (Naveh and Yogev, 2010).

In light of the conflict, national identity plays an important part in history teaching in Israel. Within Israeli society there are arguments over the definition of the nation and the way in which history teaching should be approached. Some favor teaching a common story aimed at uniting citizens around the national narrative (Naveh and Yogev, 2010). Others believe that it is important to allow space for different voices that make up the national story (Kiezel, 2008). History teaching has become an arena for political and public struggle in which different interest groups compete to shape the national memory of the coming generation (Kalderon, 2015).

Naveh (2017) criticizes history teaching in Israel as being based on memorizing data without exposing students to different narratives and without attempting to develop critical thinking. He calls for an approach that will challenge the Zionist narrative by introducing multiple perspectives. Naveh and Vered (2012) claim that the existing history school curriculum directs teachers to teach to the test, imposing material on the students solely for the purpose of preparing them for matriculation exams. Textbooks are produced that bore the students and attempt to present history without examining political and ideological context.

**Arab teachers between the hammer and the anvil**

Mahajneh (2013) claims that teachers in Israel must be able to address issues that go beyond the framework of the education program. They must be aware of developments in society and capable of adapting their teaching to changing reality through on-going reflection on their work. It is also important that the teachers believe in their work and in their success. Until the 1980s, Arab teachers were forbidden to introduce or discuss issues from current news events in the classroom.

This is especially the case when those issues relate to sensitive issues such as: land, national identity and the struggle for civil rights. These restrictions place the teacher in a complicated position. On one hand the establishment expects the Arab teachers to silence nationalist inclinations that they detect among their students, while educating their students about Israeli civic values. They are to deny their own experience and identity for the benefit of the Jewish majority. Arab society, on the other hand, expects teachers to strengthen the students’ national pride based on Palestinian-Arab national values and culture (Houri-Watad, 2009).

In 2004 Al-Hajj (2006) conducted research on Arab teachers in order to examine the state of political education and discussion of current events in Arab schools following the two intifadas (in 1987 and 2000). He found that only 17% of the teachers addressed any political topics with their students. In the wake of the October 2000 Intifada in which thirteen Palestinian-Israeli citizens were killed, 23% of the teachers discussed this with their students, and in many of these cases it was the students who initiated the discussion.

Houri-Watad (2009) claims that despite the declared democratic policy of the Ministry of Education, Arab teachers’ hands are tied on account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Out of fear for getting into trouble and losing their jobs, teachers in Arab schools avoid discussing the conflict. They prefer to turn to their students on an individual level without addressing the broader issues of the conflict.

The Arab teachers face a complex dilemma. On one hand they have good reason to be afraid of the Ministry of Education’s response to any discussion in a national context. On the other hand, their silence is a source of humiliation and insult. The Arab teachers and principals are afraid that the very discussion of national issues will be interpreted as incitement leading to their punishment and putting their livelihood at risk. They prefer not to touch sensitive issues not only out of fear from educational inspectors, but out of concern that their colleagues or students may serve as informants (Arar and Ibrahim, 2016).

**History teaching in Arab schools**

There are two categories of schools in the Israeli education system: official schools and independent schools, the latter primarily consisting of orthodox Jewish schools. Arab schools are categorized as official, under direct control of the Ministry of Education. Teachers are appointed and employed by the ministry as state employees. The education programs and textbooks are also dictated by the Ministry of Education. While the textbooks are in Arabic, most of them are translations of the same books used in Jewish schools. Such is the case for history books as well (Alhajj, 1995).

The Arab education system in Israel is used as a tool to shape the Arab students’ national identity. In order to maintain the stability of the Zionist Jewish character of the state, the Palestinian-Arab narrative is denied and no expression of it appears in Palestinian schools in Israel. Over the years, attempts were made by the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee to introduce content in these schools that would develop the students’ Arab national identity, but they have yet to succeed (Arar and Ibrahim, 2016).

Al-Hajj (1994) and later Kiezel (2008) each compared the place of national identity in the history education curriculum for Arab- Palestinan and Jewish schools. They found that while the history program for Jewish schools emphasizes questions of national identity, the program for Arab schools stresses values of Jewish-Arab coexistence, Jewish benevolence and their contribution to humanity.

Shemesh (2008) examined history textbooks for Arab schools from the establishment of the state until 2008. She showed how those responsible for the programs in the Ministry of Education used the Jewish-Zionist narrative as a tool to shape a collective memory among Arab students that will not interfere with the needs of building a Jewish-Zionist nation. Shemesh shows that there is some development in the textbooks reflecting changing attitudes in Israeli society toward the Arabs. The later history books for Arab high schools address the Palestinian-Arab people and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This material however is optional and not included in the state matriculation exams which have a major influence on where teachers focus their work in the classroom.

To the best of my knowledge, no research has been conducted specifically on Arab history teachers, making this a pioneering study in the field. In analyzing the findings, I combine critical theory in education with aspects of post-colonial theory.

**Methodology**

**Research context**

I chose to explore my questions using phenomenological qualitative research which I found to be best suited to the task. Qualitative research examines the participants’ experiences and aims to interpret them from their own points of view, their sensitivities and awareness, examining situations through the eyes of those who experience them (Shkedi, 2003; Hughes, 1989; Hichcock & Schwault, 1998). The phenomenological approach focuses on researching the essence of the human experience. The phenomenon is the object of the research, and study is conducted through those who personally experience it according to their own interpretation of it. The aspiration is to examine its significance in the participants’ day-to-day lives (Creswell, 2007).

I must note here that the topic of the research interests me very much as an Arab who lives in the country, and especially as a teacher in a college for students who plan to be teachers. I was exposed to the subject from the research literature, but even more so from the Arab history teachers who I taught over the years in the college. Here I would like to emphasize that my involvement in the material does not detract from the research, but rather enhances it as one who is involved in the field and lives it. It is important to remember that qualitative research, as opposed to positivist research, does not claim to be objective. Its results are largely dependent upon the researcher’s honesty and dedication to the task (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In qualitative studies, the primary research tool is the researcher herself. With this premise in mind, I conducted all of the interviews in Arabic – the primary language of the participants, in a surrounding that was comfortable for them, in their houses or work places (Bruner, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Belonging to same national minority as the interviewees ensured access to sensitive issues, as the participants felt a bond with the researcher and willingly cooperated in the construction of meaning. (Berger, 2015).

**Participants**

The research population included 17 female and 15 male high school history teachers. Twenty of them are from the Galilee and the other twelve are from the Arab Triangle region. Their ages range from 30 to 58 years old. They have from 10 to 36 years of teaching experience. Fourteen of them have an M.A., nine of them turned to teaching history after working in other professions, most of the latter having had legal training. I reached the participants through “snowballing,” an accepted research method in studies of this sort (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). I reached the first participants through people familiar to me and the first participants then referred me to other teachers as potential participants. I chose those who appeared suitable and who were interested in discussing the subject. In turning to each teacher, I explained the goal of the research and promised total confidentiality regarding their personal identities.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data was gathered using in-depth interviews based primarily on open questions that invite the participants to relate their experiences as freely and comfortably as possible (Creswell, 2007; Shkedi, 2003). The interviews were conducted in Arabic face to face, each one taking approximately one hour. I transcribed the interviews as precisely as possible, I read the transcripts repeatedly and used an open inductive coding method, that is to say I developed categories from the raw data, creating a model or framework that captures key themes and processes judged to be important by the researcher (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). I have reexamined the themes three times, refining them as proceeded. Following Maykut and Morehouse (1999), I then analyzed the material in stages. I began by presenting the speech of the participants without offering any interpretation. I then analyzed the data with the help of relevant research literature presented in the discussion. As promised to the participants we used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of all those who appear in the article.

**Findings**

The findings presented here are based on the interviews. I begin by presenting the complexities of the situation that Arab teachers face in working with the curriculum on account of the clash between the learning material with their own narrative and beliefs and on account of the criticism that they face from their students who see them as representatives of the State of Israel. Afterwards I present three themes characterizing the ways in which the teachers deal with the material that they are expected to teach. Although their strategies are divided and defined here as three distinct themes, it is important to realize that the teachers’ approaches are fluid and more complex. Most of the teachers deal with the material using more than one approach and only a few of them can be said to use one clear and distinct approach.

**“We don’t stray from the path”**

This theme refers to nine high school history teachers who teach according to the Israeli curriculum while omitting any reference to their Palestinian-Arab identity or narrative. They do not initiate discussion of anything outside of the official narrative and they do not allow their students to challenge it. This group includes fifteen of the teachers.

Yasmin clarified her position: “As a history teacher I stick to the history program. It’s up to me to prepare the students in time for the matriculation exams. I don’t express my personal positions at all. The classroom is not a suitable or safe space for discussion of personal narratives".

The idea that current political and social events must not be mixed in with history instruction is both explicitly and implicitly dictated from the school administration. As Imad noted, “Our school prefers not to touch issues regarding the national narrative. The principal made this clear to me from the moment I began to work in the school, and I have been following this path ever since. Once the principal clearly states the position of the school toward the Palestinian historical narrative, I don’t argue.”

The teachers are afraid that their students may police the school policy and report the teachers’ behavior to the management. Therefore they avoid controversy altogether. As Yasmin said, “My position regarding my Palestinian-Arab identity remains with me. There’s no need to take the risk of raising it with my students. I don’t know my students’ backgrounds very well and if I express my opinion in front of them, I don’t know how they will interpret it or who they will pass it on to. So why take any chances? As we say in Arabic: لاتنام بين القبورولاتشوف منامات وحشة

“Don’t sleep among the graves and you won’t have nightmares.”

The economic discrimination against the Arab sector makes these considerations even more serious. The teachers’ initiatives may lead them to lose their jobs. A teacher’s position in the Arab sector offers rare job security and, considering the alternatives, they have their reasons to be cautious.

Kamel raised this in his interview: “Look, I support my family with my teacher’s salary, my economic situation is fine, and I am not about to lose that and allow my family to suffer.”

**“Caution is the name of the game”**

This theme refers to Arab history teachers in Arab high schools who choose not to ignore their national narrative as Palestinian Arabs, but to address material regarding Palestinian identity and the history of the Palestinian people with caution. There were nine teachers in this group.

Yusuf says: “Unless I intervene in the history program, I won’t advance the Palestinian narrative among the students. In my opinion there is real discrimination regarding the history of the Palestinian people and every student has the right to study and discuss the history of his people.”

Anwar presented his approach this way: “The history of the Palestinian people can be found in many academic sources from around the world and in Israel, and there are many websites that discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict. I don’t break any laws if I use them. I bring facts as presented on Israeli television.”

Tarik adds: “Since the material presented in the textbooks doesn’t present the history of the Palestinian people, I use video clips from YouTube. Some of these were used in Arab-Jewish meetings that I took part in. They present facts and there’s no problem using them.”

Samer used one important example: “Look, all of the social networks bring up the Kufr Qassim massacre. If I, as a history teacher, don’t say anything about it that would be a mistake. So I brought a film from the Center for Educational Technology that presented the massacre from the Jewish perspective and I brought a YouTube film showing the Palestinian side. Both films are on the internet".

These teachers do not contest or deny the narrative that appears in the textbooks, rather they present the Palestinian narrative along side of it. This group of teachers cannot turn their backs on the national responsibility that they have taken upon themselves. In describing the situation, they had a clear understanding of the need to intervene in the content of the history program. Some of the teachers had difficulties with the dissonance between their identities and the material that they had to teach. Marwa stated: “The Israeli education program gives a lot of hours to history of the Jewish people. We have to teach extensively about the immigration waves to Israel and the holocaust because this is what they test on the matriculation exams. And we have to see to it that they get good enough grades on these exams in order to enable them to get into college. But all of the Jewish history distances the Arab student from learning the history of his people. This education is liable to create a generation of students detached from their own history and without a sense of belonging to their national group.

These teachers chose to forge a path on their own without support from the parents or the school administration. They began by identifying the national sentiments of their students and of their students’ families. They then decided how to address the national issues and at what level of intensity. The thought of not intervening in the curriculum regarding Palestinian history awakened feelings of shame and even guilt.

**“A Palestinian teacher in every sense of the word, despite the obstacles”**

This theme characterizes teachers who give full expression to their Palestinian identity and who take a clear stand regarding Palestinian history and regarding current events in the news. There were eight teachers in this group. They raise issues in the classroom regarding national identity and they allow their students to raise questions, argue and share their experiences. They see their role as history teachers to educate the next generation, develop their awareness of the Palestinian national narrative, and motivate them to discuss it. They see it as a national calling to confront both historical issues and events that affect them today as Palestinians.

Rani explained the motivation behind his understanding of his role: “I can’t split my personality and play this game. I’m a Palestinian-Arab who lives in Israel and who decided to teach history. I experience oppression as a minority group. I don’t receive the basic right of education. Out of a sense of national commitment I use my position to advance the Palestinian national narrative.”

Wasim raised other motives of his teaching: “Listen, I don’t speak nonsense and I don’t tell them fairy tales, but facts that even Jewish educators don’t deny. So I think it’s better that my students hear the history of the Palestinian people from me instead of looking for it on social networks and finding extremists who will confuse them and distort the historical facts. The social networks today are very rich, but they are swamped with accounts that are not true, and at a young age the students aren’t able to distinguish between fact and fiction.”

These teachers also have the responsibility to prepare their students for matriculation exams and they have the same time constraints as the others, but they believe that using the classroom as a platform for discussion and expressing opinions awakens the students’ motivation to advance their studies. Therefore some of the lessons are devoted to these discussion. Rani presented his opinion, “History lessons have a stigma of being boring – of being about writing what the teacher says until your fingers hurt. The material taught isn’t relevant to the students’ lives. But when I begin to discuss a historical event, I connect it to contemporary issues that have to do with our national identity as Palestinian Arabs in Israel. The students take an interest, share things with each other, ask questions and express themselves and in this way I break the stigma. But there are lessons in which I just teach material because that’s what the matriculation exams are on. That limits the time that I have to give to other subjects.”

The teachers face a dilemma. On one hand their perspective of the Palestinian-Arab people is different from the Jewish perspective which is dictated to them in the history program. On the other hand, the students’ must be prepared to answer questions on the matriculation exam according to the official history program. The teachers are afraid of confusing the students and harming their chances of succeeding in the exam, so in their lessons they make a point of distinguishing between material for the exam and discussion aimed at expanding their knowledge of the Palestinian narrative.

Rani: “When I tell you about these things they sound simple and easy, but in fact it’s very complicated and risky. There’s a very big concern that the discussions in the class about the Palestinian narrative will influence what they write in the matriculation exam and that they may fail this very important test because of us. So I made an agreement with the students that the answers on the test must be in line with the history program and that they must not add anything from the classroom discussions. .”

**Discussion**

The findings correspond with other research on Arab teachers demonstrating their caution and their fear of broaching present-day social issues – particularly those that are connected to the conflict (Agbaria, 2013; al-Hajj, 2006; Houri-Watad, 2009; Arar and Ibrahim, 2016). Over two thirds of the participating teachers reported that they were very careful when expressing how they understand their past and they preferred to work according to the history program dictated by the Ministry of Education.

The first group of teachers did not stray at all from the program in order to avoid getting into any trouble, such as being summoned for a hearing at the Ministry of Education and in extreme cases losing their jobs. Some of them explain this by saying that their primary responsibility is to enable the students to pass the matriculation exams. Others place the responsibility on the school administration that prevents them from tampering with the history program. A few of them explicitly state that they work as they do in order to keep their jobs.

The second group navigates their way through the official program in an attempt to protect their source of income while finding ways to present the Palestinian narrative as an alternative look at their history and at the conflict. Rather than present the narrative directly, they may bring video clips, articles from the internet, or stories from their students. For example, they may teach about the massacre at Kafir Qasim from a Palestinian perspective using films from social media. This is permitted by the Ministry of Education. They do this carefully by getting a feel for the positions of the students and their families before they begin. They pay attention to the students’ responses to the material and to the positions that they have before deciding how far to go in presenting the Palestinian narrative along side of the Israeli narrative that is presented in the textbook. Even if the class seems prepared for it, the teachers are still careful about how they introduce the narrative. The teachers present the narrative from a third party rather than take direct responsibility for the content. They proceed cautiously with constant concern about the possibility of losing their jobs. This situation corresponds with critical theory in education as presented first and foremost by Paulo Freire. The ruling elites use education, and in this case the official history program, in order to control the narrative and maintain their dominance (Apple, 1986, 1993; ; Giroux, 1987; Freire, 1997; Freire & Mecedo, 1995; Manzer, 2003).   
 The means through which the establishment excludes the Arab narrative are also consistent with critical theory in the field (Giroux, 1987; Freire, 1997; Manzer, 2003; Apple, 2013). The Ministry of Education manages to convince the larger public that it does not take a political or ideological position. It then demands of the teachers – particularly the Arab teachers – to stay away from politics and keep the Palestinian-Arab narrative outside the walls of the school. The state, through its representatives in the Ministry of Education, imposes its narrative and terminology. These representatives determine what is legitimate and what is not, what is political and what is neutral, what can enter the school and what cannot.

Such is also the case before us. The history books are saturated with ideological and political content. They represent the Zionist narrative, and they completely exclude the Palestinian Arab population (Kiezel ,2008). Presented as legitimate apolitical textbooks, Arab teachers are required to teach them to their students without expressing their own thoughts and positions regarding what is written in them. Taking such critical positions would be seen as political intervention which, the teachers believe, is forbidden.

The situation presented here reinforces claims found in postcolonial theory and matches the behavior of settler-colonialists towards the native population in that they not only want control of the native’s land but of their consciousness. They cut them off from their history or try to “silence their history,” in the words of Trouillot (2015). Beyond that, they invent a new history and identity for the natives that serve the colonialists’ narrative (Schmidt and Patterson, 2015).

This description fits the issue before us as the Zionist movement, through Israel’s history education programs, attempted over the years to cut Palestinian students off from their past and impose upon them an alternative history that suits the Zionist narrative. The Israeli education system’s general aim is to create an alternative Israeli-Arab identity, detached from Palestinian national identity. As Abu Saad (2004) and Arar and Keinan (2015) point out, these aims are explicitly served by the state’s history program in an attempt to create “Arab-Israelis” loyal to the Jewish state. This policy supports the claims of Wolf (2006) and Veracini (2006) that Jewish-Palestinian relations must be seen through colonial parameters rather than as a national or religious conflict. More specifically, the Zionist movement’s practices can best be understood as those of settler colonialism that began before the establishment of the state and continue until today.

The narrative that appears in the history textbooks reflects the Zionist narrative that was constructed over the years and became the narrative of the Jewish state. The history programs reinforce and serve the general narrative. In this sense the education system can be seen as a tool of the state, employed to establish “effective” control over the Palestinian minority.

It is important to note that despite the policies described above, Palestinians throughout the years fought to preserve their identity. This can be seen in the behavior of some of the history teachers in this study.In light of the risks involved, the third group of teachers comes as a surprise. Despite supervision of the Ministry of Education and despite the threats under which they live, these teachers dare to speak out against the dictates of the authorities, and they teach the Palestinian narrative in classroom history lessons.

This behavior supports Giroux’s (2003) theory of resistance, suggesting that there is a breaking point that can lead to change. When on one hand the imposition of the establishment’s position becomes sufficiently intolerable, while on the other hand the minority group is sufficiently empowered, teachers may break the barriers of fear. This behavior would reinforce the work of Simmons and Dei (2012) who state that when the minority is crushed and excluded and when their narrative is defined as not legitimate, they resist and struggle against those who exclude them and deny their identity.

In order to address the challenges faced by the students, and particularly by the teachers, Barton and Levstick’s (2004) model may offer a solution. It directs students to work toward a pluralist democratic society serving the common good of all of the country’s citizens, challenging the Zionist narrative imposed upon the Palestinian Arab society which works toward the common good of Jewish citizens alone.

Finally, it must be noted that the research presented here has its limitations, however it does present a picture of the challenges that Arab teachers face when teaching material that conflicts with their beliefs. While the research was conducted on teachers in Israel, the issue is not unique to Israel. As we see in the research literature, minority-group teachers all over the world confront educational programs that are dictated from above (Yitzhaki, Talmon and Tikochinsky, 2007). What may be unique here is the context; the background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes this case particularly very explicit.

This research could lead to further studies in Israel and in the world. More research is certainly required to get a better understanding of how the Arab teachers navigate their way between the goals of the education system and the aspirations of Arab society in general, not only regarding history education.

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