

Articles

Palestinian Continuing Education Under Occupation: Images of Distress and Possibilities for Hope

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how aspects of a militarily enforced occupation have influenced continuing education at Palestinian universities. It focuses on three influences: the impact of the politics of occupation on the history of continuing education; the effect of travel restriction, violence, and a damaged economy on participation; and the influence of a dependence on foreign donations on program development and delivery.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine comment certains aspects d'une occupation par l'armée ont influencé l'éducation permanente dans les universités palestiniennes. Trois influences sont ciblées : l'impact de la politique d'occupation sur l'histoire de l'éducation permanente; les effets des restrictions de voyage, de la violence et d'une économie endommagée sur la participation; et l'influence d'une dépendance sur les dons de pays étrangers pour le développement et la livraison de programmes.

INTRODUCTION

I arrived in the Palestinian territories in 2003 to observe the occupation from an educators' perspective. My host in Hebron took me to Hebron University's Continuing Education Center. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) had closed Hebron University's main campus but the Center remained open in order to run undergraduate classes. Doing so violated the closure order and subjected staff and students to possible arrest. That was my first encounter with how university continuing education (UCE) was being affected by Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. This paper explores that influence and in doing so makes visible a distressing image of how Palestinian UCE has been affected by having functioned for its entire history under occupation.

While this account is explicit to the Palestinian context, it should alert us to the necessity of understanding how continuing education functions in some of the most troubled parts of the world: in states ruled by autocratic regimes and in places rife with corruption, human rights violations, and subject to political instability, if not civil war. The internationalization of continuing education has grown substantially over recent years, facilitated by new technologies for distance delivery. While the motivation for establishing international partnerships is often the financial rewards that come with expanding markets, Canadian educators typically pursue these initiatives with the belief that they help to make upward mobility possible and promote social justice in regions where repressive conditions have become the norm (Kawalilak & Sherman, 2008; MacKinnon et al, 2009). Before we can credibly claim that a partnership with a continuing education unit functioning under adverse conditions is making a positive contribution to the public good, we have an obligation to attend to how these conditions affect our partners' abilities to develop and deliver programs. Our historical commitment to social responsibility—frequently discussed in this journal (Cram & Morrison, 2005; Fletcher, 2008; Nesbit, 2008)—should encourage us to connect with educators living and working in repressive contexts in ways that avoid inadvertently contributing to their troubles and support their efforts to formulate emancipatory practices.

This investigation is guided by Cervero and Wilson's observation that the "form and content of any educational program are expressly a function of who negotiates what interests in what context. Because planning is a social . . . activity, it is important to understand planners' interaction with their organizational setting" (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. xiii; Wilson & Cervero, 2001). They note, "it is essential to recognize that educators of adults must always act in historically developing and structurally organized relationships of power, which may either constrain or enable them to negotiate the interests of people affected" (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 5). In this case, the historically developing and structurally organized relationships of power affecting all aspects of planning and delivery are those associated with a militarily enforced occupation.

This study is based on field observations and notes written during discussions with educators at five universities located in the occupied West Bank—Al-Quds, An-Najah, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and Hebron—and with other Palestinian educators. The data was collected during visits to Israel and the occupied territories between 2003 and 2007. I quote directly from my field notes, set off by italics, not from transcribed interviews.

My findings can be summarized as follows. First, the history of Palestinian UCE and their home universities resonates with the politics of occupation. Second, every aspect of program delivery has been affected by how Palestinians must adapt to physical and legal barriers controlling their movement within, to, and from the territories. Inseparable from travel restrictions are the influences of pervasive violence, unemployment, and poverty. Third, an increasing dependence on foreign donations to develop and deliver programs has substantively magnified typical neocolonialist influences of educational internationalization. In this milieu, Palestinian educators are constrained and unable to negotiate the interests of the people they serve.

CONTEMPORARY FEATURES OF CONTINUING EDUCATION: AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During a 1948 war between Israel and Arab states opposed to Israel's creation, Israel expanded its borders up to what is now called East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza (Mayer, 2008; Pappe, 2004). In a 1967 war, Israel occupied these areas, which are the internationally recognized occupied territories. Before 1971, there were no Palestinian universities in the territories. Parents sent their children abroad for their degrees if they could afford to do so. Motivated in part by concerns that Palestinian youth were not learning their own history and culture, Arab states and wealthy Palestinian families began converting small colleges into universities. Between 1971 and the 1990s, ten undergraduate universities were established (Alawi, 2008). From 1989 to the 1990s, each of these universities established continuing education centres that were products of an emerging need for non-degree programs in management and social services, a demand that accelerated once a public sector emerged with the founding of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994.

The history of Palestinian universities and their continuing education units is inseparable from the politics and economics of occupation. The practice of sending students abroad for higher education was curtailed after 1967 by military regulations that put these students in danger of losing their Israeli-issued identity cards. Moreover, conservative Arab governments became hostile to Palestinian students, whom they accused of organizing radical pro-Palestinian and Arab nationalist movements (Sullivan, 1994). Conflicts between conservative and radical Palestinian nationalists in the territories and between local groups and the exiled Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led to struggles over control of the universities' administrations and teacher and student organizations (Jamal, 2005).

Israel discouraged but did not stop Palestinians from establishing universities; instead, initially it gave the IDF authority to approve course curriculum, student admissions, and faculty hiring decisions (Sullivan, 1994). From 1988 to 1992, the IDF closed all universities in response to the first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) and again closed or restricted access to them during a second *intifada*, which was the situation when I visited Hebron in 2003. In response to the election of Hamas in 2006, Israel closed the occupied territories to international funding and withheld taxes collected by the PNA, which left the PNA unable to pay teachers' salaries and operating expenses.

In 1994, the PLO and Israel negotiated the Oslo Accords that established the PNA as a restricted form of self-governance over discontinuous enclaves of the occupied territories, essentially those adjacent to major urban centres (e.g., Nablus, Hebron, Janine, and Ramallah). Crucially, the PNA exercised no sovereignty over these areas (e.g., no control over trade, immigration, or fiscal policies), but it was granted restricted authority over internal security, the local economy, education, health, and social services. In order to manage these functions, the PNA established ministries and bureaucracies that required trained staff, and funds were made available from foreign governments for continuing education and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver this training.

The PNA's Ministry of Education and Higher Education initiated some governance over the universities. In the case of UCE, it approved certificates and diplomas, attempted to establish uniform standards for quality assessment, and tried to reduce program duplication. However, the continuing education centre directors told me that their own efforts at networking and creating "strategic alliances" among themselves have been more effective than the ministry's efforts to reduce overlap, share resources, and develop co-operative instructor-training

programs. The ministry has been hampered by limited financial resources. It has access to tax revenue collected by the PNA and it is a conduit for foreign donations, but these sources have never been sufficient for implementing its plans (Ministry of Higher Education, 2002).

In summary, Palestinians have had limited control over their higher education system, which has prevented the campuses from enjoying substantive immunity from the occupations' larger political forces. These forces have been positive insofar as they contributed to the motivation to establish universities. The inception of the PNA and its ministries created public-sector demand for training provided by continuing education; however, my initial encounter with UCE at Hebron reminds me that any change in the politics of the occupation can radically restrict what continuing education is able to do.

CONTINUING EDUCATION, VIOLENCE, POVERTY, & FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Educators commented on the psychological aspects of the situation of occupation, describing the population as traumatized but unaware of how trauma affects how they perceive and respond to their situation, a concern that one also sees in the literature (Abdeen, Qasrawi, Nabil, & Shaheen, 2008). Since the 1967 war, between 18,000 and 24,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished as punishment for suicide bombings and armed resistance, and to clear land for military posts, settlement, and roads (Mayer, 2008, pp. 24–28). Between September 2000 and December 2008, B'Tselem, a prominent Israeli human rights organization, documented 4,792 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, including 953 minors. In 2009, the World Bank reported unemployment rates in the first quarter 2008 as 19% in the West Bank and 29.8% in Gaza. The World Bank stressed that these figures “do not give an accurate picture” because they fail to account for the approximately 60% of the potential labour force that has either turned to unpaid family labour or left the labour force after not finding work for an extended period (World Bank, 2009). According to United Nations, “46% of Palestinians do not have enough food to meet their needs. The number of people in deep poverty, defined as those living on less than 50 cents a day, nearly doubled in 2006 to over 1 million” (quoted in *Palestine Monitor*, 2008). Under these circumstances, the universities depend on foreign donors to pay course fees for marginalized groups participating in job training programs. The majority of students in management and professional programs have been paying their own fees or have them covered by employers; others depend on loans or scholarships from foreign governments.

The most frequently mentioned influence of the occupation on UCE is restrictions on freedom of movement. By 2007, about 450,000 Israelis were living in 140 settlements located inside the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Mayer, 2008, p. 21). The settlements form blocs that “control strategic corridors of the West Bank and interrupt the territorial continuity of the Palestinian areas” (Halper 2006, p. 64). Approximately 20% of the West Bank is designated by the IDF as closed military zones. Settlements and military areas are connected to each other and to Israel by a network of roads reserved exclusively for Israelis. The roads, settlements, and military zones result in Palestinians being able to move relatively freely in less than 20% of the West Bank (Levine, 2009, p. 88).

Throughout the West Bank there are checkpoints and roadblocks that monitor or restrict movement. Palestinians must pass through these checkpoints going to and from towns and cities inside the territories and at any crossing point going in or out of the territories. By 2006, there were at least 500 checkpoints and many more roadblocks (Levine, 2009, p. 94): Palestinians must

have Israeli-approved permits to pass through them. It can take hours to get through a checkpoint or roadblock, and without notice they can be closed by the IDF for an indeterminate length of time (Hammond, 2007). In 2002, Israel began constructing what the International Court of Justice called a separation barrier: Israel calls it a defensive fence. The barrier/fence snakes along the internationally recognized boundary (i.e., Green Line) between the West Bank and Israel but also encroaches into the territory in order to place settlements, aquifers, and religious sites on the Israeli side. About 17% of the West Bank will be on the Israeli side of the barrier when it is completed, with estimates that 350,000 Palestinians will find themselves cut off from their villages and farms on the other side of the barrier/fence (Halper, 2004).

Travel restrictions have a direct impact on instructors' and students' movement. Working adults and parents prefer to take evening classes; however, it is too dangerous for instructors living in the major urban centres to travel to and from villages after dark to teach. Travel after dark for anyone living in refugee camps is especially dangerous because they risk confrontation with IDF night patrols. Those living in Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Nablus benefit from having large continuing education centres nearby. Others are left out or must assume the additional cost of taking a residence in one of these cities to avoid travel restrictions. This note was recorded during a conversation with an instructor: *She says that 80% of the students come from the villages . . . for classes. It can take them six hours to get here if the checkpoints are closed because they must walk through the mountains, or they sit for hours at the checkpoints just waiting until the soldiers let them pass.* Without Israeli-issued travel permits, Palestinians cannot go between East Jerusalem and the West Bank or cross the barrier/fence to access UCE, work, or be with their families and friends.

UCE units have responded to villagers' demands for evening courses by recruiting instructors from the villages and collaborating with local organizations for classroom space. Online and distance learning are also utilized, though even Internet access is affected by the occupation. Israel controls licences for satellite access. Two directors mentioned significant delays in obtaining licences and the control that licensing gives Israel over Palestinian programming. Nonetheless, if universities do not utilize online delivery, people living outside the major centres would be poorly served. From a western perspective, collaborating with Palestinians to develop online and distance education options may be seen as enabling UCE to serve the public's interest; however, among Palestinians such practices are often described as constraining their national aspirations. Within the limits of this paper, I can consider briefly two issues discussed in this debate.

First is the question of normalization, which in this context is used pejoratively to refer to arrangements that enable Palestinians to adapt to their circumstances without furthering the struggle to end the occupation (Mi'Ari, 1999). Individuals and organizations involved in such arrangements defend their work as progressive efforts to circumvent constraints and make life tolerable until the occupation ends. Opponents say these arguments gloss over the fact that such projects have done nothing to stop further restriction and increasing impoverishment, while putting off to some indeterminate future date hope for realizing Palestinian national aspirations (Massad, 2006, p. 112). In this debate, online and distant education initiatives, like capacity-building projects, are viewed by some as essential for improving education in the present as well as the future, and by others as accommodations that normalize that which should not become normal.

A second issue is whether or not increasing access to higher education through online and distance education serves to aggravate underemployment problems. At an international conference on education and the occupation in the West Bank, Khadija Zawahreh and Kathleen Matheos (2007) presented papers on open education and occupation. The presentations precipitated a discussion on the problem of increasing access in this context. I wrote this observation: *It*

is already impossible for graduates to get jobs—100 applicants for every teaching job [how many engineer graduates I've met tending shops]—so increasing access and the number of graduates without increasing employability is contributing to underemployment. People are kept occupied going to school; it is just something to do, and that is all it can be unless the restrictions are lifted and they can get work.

Online learning is not the only undertaking subject to such criticisms. It merely exemplifies how any educational effort intended to circumvent travel restrictions and ameliorate the poverty may do little to change structurally organized relationships of power that weigh down on educators' ability to work in the interest of an emancipatory pedagogy that confronts head-on the underlying problems associated with occupation. My notes contain this entry made while speaking with a teacher: *You can learn how to do things, but it's not permitted to do things. So maybe it is better not to know . . . because you get frustrated . . . It is fine to be an expert in a certain thing but so what. The end goal is catastrophically affected.*

OCCUPATION & EDUCATIONAL NEOCOLONIALISM

A striking feature of Palestinian UCE is the similarity with North American practices. After listening to educators speak about the circumstances in which they work, it is rather astonishing to hear them describe program and instructional development methods as if they were working at a Canadian university. My notes are replete with descriptions of needs assessment instruments, focus groups, advisory committees, and the value of problem-based learning. Approval processes for certificates are remarkably similar to Canadian practice, except the Ministry of Education approves them rather than a university senate. The centres make a considerable commitment to instructional development and describe sophisticated, often mandatory, train-the-trainer programs. If, as Cervero and Wilson contend, the form and content of educational work are functions of the context in which planning is negotiated, what might explain hearing a westernized discourse on planning in a context so different from what prevails in the West?

In part, the answer lies in the fact that many Palestinians were educated in North American universities, an experience that imparted an ability and willingness to value western practices. A dependence on foreign aid for program development motivates the utilization of these practices. Funding applications and program evaluations are benchmarked against the standards of western universities and donor agencies. This dependency opens the door to forms of educational neocolonialism.

Kwame Nkrumah, the post-independence Ghanaian leader, said, "the essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside" (as quoted in Wickens & Sandlin, 2007, p. 278). Neocolonialism may be defined as a situation in which formerly colonized countries find that cultural and economic independence were never won at all. Formal colonialism ends but the systems of domination persist with educational work being both an expression of and vehicle for neocolonialism. Educational neocolonialism continues the processes of fetishizing colonial ideology in the lives of those who were once formally colonized.

Negotiating grants and partnerships with organizations such as the World Bank and universities forces Palestinians to harmonize their educational systems, professional practices, and standards of excellence with the West. Objectives and expected outcomes are written to correspond with the style that is accepted in the donor countries. In a conversation about funding with a director, I noted: *The centres are adapting their methods and philosophies to build them*

around results-oriented training and capacity building. Results-oriented training is something that the Canadians are excited about.

Palestinians are eager to collaborate with foreign universities to deliver their diploma and certificate programs. Adjustments are made to accommodate cultural issues (e.g., course content modification and the use of local instructors); however, in the name of quality assurance, foreign universities expect to approve instructor appointments, course outlines, and admission and completion criteria. The Palestinians may request that courses be shortened, removed from the curriculum if they are not essential, or substituted with local courses in order to reduce costs and accommodate constraints imposed by the occupation. Typically, such requests are refused on the grounds that the program would no longer be equivalent to the original. Because the Palestinians value the international prestige associated with creating such partnerships, the foreign partner's organizational practices and standards are accepted and thus imported into the Palestinian context however inappropriate they might be given the circumstances.

In a study of neocolonialism and higher education in the South Pacific, Mark Bray observed that where the islands "had achieved sovereignty, islanders had far more say about sources of funds and ways to spend money . . . [although] their freedom of decision is still somewhat limited" (1993, p. 10). While indigenous intellectuals may forgo their allegiances to national interest and be willing to adopt practices and goals understandable to and consistent with western values, independent states, even weak ones, demonstrate some capacity to "leverage . . . their sovereignty" (p. 9) when negotiating their interests. However, Palestinians have no sovereignty to leverage. Not until the establishment of the PNA has there been even a compromised quasi-state structure able to exercise limited self-governance over discontinuous enclaves in a fraction of the territories. In a 2002 strategic directions report, the Ministry of Higher Education noted that in "the present context of financial strains . . . implementing [the Ministry's] strategies requires external resources" (2002, p. 9). The report predicted, "that the level of public financial support for Palestinian higher education is not now nor likely in the foreseeable future to be sufficient to ensure financial sustainability" (p. 5). Faced with a weak ministry within a quasi-state structure, UCE has had to rely on inter-university networks for planning and coordination, but their ability to do so is hampered by the inability to make reliable predictions and count on long-term funding. A centre's director described it as, *thinking in bits and pieces . . . can't see the whole picture . . . don't have a big plan for the whole country's development. This is why you will find that for many problems they cannot ask for the right things from donors.*

For instance, a foreign agency may announce that it is making funds available for developing a program in marketing. The grant includes course fees for the program's initial offerings; however, when the grant runs out the local economy may not be able to support further offering. A centre would hesitate to refuse such funds even if this creates an unsustainable program because the grant would support the centre's operations and educates a number of people while the program was running. There would be hope that perhaps operating funds will be found elsewhere; meanwhile, the program could sit "on the shelf" for delivery later. Arrangements such as these contribute to "thinking in bits and pieces." They make it difficult for Palestinians to define their own priorities and adjust development to fit within their context.

Furthermore, inter-university networking is compromised by multiple layers of competition for foreign aid. The centres compete with each other and with community-based agencies providing upgrading and job training. In addition, Israel restricts the type of programming external agencies can support and prohibits projects it deems threaten its national security. Several governments favour projects that involve co-operation with Israeli institutions based on the mistaken, but not uncommon, belief that joint projects serve to ease tensions (Barghouti & Murray, 2005). In a few cases, universities have established their own criteria for accepting

funds. For example, a program serving Palestinians in East Jerusalem refuses to apply to foundations that fail to recognize East Jerusalem as an occupied city. However, such criteria are easily circumvented. For instance, where universities have imposed restrictions on joint projects with Israel, NGOs and private businesses accept funding tied to such arrangements, and then contract with continuing education centres to provide the training.

Moreover, the creation of the PNA has fostered a conservative, pragmatic tendency among intellectuals in the public sector who benefit personally and professionally from negotiating program development contracts with foreign agencies and universities. These educators are prepared to sideline questions about how a program might inform popular-based strategies aimed at ending the occupation (Massad, 2006). Since UCE developed in response to PNA training demands, the centres work closely with these pragmatists and have a stake in their ascendancy.

Dependence issues described here will sound familiar to Canadians working with groups in this country that rely on grants for development and delivery. This familiarity is valuable insofar as it provides some common ground for appreciating the circumstances facing Palestinians and the consequent neocolonial effects; however, the similarities should not be overstated. At least one substantive difference is that dependent groups in Canada and Canadian UCE operate in jurisdictions where civil servants are responsible to elected legislators, who in turn are ultimately responsible to an electorate, not an occupying power. Discrimination severely compromises many Canadians' rights, but Canadians are citizens of a sovereign state. Palestinians have no citizenship and no government structure capable of operating with any substantive independence. The intensity of dependence, along with other restrictions and economic collapse, creates qualitatively distinct relationships of power that frame all aspects of planning and delivery.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

In 2009, the World Bank stated, "Combined with the tightening Israeli restrictions on movement and access, and continued settlement expansion, the result is a Palestinian economy that is unable to sustain itself and its population under the current circumstances" (World Bank, 2009). Their assessment illustrates that since I recorded my last conversations in 2007, circumstances have not improved. The settlements, and roadways connecting them, have expanded; construction of the separation barrier/fence has proceeded; and following Israel's assault on Gaza in 2009, the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights called on the international community to "be steadfast in demanding accountability for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law" (Office of the High Commissioner, 22 March 2010).

Moreover, UCE is operating in an increasingly fractionalized society. Pressure by Israel and the United States to force the elected Hamas legislators and prime minister out of government in 2006 led to a rebellion that resulted in Hamas controlling Gaza and Fatah, the party that controls the PNA presidency, and thus the West Bank. The president set up an unelected government that Israel and the international community recognize as the legitimate government of the occupied territories. The PNA has used its security forces and persuasion to ensure that Hamas supporters play no role in public affairs, and this includes having no influence in the universities. The enclaves directly controlled by the PNA have been experiencing economic growth due to increases in foreign aid and a decline in travel restrictions; meanwhile Gaza exists in a state of siege with international organizations issuing warnings of an imminent humanitarian crisis (World Bank, 2009). There has been a considerable effort made by the PNA and Israel to normalize life in PNA-controlled areas. Writing in *La Monde diplomatique*, Sandy Tolan describes

Ramallah as a “Liberal Enclave, where residents experience a taste of prosperity and rising quality of life in this small but significant part of West Bank society” (2010, p.3). In the villages and refugee camps Tolan observed little, if any, improvement.

I have not returned to the region since 2007 to examine what UCE is doing to deliver programs outside the urban centres. I would venture to guess that educators are even more constrained by the politics of occupation than they were up to 2007, that people living in the villages are finding it more difficult to access programs, that support for development projects continues to be dependent on foreign donations, and that the PNA uses its influence on universities to determine who negotiates projects internally and internationally and whose interests are to be served by these negotiations. Continuing educators in the West who are arranging initiatives with Palestinian universities must exercise diligence in accounting for how that milieu constrains and enables the people affected.

This is far from a comprehensive account of Palestinian education under occupation. What has been examined here may be thought of as the platform of constraints and dependency upon which the day-to-day work of continuing education is performed. For anyone intending to collaborate with Palestinian universities, a more nuanced appreciation of that daily work is required. I spoke with an educator who emphasized that anyone working in this context learns *ways of doing things, about how to be flexible*. Critical ethnographies that analyze these “ways of doing things” would add an important level of understanding about how educators negotiate in their various organizational settings. On the matter of dependency, a Palestinian director told me: *There are some ways to offer programs for marginalized groups . . . These aren't big projects, sometimes there is surplus from larger grants to use for these things*. Such comments suggest cracks in the totality of the formal requirements of granting agencies that should be examined.

I also think it is essential to study the use of participatory planning methods in this context. Years of working with these methods has increased awareness about their value beyond program planning. Educators spoke of them as giving students concrete opportunities to gain confidence and skills in working collectively and changing people's expectations about the roles they should be playing in community projects. A few educators described these methods as means for fostering greater public participation in the struggle for national liberation. Amal Jamal (2005) has remarked on how the PNA has suffered politically from their leaders' elitism. Is the utilization of participatory planning practices a means for teaching people how to take collective ownership of decision-making processes in political discourse?

It is essential to approach optimism about participatory planning cautiously. It would be naive to think that because individuals and small groups have experienced a new role for themselves by participating in educational planning that this will translate into playing a substantive role in public political discourse. That said, it would be a mistake to dismiss the significance of changing people's expectations. I wrote this note after speaking with a director about this matter: *He believes that if you want to create a more democratic society, a more participatory society, you need to work at different levels. The most difficult is to have an impact at the political . . . and senior levels, but he thinks there is a mid-level where you might have an impact on policy makers. Therefore, they are trying to make changes in attitudes [at this level] and people's understanding of their role and their contribution to community*. Here is a fragile hope for an emancipatory pedagogy worthy of further exploration.

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