

Formal Education and National Identity among Palestinian Students in Israel

**Ibrahim Makkawi
Birzeit University, Palestine**

The critical assumption about the formal educational system of the Palestinians in Israel is its systematic control and direction by the Israeli authorities in order to achieve three intertwined objectives. These objectives are: (a) to shape the students' sense of collective-national identity consistently with Israel's definition as a "Jewish state," (b) to use the school as a social institution for reproduction of the socio-economic class structure and (c) to co-opt the Palestinian educated elite through employment as teachers, by keeping other forms of employment restricted.

This research project uses critical theory approach to explore the manifestation of these objectives and the dialectical relationship among them, with particular emphasis on the issue pertaining to the students' sense of collective-national identity. The study utilizes in depth qualitative analysis of the formal curriculum operates in the Palestinian schools, and open-ended exploratory interviews with Palestinian students and teachers. The main question pertains to the ways by which the Palestinian education is exploited in the political process as a hegemonic tool in blurring the students' collective-national identity and what forms of "resistance", if any, are being adopted by them to counter this process?

The study provides a serious contribution to critical-multicultural education, focusing on the experience of non-assimilating, non-voluntary national minority group within the context of a prolonged conflict. It is a rigorous attempt to investigate directly, and from the actual curriculum which is being used in the schools, whether education within such a conflictive situation is a tool of domination and hegemony or a process of liberation?

Theoretical Framework:

Tajfel (1981), defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). The self-concept has two components: personal identity, which

contains specific individual attributes such as feelings of competence, and psychological traits; and social identity, which derives from one's knowledge and feeling about his or her membership in a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Brewer & Gardner (1996), argue that we have two levels of collective self: "those that derive from interpersonal relationships and interdependence with specific others and those that derive from membership in larger, more impersonal collectives or social categories" (p. 83). Our interest in this research project is the collective self, which derives from membership in a national group, namely the Palestinian people as a whole.

There are at least three reasons which explain the growing interest in researching ethnic identity development in heterogeneous societies in recent years. First, the failure of the "melting pot" model to accommodate a large number of visible ethnic minorities who would rather maintain their unique ethnic identity and culture. Second, from an educational perspective, we must recognize and nurture the students' cultural and ethnic background in order to create equal opportunities for success. Finally, the more people are confident and secure about their own ethnic identity, the less they become prejudiced against members of other ethnic groups in society (Aboud & Doyle, 1993; Carter & Goodwin, 1994).

The situation becomes more puzzling as we consider the experience of indigenous groups whose national goals are in sharp contradiction with the dominant group. Israel as a "Jewish state" is based on the denial of the collective-national identity of the indigenous Palestinian people (Will & Ryan, 1990). Since assimilation is not feasible for either group, the question becomes, to what extent, and by what means does the dominant group manipulate the identity of the dominated? Education plays a key role in such a process.

Tajfel's definition of social identity constitutes the foundation for many ethnic and racial identity models developed in recent years (Phinney, 1990). In her research program on ethnic identity development among minority adolescents, Phinney (1989) constructed a three stage developmental model, that is "consonant with Marcia's (1980) ego identity statuses, that reflects the stages and issues described in the ethnic identity literature, and that can be applied across several ethnic groups" (p. 36). Ethnic minority adolescents move from *unexamined* ethnic identity, through *exploration* and into ethnic identity *achievement* in which they demonstrate a clear sense of their own ethnicity.

There is a positive correlation between higher stages of ethnic identity and personal self-esteem (Phinney, 1995; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). Individuals in higher stages of ethnic identity are actively involved in cultural and political activities, pertaining to their ethnic group (Phinney, 1989; Cross, 1991). There is the premise that the more people are secured and confident about their own ethnic identity the less they become prejudiced toward other groups (Tajfel, 1981; Phinney, 1989; Cross, 1991). Furthermore, identity as a psychological construct with *both* its individual component (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and collective or ethnic component (Phinney, 1989) is a developmental process, which is dominant during adolescence. Consequently, this research project examines the role of the formal education during the junior and secondary school years where Palestinian adolescents begin to grapple with the issue of collective-national identity.

Context of the Study:

Arab education in Palestine has never been run by the community itself. During the British Mandate and the Ottoman rule, education was controlled by outsider authorities that represented dominating cultures. The situation involving Palestinian education in Israel is even more polarized. While the Palestinians try to use their education in order to preserve collective-national identity among their youth, the Israeli authorities retain antithetical goals by using formal education in order to repress national awareness among the Palestinian students. As reported by the Human Rights Watch (2001) Palestinian schools in Israel suffer from systematic discrimination in budget, school building, support services, teacher qualifications and much more.

Since the very beginning, the Israeli curriculum planners were being faced with a critical question regarding the goals they set for Palestinian education. One of these planners posed the following question: “How can we encourage loyalty to Israel among Israeli Arabs without demanding a negation of Arab yearning on the one hand, and without permitting the development of hostile Arab nationalism on the other?” (Peres, Erlich & Yuval-Davis, 1970, p. 148). However ambiguous these criteria are, explicitly they are very political in nature. Ironically, Arab nationalism and national identity of the Palestinian students were to be defined for them by Jewish Israeli educational planners!

Failing to define agreed upon formal goals for the Palestinian education did not prevent the Ministry of Education from striving to empty it from its cultural and national

content. According to Mari (1987), the de-facto goals of Palestinian education set by the Israeli government are threefold: “to instill feelings of self-disparagement and inferiority in Arab youth; to de-nationalize them, and particularly to de-Palestinize them; and to teach them to glorify the history, culture, and achievements of the Jewish majority” (p. 37). Given the choice, the Palestinians would assign the exact opposite goals for their education. They would expect it to “preserve and reinforce Arab national identity - particularly their Palestinian identity - and to instill pride in their own culture, heritage, and nationality; and if it were up to them, the education of their youth would engage in condemning Zionism, rather than praising and glorifying it” (Mari, 1987, p. 37).

A study comparing Palestinian and Jewish educational goals for secondary schools, but not the *actual curriculum*, was conducted long time ago (Peres et. al, 1970). The study concluded that “whereas the Arabs are required to take an example from the great men of Israel, the great figures of the Arab world are not deemed worthy of special attention in the Jewish curriculum, but lumped together with the world’s great men” (p. 150-153).

The same goals for teaching history in Arab and Jewish schools in Israel were cited again by Mari (1987), Al-Haj (1995), and Makkawi (1999, 2002) all indicating the consistency in Israel’s approach of cultural colonization to Palestinian education. The major theme that runs across these educational goals, is the fact that the Israeli Ministry of Education is concerned mainly with the cultural identity of it’s Jewish students. Palestinian students are not only deprived from similar cultural education, but are taught to respect and glorify the culture of the Jewish group. The infusion of such a content into the students’ minds is not a simple process. Resistance by the students’ as human agents in such an educational process is the only expected outcome (Giroux, 1983).

Design of the Study:

This is an exploratory qualitative research project using the grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data for the study will include the following:

I. Qualitative content analysis of the curriculum will be conducted on History textbooks used in grades 9-12 in the Palestinian schools in Israel. Three independent raters familiar with the context of the study will read and identify themes independently. Only themes agreed upon by all raters will be considered as reliable findings.

II. A small and purposefully selected sample of Palestinian students from each grade level will be selected. Qualitative open-ended exploratory interviews will be conducted with this purposive sample of students. The aim of these interviews would be to give the students an opportunity to explore what the curriculum means to them with regard to their national identity, and explore the themes identified in the curriculum.

III. A purposive and small sample of Palestinian teachers who teach this subject matter and willing to participate will be selected for in-depth interviews. Comparison will focus on similarities and differences in the perceptions of the teachers and the students of the curriculum.

IV. Specific comparisons will be conducted with the curriculum used in Palestinian schools in the West Bank and Gaza, and with Israeli Jewish schools. While the focus remains on the Palestinian curriculum in Israel, comparisons with these two groups is intended to elaborate the hegemonic objectives designed for the Palestinian group formal citizens of Israel.

In Conclusion:

To the best of my knowledge, there is a near lack of research critically examining and analyzing the curriculum used in Palestinian schools in Israel. The need for such a fresh analysis of the curriculum is more pressing today since at least the stated goals for the Palestinian educational system have remained in tact over the past half a century. The current study is intended to fill such void in the literature.

REFERENCES

Al-Haj, M. (1995). Education, empowerment and control: The case of the Arabs in Israel. New York: State University of New York Press.

Brewer, M. & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this “we”? Levels of collective identity and self representation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71(1), 83-93.

Carter, R. & Goodwin, L. (1996). Racial identity and education. Review of Research in Education, 20, 291-336.

Cross, W. E. (1991). Shades of black: Diversity in African-American identity. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Erikson, E. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Giroux, H. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. Harvard Educational Review, 53(3), 257-293.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Hogg, M. & Abrams, D. (1988). Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes. London: Routledge.

Human Rights Watch (2001). Second class: Discrimination against Palestinian Arab Children in Israel’s schools. New York: HRW

Human Rights Watch. (2001). Second class: Discrimination against Palestinian Arab children in Israel’s schools. New-York: Human Rights Watch.

Makkawi, I.(1999). Collective identity development and related social-psychological factors among Palestinian student activists in the Israeli universities.

Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, Kent, OH.

Makkawi, I. (2002). Role conflict and the dilemma of Palestinian teachers in Israel. Comparative Education, 38, 1, 39-52.

Marcia, J. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), Handbook of adolescent psychology (pp. 159-187). New York: Wiley.

Mari, S. (1987). Policy and counter policy: The state of Arab education in Israel. Relations between ethnic majority and minority: A symposium. Tel-Aviv, Israel: International Center for Peace in the Middle East.

Peres, Y., Ehrlich, A. & Yuval-Davis, N. (1970). National education for Arab youth in Israel: A comparative analysis of curricula. Jewish Journal of Sociology, 12, 147-163.

Phinney, J. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity development in minority group adolescents. Journal of Early Adolescence, 9(1-2), 34-49.

Phinney, J. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. Psychological Bulletin, 108(3), 499-514.

Phinney, J. (1995). Ethnic identity and self-esteem: A review and integration. In A. Padilla (Ed.), Hispanic psychology: Critical issues in theory and research (pp. 57-70). California: Sage Publications.

Phinney, J. & Chavira, V. (1992). Ethnic identity and self-esteem: An exploratory longitudinal study. Journal of Adolescence, 15, 271-281.

Tajfel, H. (1981). Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of intergroup relations (2nd ed.) (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Will, D. & Ryan, S. (1990). Israel and South Africa: Legal systems of settler dominance. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc.