

Assessing the Educational System in Palestine: An NGO Perspective

Context, Problems, Challenges and Policy Recommendations

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Abbreviations

EDSP	Education Development Strategic Plan
ICT	Information Communication Technology
MOEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
RDP	Reform and Development Plan

Introduction

In the Palestinian Territories 43.5% of the population are below the age of 15 years; 40.8% in the West Bank and 47.9% in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2008). Demographic trends with such high young-aged cohorts entail greater investment required in specific sectors such as health and education. It is therefore imperative that sound government policies are set in place to match and meet the demands of such a youthful Palestinian population.

Since the establishment of the Ministry of Education, it was tasked with the enormous duty of setting up an educational system from 'scratch'. Reform followed specifically in 2008 with the development of the educational strategic plan aimed at reforming shortfalls in the education system. The current system however, still struggles to bring about educational reform in a climate of instability, change and diminishing monetary and non-monetary resources.

This policy paper aims to contextualize and map out the current educational system, its challenges, achievements and shortfalls from the perspective of local NGO's to vocalize and translate the perceptions of core educational players and grassroots.

The outcomes of this paper are of great importance in understanding real policy issues that require prioritization and a swift change from the eyes of local educationalists and field experts highly involved in the educational process. Given the importance of education in Palestine and the current demographic trends, it is hoped that the recommendations put forward are taken into consideration with respect to reform initiatives in Palestine so that an effective, forward-looking and progressive model is pursued in order for it to derive real social and economic development and to create a real investment in the human capital of Palestine.

Problem Context and Literature Review

Education Development Strategic Plan

The preparation of the Education Development Strategic Plan (EDSP) put forth by the Ministry of Education in 2008 developed as part of its overall Reform and Development Plan (RDP) set forth for the implementation of the PNA's vision for the future Palestinian state. The vision implemented by the MOEHE sets out 12 main pillars of policy improvements. The first, *Education for All*, emphasizes provision of quality education for school-aged students, increasing access at higher educational levels including vocational and non-formal education. The second, *Gender*, strives for gender education parity, specifically, enrolment and completion rates. The third, *Poverty Reduction*, aims for ensuring educational provision to low socio-economic students. The fourth, *Education Quality*, focuses on quality education with specific deliberation towards the implementation of a national strategy for teacher education; curricular development; competency-based modular curricula for vocational education; and improving higher education quality and research. The fifth intends to link education to labour market and society needs towards socio-economic development. The sixth focuses on improving science and technology in education, including the use of ICT at all educational levels. The seventh focuses on involving and creating partnerships with the private sector through policy advice, implementation of shared activities and financial investment. The eighth strives for improving partnership, coordination and cooperation with UNRWA, NGO's and international development partners with the aim of enhancing partner participation in policy, planning, implementation and monitoring. The ninth aims to enhance the capacity of planning and management towards the implementation of the educational development strategic plan. The tenth works toward the decentralization and restructuring of the Ministry holistically. The eleventh pillar gives special focus to improving education in Jerusalem, in terms of infrastructure, salaries and loans to poor students. The last pillar aims to drastically improve education in the Gaza Strip (EDSP, 2008: 18).

On the holistic level, the EDSP indicates four core goals in access, quality, management and relevance expected to have been acquired and achieved by the end of the planned period ; 1) *Access*: increase the access school-aged children and students of all educational levels had to education and to improve the ability of the system to retain them; 2) *Quality*: improve the quality of teaching and learning; 3) *Management*: develop the capacity for planning and management and to improve the financial and management systems used; 4) *Relevance*: realise a gradual conversion of the higher education and TVET sectors from a supply-oriented to a demand-oriented sector, thus matching outputs and labour market needs (EDSP, 2008:20).

Since the establishment of the MOEHE in 1994, the Ministry was tasked with a great challenge in structuring an educational system from 'scratch' and has indeed moved a long way. It took in its stride to ensure the advancement of the educational process as a whole and the improvement in the quality of education in general. The Ministry, however, had specific concerns over enrolment rates and ensured implementing measures focusing specifically on increasing schooling rates among both male and female pupils. Given the current strategic plan and vision, it is imperative to set out what has already been achieved and where education currently stands in Palestine. The following sections attempt to contextualize the state of the Palestinian education at varying levels.

Overall Educational Statistics

A Quantitative Perspective

The PNA has successfully increased literacy rates at all ages, from 84.3 in 1995 to 94.4 in 2007, where male literacy has reached 97.4% and female literacy reached 91.7%¹. Literacy rates are high in relation to world standards however there is still room for greater advancement in terms of female literacy rates in order to achieve gender parity. Overall attendance rates of students have similarly increased from 42.1 in 2001 to 46.1 in 2006, and has specifically increased at all age brackets for female students. It is worth noting that whilst the overall attendance rate has increased for both sexes, there has been a slight decline in attendance rates of male pupils aged 15-17 years from 83.5% in 1995 to 80.6% in 1996². This is a worrying statistic should it continue to decline in the forthcoming years. Despite no statistics at the PCBS showing attendance rates at specific age brackets for 2007/2008/2009, drop-out rates between the years of 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 show a crippling rise in male drop-out rates at the basic educational level, and for both sexes at the secondary level.

The following table extracted from PCBS's annual report 'Palestine in Statistics' shows drop-out rates in basic and secondary education among male and female students. Current drop-out rates in Palestine are relatively low (even with the increases evident in 2006/2007) in basic education for males and for both sexes at the secondary level. At the basic level, male drop-out rate in 2006/2007 increased to 1.3% topping all figures in the last 5 years. On the other hand, at the secondary level, male pupil drop-out rates increased to 3% again exceeding the last highest figure evident, 2.6% in 2002/2003. For female pupils, rates have also increased to 3.8% standing as the second highest figure in the last 5 years after 4.8% in 2002/2003. While the current increases in drop-out rates are marginal and do not cause major concern, rates should be monitored to ensure that the nominal increases witnessed in 2006/2007 do not cripple over and accumulate over time.

	Drop Out Rates	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Basic	Male	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	1.3
	Female	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5
	Both Sexes	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.9
Secondary	Male	2.6	2.3	2.5	2.3	3.0
	Female	4.8	3.6	3.7	2.9	3.8
	Both Sexes	3.7	3.0	3.1	2.6	3.4

An MOEHE study has identified drop-out rates according to four parameters, individual reasons, familial reasons, military reasons and scholastic reasons. The findings show that at the individual level, the main reasons causing student drop-outs is lack of interest in education and low attainment levels for both sexes, while pursuing work ranked third for males, and early marriage ranked first for females. Inability to understand modules were ranked in the fourth and fifth places consecutively. As for familial reasons, low family income is the main factor in deterring both sexes from continuing their education studies. Female students in specific also highlighted that being forced to leave education or being deterred from education by family members is also a core factor. In terms of military reasons, the study highlighted that the absence of teachers due to checkpoints contributed to pupil drop out, in addition to fear of settler attacks or army harassment on the way to schools and settler harassment against students. As for scholastic reasons, pupil drop-out rates are caused

¹ Literacy Rate of Palestinian Population (15 Years and Over) by Age Groups, Sex and Region, http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/educatio/4bb8f899-5346-4939-917b-bbd389aa4d45.htm

² http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/educatio/educt13.htm

namely due to difficulty in specific modules and the curriculum as a whole and antipathy and lack of loyalty towards the school (MOEHE, 2005).

What remains a major concern in the quantitative measures are the high student-teacher ratios and over crowdedness. The MOEHE has invested heavily in infrastructure, including the building of new schools, classrooms, libraries, school resources among others, in an attempt to raise basic standards and meet basic school necessities³. However, teacher student ratios remain high and overcrowded classroom are still a matter of grave concern.

Teacher to pupil ratio remains high and relatively unchanged, a small decrease in the ratio of less than 1% has taken place, but not high enough to claim a significant change in quality educational access for pupils. In 2008, the ratio stands at 1:33 in Government schools and 1:38 for UNRWA schools. The ratio is extremely high, especially in comparison to optimal ratio rates set in developed nations. Governments around the world have become more vigilant in ensuring class ratios remain around an average of 1:20 as a general figure for primary and secondary education. However, it should also be noted that the average rates of Euro countries, show ratios starting from as low as 1:10 and the highest apparent in the United Kingdom with 1:19. Literature has shown that high teacher pupil ratios have many implications. Most importantly studies have shown that high rates disturb education for many reasons. First of all, high student rates, especially in the Palestine context means that classes are prone to pool together students with varying degrees of cognitive learning abilities, learning styles and capability to intake information. Depending on the pace the teacher wishes to choose, this either slows down the academic pace of students with higher cognitive learning abilities or conversely forces less academic students to speed their pace often causing gaps in understanding more complex curricular material. It can cause frustration manifesting disruptive behaviour. Higher student ratios in general may also result in higher pupil disruptions. When classes become unmanageable with 40 pupils per class as the Palestinian case, teachers may at times choose to concentrate their efforts on academic students, putting less academic students at a double disadvantage, the first being their slower cognitive learning ability and the second, their ability to seek or acquire further scholastic attention from the teacher during class, as teachers may be prone to give less attention to these students in order not to jeopardize the pace of the syllabus. If this was not the case, the class will spend time more for less academic students to assimilate the information, but teachers are inevitably compelled to strictly conform to the curricular timeline. They will more often than not choose to spend their time progressing through the syllabus, rather than attending the extra needed time for less academic pupils. High teacher ratio rates are also a burden on teachers. Studies have shown that teachers may become less motivated, less assertive and disillusioned with the schooling system as a whole effecting the educational delivery and quality.

³ www.moehe.gov.ps

A Qualitative Perspective

Preschool Education

The MOEHE has specified in its strategic development plan a desire to regulate and develop the quality of education in pre-school education. Pre-school education is still being supplied by the private sector, non-profit schools and charities. Currently, the Ministry only supervises pre-school education by ensuring that physical facilities of kindergartens, personnel and programmes meet the set specifications and criteria, thus granting operational licensing. On the positive side, the current figures show an increase in the total number of kindergartens provided from 935 in 2005-2006 to 972 in 2007/2008 (Palestine in Figures, 2008). Ironically though the number of students enrolled in preschool education slightly decreased, in addition to a drastic decline in the total number of students in the first-grade who had enrolled in pre-school programs from 73.3% in the scholastic year of 1999/2000 to 53.3% in 2005/2006 (EDSP, 2008:31). The causes have been outlined as a result of increasing poverty, the separation wall and the quality of preschool programs (ibid). Should preschool education remain funded by the private sector, raising the entrance bar of students according to economic ability it will cream off students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, creating exclusion in pursuing early childhood education. Furthermore, quality preschool education requires teachers with degrees in early childhood education, a professionally developed curriculum for the age bracket of 3-4 year olds and small teacher-children ratios (Dickman et al, 2009). At the moment, no preschool curriculum exists leaving it up to teachers to produce learning materials for children consisting mostly of worksheets and practical activities dispensed at their discretion. Qualification levels of teachers also remain low. The PCBS statistics of 2008, reveals that only about 40% of kindergarten teachers have completed secondary education, 30.8% hold diplomas and 26.8% hold undergraduate degrees, bearing in mind the undergraduate degrees are not necessarily in education or early childhood education. According to EDSP, there is also a lack of quality control in pre-schools and kindergartens as the number of supervisors per each Educational Directorate is insufficient and diverges from the level of quality control strived for by the Ministry. Kindergarten principals and supervisors also lack training, educational sensitivity and sound management skills in raising the standards of pre-school education; and lastly, there is a lack of facilities for children with disabilities, learning difficulties or those in need for special education and attention (EDSP, 2008:32).

Quantitatively there has been an increase in the number of kindergartens available however this quantitative increase is not matched by a 'qualitative' increase in core quality improvements required for early childhood education. Preschool education strengthens the academic platform of children entering basic education and education theory has focused its attention more and more on the importance of preschool education and the cumulative effect it has on cognitive learning at all later stages of learning in life.

General Education

Improvements in the overall quality of education has several facets including, quality of overall school environments and resources, quality of teaching and student achievement levels.

The skills of teachers remains a major concern; teachers are not adequately trained in teaching as a whole, nor are they trained or supported to teach the curriculum. Formal licensing into the teaching profession has not yet been endorsed in the Palestinian educational system (MAS, 2006). According to the same report, the last Palestinian Education law project presented to the PLC in 2005 did not specify any conditions or qualification requirements for teaching (ibid). The report further asserts that the minimum Tawjihi score required for entering the teaching profession is very low. Consequently, choosing the teaching profession at higher education is a result of inability to enter

more attractive professions. In other words, matriculation scores somewhat determine who enters the teaching stream, and may thus devalue the level of teachers on the one hand, and question their interest in teaching on the other. Shakhsher Sabri and Abu Dagga (2006) report that Palestinian teachers are extremely unsatisfied with their salaries; they do not meet familial needs and do not match the exerted efforts. The study also revealed that male teachers responsible financially for their families were more likely to opt for a change in profession (ibid). Aside from the financial aspect, Palestinian teachers suffer from various problems related to low educational quality in Palestine, including poor work conditions, students' behaviour problems, and students' motivation.

Educational theory has found that teaching is a stressful profession. The teaching profession (internationally) is considered one of the most stressful careers along with that of servicemen and social workers. For example the Teacher Burnout Report, 2002, by the American National Association as cited in (Mrozek, 2005) shows that about 33% of the American teachers view teaching as very or extremely stressful profession, and that 30% of novice teachers quit teaching before their 5th year. Finland and other European countries have suffered in the past from very high rates of senior teachers' early retirement and novice teachers who leave teaching causing considerable shortage in qualified teachers (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005).

Educational theory has proven various factors causing teacher stress, including lack of administrative support and care, lack of supervisory support, inadequate time to complete the allotted syllabus, increased workloads, being forced to teach outside their specialist areas, low salaries, lack of resources, low control over the job, poor physical work environment and poor students motivation, large classrooms sizes, having to cope with student's social problems (i.e poverty, parents' divorce, drugs, alcohol etc), disciplinary problems, minimal promotion opportunities and interruptions during teaching time (Easthope & Easthope, 2007; Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005; and Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Overcrowded classrooms and overwhelming workloads only exacerbate teaching stress and the lack of educational facilities means greater work burdens on the teacher. Highly stressful work environments affect teachers both physically and mentally. Montgomery and Rupp (2005) found that the more important effects of high work stress are mental and psychological as teachers may suffer lack of concentration, lack of ability to think rationally, increased distraction, reduced memory, increased errors in organization and planning, increased tension and aggressiveness, in addition to depression, low self esteem, less enthusiasm, absenteeism and burnout, thus, negatively affecting teachers' professional performance and efficacy. Administrative and organizational relationships (including strict regulations and assessment measures) and conflict of educational values also contribute to this phenomenon. Teachers stress because of repeated interruptions by administrative staff (principals, principal assistance) to the classroom. They are also stressed by the rapid changes that might take place in the system or the involuntary transfer policy for example. Relationship with the community and its attitudes towards teachers is another important factor (Easthope & Easthope, 2007; and Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Hakanen et al described the "exhaustion stage" of teaching as a main contributor to anxiety, physically drained teachers, decreased motivation and increased cynicism towards teaching, reducing teachers' commitment and engagement in the teaching-learning process, consequently negatively influencing education quality (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005). Teachers' coping strategies to handle high stress conditions may be negative in terms of cognitive, behavioural and emotional reactions that affect their personal lives and professional practices as well. Some coping mechanisms lead to indifference and cynicism about teaching, lack of engagement to find solutions, or a distant attitude towards work, colleagues, and students (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). An encouraging work environment on the other hand, enhances the reduction of work demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs. Such an environment accelerates achievements towards work goals, and stimulates personal growth, learning, and development. Enhancing an innovative school climate, supportive administration and

supervision and allowing easy access to information and resources and job control are characteristics of an encouraging environment (Hakanen et al, 2005). Teachers thus become more effective in motivating students when they themselves have greater enthusiasm. Social support and the need for recognition and independence were also highlighted as important factors (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005).

Teacher qualification

In 2008, the MOEHE drafted a proposed strategy for developing educational qualification programs in higher education institutions. The strategy's objective sought to develop general education in Palestine. Up until now, teaching methodologies are not a prerequisite of teaching in Palestinian schools. Universities provide programs for educational qualification, however, attendance remains voluntary. Consequently, teachers in the Palestinian schools are 'technically' qualified in terms of subject knowledge. The strategy hopes that by the academic year of 2014/2015, only graduates of higher education institutions' teacher qualification programs will be appointed as teachers in Palestinian schools.

Palestinian universities have only recently started to adopt this strategy. Birzeit University added four new BA majors in teacher education for the year 2010-2011, in which the new majors include methodologies in teaching mathematics, technology, sciences or social sciences subjects for basic education between the grades of 5 to 10. Birzeit University also developed its educational qualification diploma program in light with the MOEHE strategy for developing educational qualification programs in higher education institutions (2008). Birzeit University also expanded its Psychology and Education Department and institutionalized it as a separate faculty in order to develop its programs. Al-Quds University and the Arab American University in Jenin are expected to follow and introduce two new majors for the educational qualification Diploma degree, teaching 5th to 10th grades and teaching 11th and 12th grades (<http://www.birzeit.edu/news/21493/news>). Currently, all teachers receive training on their taught subjects. Teachers have however, reported that this training addresses only the content of the curriculum and lacks emphasis on modern teaching methodologies (Shakhsher Sabri & Abu Dagga, 2006). They suggest that the ministry consider more planning and reparation for these training courses.

Curriculum

The Arab Knowledge Report (2009) conveys the reality of education systems in the Arab countries. It argues that completed levels of education and official graduation do not reflect the true quality of the individuals' knowledge and the skill set required in those countries. It highlighted that curriculum in general lack activities aimed at developing the learners' abilities to collect, organize, sift and analyze information (ibid). It is thus important for the MOEHE to reflect on what knowledge they really want their school graduates of basic education, secondary education and tertiary education to have acquired.

Torrance and Goff (2009) argue that children tend to learn more effectively by creative ways than by authoritative ways. They state that curriculum itself must provide opportunities for creative learning such as materials that invite original work or self-initiated projects. The type of learning and learners that should be developed need to fulfil current and future life needs whilst emphasizing aspects of lifelong learning throughout (ibid). Torrance and Goff asserted that this type of learning relates to the acquisition of problem solving skills enable learners in encountering future unexpected problems and of being more effective in the absence of expert knowledge. Accordingly, education and instruction systems, including design of textbooks, must focus on developing modes of thinking where problem solving can be enhanced.

Fattash (2010) analyzed the Palestinian teachers' assessment of the English curriculum and its correspondence to the communicative approach. According to the study, this curriculum conforms only to a very few aspects of the communicative approach. It revealed lack of training for teachers in terms of the curricular syllabus, in which surveyed teachers felt that they did not receive adequate training on specific aspects of the syllabus such as teaching writing skills. Moreover, the report indicated that teachers could not teach certain aspects of the curriculum due to the lack of needed equipments and resources such as audio-visual tools in their schools. Bitar and Assali (2008) on the other hand, concluded a study of the social science curriculum (history, civic education and geography) revealing that the curriculum is presented in a very traditional manner and does not contribute much towards the enhancement of analytical, critical and creative thinking skills of pupils nor is it suitable for students' cognitive development, instead rely on sheer memorization of facts rather than reflective abilities. Curriculum and textbooks are a very important aspect in the teaching-learning process. The importance lies in their contribution and ability to cultivate students' cognitive, social and emotional learning and development. They are effective when they respond to learners' needs and transform them into meaningful skills (Mohammad, 2007).

The lack of quality rigour in the Palestinian curriculum is also reflected in Palestinian students' achievement levels in the internationally based TIMSS testing. The International TIMSS test scoring which assesses 4th graders and 8th graders achievement in Mathematics and Science is carried out every 4 years. Palestine has not taken the TIMSS tests for 4th graders but has for 8th graders. The last statistics of 2007, shows Palestinian students under achieving in both science and math. The TIMSS scale average for both Mathematics and Science stands at a score of 500, in Mathematics Palestine achieved an average score of 367 and a score of 404 in Science placing it in the lower international percentile. The mathematic scoring are based according to four benchmarks of mathematical development, advanced, high, intermediate and low. Palestine scored a minimal 0% in the advanced international benchmark level, highlighting Palestinian students' inability to organize and draw conclusions from information, make generalizations and solve non-routine problems, scoring highest 39% in the low international benchmark highlighting students ability of having some knowledge of whole numbers, decimals, operations and basic graph and 15% at the intermediate level where students can apply basic mathematical knowledge in straightforward situations.

TVET

The relevancy and effectiveness of the Palestinian TVET system has been questioned in terms of its compatibility with labour market needs and requirements. Technical and Vocational Education and Training has no unified system as it is provided by various training institutions including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, private institutions and NGO's. The fragmentation in the system has led to duplications and impaired efficiency (Kouhail, 2004). Most of which are small in their scope, the teaching system is based on old curricula or none at all, the equipments are outdated or obsolete, trainers have received minimal training in vocational education and the system has a capacity of training 3% of students at any given time (ibid).

Improving vocational education in Palestine is an enormous challenge. At the current level, there are very low levels of student enrolment in vocational education and training by both males and females, but even more so among female students (MAS, 2010; Gill et al, 2000). The stigma vocational education acquires among Palestinians does not help the encouragement of students into such fields, nor does the low levels of average daily wage of graduates of vocational education and training compared to wages of university graduates (MAS, 2010). The attention of reforming vocational education is still limited and there are currently inadequacies in government and private sector involvement, even though UNRWA has greatly concentrated on TVET (MAS, 2006).

Higher education

Higher education and research are tools for sustainable development socially, culturally and economically. However, in the Palestinian Territories, the higher education sector is not supported in that it does not play the role it should in promoting development (Baalousha et. al, 2009; & Robinson, 2010).

Developments in the higher education sector in Palestine, aims to expand capacity, increase access, enhance quality and improve relevancy in order to create a knowledge-based economy. In terms of enrolment rates, there was a considerable change from less than 40,000 in 1994 to 180,000 students in 2009. Additionally, a number of improvements took place including: the introduction of the higher education law, introduction of the higher education organizational structure, the establishment of the Council of Higher Education, the National Commission for Accreditation and Quality, the Council for Scientific Research and the University Student Fund (Abu Al-Hummous, 2006; Baalousha et. al, 2009; & Darwish, 2009).

However, there are major problems such as the increasing enrolment fees; lack of sufficient infrastructure, especially for scientific laboratories and equipment; lack of qualified academic staff and lack of support for research. Moreover, the higher education sector encounters great challenges in terms of conforming to new and rapid advances in information and communication technology, and in contributing to human capital development (Baalousha et. al, 2009; & Darwish, 2009). Universities face huge difficulties that make it impossible to provide for chemicals and modern lab equipments. There is also very little financial support for academic research. The Government has currently no direct fund allotted for research and most research funding rely on international and external financing. Libraries also suffer from poor resources and limited access to electronic resources (Baalousha et. al, 2009; & Robinson, 2010).

In Gaza, damaged higher education infrastructures have not been reconstructed. This is further compounded by Israeli restrictions on the supply of construction materials due to the Israeli blockade. The Israeli authorities also imposed direct strikes during the last war on the Islamic University in Gaza, claiming that its laboratories were being used by terrorists, (Robinson, 2010).

Working to promote creativity and academic research not only requires reviewing courses and teaching methodologies, but also requires enhancements in teaching English (given it is the universal language of academia and resource publications) and computer skills for students. Several researchers have acknowledged the importance of promoting youth initiatives in academic and developmental projects as well. It is similarly imperative that higher education is linked to labour market by focusing on vocations and specialities required by the local economic system. A key aspect in developing the higher education is seen through the utilization and the recruitment of the Palestinian private sector in supporting and providing initiatives for its development. According to Abu Al-Hummous (2006) and Baalousha (2009) it is crucial that the higher education law be enhanced to protect the higher education institutions and to scale up their achievement levels.

Palestinian Budget Allocation

Salaries make up the highest expenditure of the MOEHE's budget. According to Nicolai (2007) operational costs make up 85% of the sector's budget and 90% are for school staff salaries. This budget allocation is raising concerns among donors and educationalists alike. Given that the majority of the current budget for the MOEHE is being allocated purely for educational running costs and unless the government raises educational budgets, government expenditure allocated towards educational development will remain minimal, and thus will not facilitate the developmental reform required, resulting in a stalemate.

Palestinian Educational Law

No domestic general educational law currently exists with the expectation of materialization upon the creation of a new Palestinian state (Nicolai, 2007). This means that specific education issues in areas such as Jerusalem cannot fully be addressed as they are highly subjective to uncertain political status and final status negotiations. However, a basis of 'Education Rules and Regulations' are in use and outline issues related to exam procedures, procurement and recruitment, which were based on previous Jordanian and Egyptian law but amended through experience in order to further contextualize to Palestinian needs. As such, international laws still plays a de facto role in outlining education rights and obligations (ibid) in addition to the use of laws based on previous administrations, including the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate, Egyptian Law (in Gaza), Jordanian Law (in the West Bank) (Musleh and Taylor, 2005:13).

Occupational Challenges

Putting aside pure quantitative and qualitative educational argument, the occupation has created an enormous challenge in the functioning of the educational process as a result of the geographic disparity hampering ability to create tangible reform. Each locality, be it Area C, Jerusalem or Gaza, suffer unique set of problems. The next section provides a glimpse of the most common set of predicaments faced in these localities.

Jerusalem

Schools in East Jerusalem suffer a wide array of problems. Schools suffer from poor infrastructural conditions, notably dilapidated constructions leading to unhealthy and unsuitable learning environments. Classrooms are characteristically overcrowded and lack basic ventilation. According to The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, the inability to construct new schools has resulted in schools being housed in rented buildings not suitable for classrooms and often do not have integrated classrooms, teachers rooms, libraries, laboratories or even playgrounds (The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, 2010). According to official figures of the Jerusalem municipality⁴, the number of children who do not attend school is approximately 5,300 children or about 6% of the total number of children in Jerusalem and drop-out rates reach a staggering 50% (ibid). It is also agreed that about 1000 classrooms are missing. It is therefore, unsurprising that education in Jerusalem generates low scholastic achievement rates and or even students' personal development. According to the same report, poverty stands at a current rate of 65.1% of East Jerusalemites living under the poverty line and high dropout rates has given rise to 'juvenile delinquency and drug abuse' creating and heightening the challenge of educational development.

Area C

62% of the West Bank is in Area C posing huge challenges in terms of the functioning and administration of Education in these areas as Israel retains full administrative and military authority. This has resulted in a situation difficult to improve: demolition on one hand and severely restrictive planning policies and permits on the other. Difficulties in obtaining permits for the construction of schools, refurbishment or even expansion has manifested extreme restrictions in supplying adequate education, or even basic educational services, to an estimated population of 150,000 Palestinians,

⁴ Jerusalem Municipality Demographic Almanac, breakdown by age and sex in Jerusalem, figures as of December 31, 2009

coercing the construction of schools without permits and thus leaving them consistently prone to demolition by the occupational forces. This means a lack of services not only to the current population but also in terms of meeting the natural population boom in these areas. The ability to even weatherproof dwellings or replacement by portable tents is prohibited (OCHA: 2010). The Israeli Civil Administration generally allows Palestinian construction only within boundaries approved by their municipal plans (ibid). In Khan Al Ahmar School, for example, the largest classroom is a 9 meter room that has been divided at a ratio of 6:3 meters to accommodate for an extra classroom. The school has been unable to add classrooms to accommodate for both additional grades or even to cope with the natural population growth. The school is now left with the extreme challenge of adding grade 6 into their school for the next coming academic year in 2011.

Settler violence is on the rise and mostly takes place in the West Bank (OCHA: 2010). The threats of settlement violence have resulted, at times, in deterring students from going to school and resulting in psychological repercussions on children at their tender ages. Checkpoints, road obstacles and the wall have delayed and hardened the route of both teachers and students accessing education and reaching their final destination points. This leads to higher dropout rates, specifically for girls in Area C in specific relative to other areas in the West Bank. According to a report prepared by the MoE, many Palestinians need permission from the Israeli military to travel to their schools, universities and jobs. The Wall causes a disruption in the school system since students and teachers are made to wait at the gates of the Wall; students spend more time at checkpoints than in their classrooms (MoE, 2007).

Gaza

In the fifth Palestine Human Development Report (2009-2010), it is stated that human insecurity which is caused by different threats can only be eliminated by the empowerment of people through development, where education constitutes a crucial aspect. Political division between Fatah and Hamas, according to this report has affected social cohesion in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while civil rights are being violated by the ruling authorities. To compound matters, subsequent to the international boycott of Hamas, and Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007, development opportunities decreased in addition to funding for development.

Gaza has been under blockade for many years, where more than half the population of Gaza 53% – is under the age of 18. There are 383 public schools, 221 UNRWA schools and 36 private schools, around 85% of these schools suffer overcrowding and operate in shifts. There are restrictions on investment in building new schools or repairing damaged schools. Since Israel's Operation Cast Lead in 2008, most of the schools that have been destroyed have not been reconstructed since. The war resulted also in the damage of 20000 houses and 280 schools, besides complete destruction of 18 schools (International Development Agencies, 2009), let alone the psychological implications on students.

According to the same report, the quality of education in Gaza shows that students' attendance and academic performance is declining as a result of inappropriate infrastructure and overcrowding, in addition to the disruption of Israeli military operations. For example, in the school year 2007-2008 standardized exams were applied to 6th graders and only 20% of the public schools' students passed those exams in mathematics, science and Arabic (ibid). A survey by Sharek Youth Forum shows that, after the last war on Gaza, 40% of the Palestinian Youth are considering emigration seeking better economic security, social rights and a better education. In light of this critical time to the Palestinian economy there is a need to invest in human capital, in order to create a degree of self efficiency and independency for the Palestinian economy. Furthermore, given the blockade on Gaza, all infrastructure projects are frozen causing more chances for deterioration in every living aspect including education which is inevitably a cornerstone for long term development. Gaza has been under repetitive blockades since 2000. but in 2007, collective sanctions were the most aggressive.

This included restrictions on people's movement to and from Gaza Strip. Besides the extreme negative influence of this decision on health conditions and humanitarian cases, Gaza students are not able to join universities outside the Gaza Strip, which presents more load on Gaza universities and deprives students from learning opportunities (ibid).

Role of NGO's

The emergence of NGO's in Palestine surfaced with the need for providing services in the absence of a national state prior to the establishment of the PNA. NGO's were successful in establishing relations and values that strengthened the structure of the Palestinian society whilst protecting a common identity and history during occupation (Abdullah, 2004). NGO's have therefore, enjoyed a long history in providing services to the Palestinian community, reaching wide social segments carrying out development activities in health, education, social services, job creation, poverty alleviation and microfinance, human rights, democracy, women and children's rights, all in an attempt to improve the quality of life in Palestine especially targeting the poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups (Abdel Shafi, 2004; Abdullah, S. et al, 2005; Abusrour, 2009).

Upon the establishment of the PNA, the NGO's influenced governmental policies in different areas such as the passing of the NGOs law, the Labour law the preparation of the National Health Plan, launching the national dialogue on economic policies, civil affairs law and many other initiatives through networking, lobbying and other contributions (Abdel Shafi, 2004). NGO's had had great presence in participating in formal committees tackling political and national issues, and have also played a fundamental source of information for the media (ibid).

The findings of a MAS working paper on social protection in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, found that NGO's in Palestine saw that the absence of real coordination has crippled improvements in NGO's operations and from collectively exerting pressure on the government to improve its social protection policies (MAS, 2008). Lack of coordination and competition for funding was highlighted coupled with the different developmental approaches and policies among the NGOs themselves or the government, and that NGO's tend to deal with public policies and ministerial decisions individually rather than collectively, using just its own competencies and personal relationships with other organizations (ibid).

A dilemma arose with the creation of the PNA. NGOs are seen as core agents of change and a crucial vehicle in the successful implementation of a national statehood in Palestine. In 1994 when the PA was created there was confusion around the roles of NGOs and grassroots organisations; a governmental department had overtaken the official authority. The power and ability of civil society was suddenly restricted in terms of shaping the future of the Palestinian state. (Abusrour, 2009).

It is therefore seen as imperative to unify the vision among the PNA and civil society actors in planning, coordinating and realizing the means to achieve and adopt developmental priorities, synchronizing activities, enhancing networking and decision making among the different educational stakeholders in order to strengthen the educational structure in Palestine. This is required especially at a time where NGOs have struggled with the dual roles around being part of the national struggle for liberation and positioning themselves in the state building process (Abdullah et al, 2005).

Methodology

The aim of the study was to identify the perspective of local NGO's with regards to the educational system. The study is phased out into 3 stages: 1) NGO's perceptions of the strategic plan; 2) the role of NGO's; and 3) educational priorities areas requiring reform. Table 1 details the questions the study seeks to answer and the questions posed to the interviewees.

Table 1. Questions the study seeks to answer

NGOs perceptions' of the strategic plan	1) How do you view the education strategic plan? 2) How far does the strategic plan reflect the needs of the educational system and educational needs? 3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the strategic plan and educational policies implemented? 4) Are there priority issues not covered or not being tackled in the plan in specific, and educational implementation in general?
The role of NGO's	5) To what extent have educational policies, strategies and programs of NGO's changed in response to the strategic plan? 6) How do you see the relationship between NGO's and the government? And what is or what should be the role of NGO's? 7) To what extent have educational programs been able to meet the challenges and difficulties in education?
Educational priorities	8) What are the challenges and difficulties in education and how can they be overcome? 9) What are your recommendations for improving education and meeting educational needs?

Sampling

Purposeful sampling approach was utilized in the selection of the interviewees and in-depth interviews carried out with six NGO Executive Directors and educationalists and one focus group.

Type of Interviews

A mix of structured, semi structured and non-directed interviews were used for data collection. Structured and semi structured interviews are favoured among educational researchers (Wragg, 2002) allowing for interviewees to express themselves at length and enough information is gathered regarding the exploration of the different issues present. The interview structure conforms to that of the analytical framework, however the interviews were at times tailored to the academic or stakeholders expertise area.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The transcriptions were developed by the use of thematic codes and reoccurring themes were segmented as the areas of importance.

Findings

Strategic Plan and Educational Policy

The completion of a strategic plan is seen as a positive step towards visualizing and reporting on educational issues that need to be addressed and reformed in Palestine. Nonetheless, its level of educational scrutiny has been described as; *“broad, general and lacked depth to the problem-context”*, for several reasons; the strategic plan is considered a very broad framework that lacks specificity to problems outlined with regards to each theme, in that it looks very broadly and generically at educational problems in Palestine and the areas of reform without giving real directions or bases to understand where educational priorities lay given current financial constraints and inability to reform all the designated areas proposed in the plan. This lack of rigour has meant that prioritization of educational inputs, outputs and outcomes have not been outlined or set, instead a broad set of educational areas outlined, seen at times as ‘ambitious’. The interviewees asserted that this *“creates difficulty in monitoring or assessing change”*, *“it is not activity based where outcome and impact can be measured according to inputs and output”*, *“nor does it provide solutions to the current problems”*, thus *“creating difficulty in carrying out true accountability”*.

The strategic plan has also been described by several interviewees as *“highly donor driven”*, *“does not identify priority areas”* and *“accommodates for donor support and donor requirements”*. One interviewee affirmed that the

“strategic plan lacks content especially with respect to the curriculum and in terms of administrating the educational process as a whole in achieving the goals. It accommodates for donor support and has been developed to match with donor requirements in general... It lacks measurement and is merely the crust of educational needs in Palestine”.

Another asserted that *‘Many educational issues require further scrutinisation such as student achievement and TIMSS’*, whilst another felt that *‘the actual development process is not reflected in the plan’*. The problem of urbanization on education in Palestine has been highlighted as a crucial aspect not carefully considered in the strategic plan either. One interviewee asserted that classrooms are still overcrowded and questioned whether the natural population boom has been considered within the already problematic overcrowded situation. Various NGO’s questioned whether a thorough needs assessment was carried out and whether the changes needed match market needs or the needs of developing human resource output in Palestine. One interviewee described the strategic plan as a *“theoretical framework”* in which the needs were *“assumed”*. Similarly, NGO’s outlined the lack of educational stakeholders’ opinion, including teachers, parents, and even local NGO’s themselves, during the finalization of the strategic plan in specific and as core players in improving the educational process as a whole at all stages, contesting that parents, teachers, principles, students and all field educationalists should be given more attention and emphasis in vocalizing their concerns by listening to their opinions more in influencing educational management decisions. Effectively pushing for a more bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach where policy makers decree educational policy, effectively marginalizing grass-root voices who are arguably more connected to the educational process at the field level.

Cumulative to the lack of needs, one interviewee stated that *‘the Educational Strategic plan is not being practiced on ground’*. Several stated that whilst we have a plan in place, issues such as: the rehabilitation of teachers; increasing teacher devotion towards the profession; enhancing teaching methodologies and practices; institutionalizing pre and in-service training; raising the social status of teachers; and increasing teaching incentives have largely been left unchanged, i.e. issues are not being practiced on ground even when such issues have been stated in the plan as areas of reform. It is also seen that the EDSP gives little reflection to the direction the government is taking towards educational reform, in other words, where in the many themes outlined will the government focus

given its limited monetary and non-monetary resources, realistically evaluating the current constraints in the overall system, and what areas will be left not tackled by the government due to the same constraints, neither does it give reference to the NGO's or stakeholders working in line with the ministry to cover priority areas that cannot be covered by the government. This effectively highlights the extent to which issues mentioned in the plan may be left unreformed even if the MOEHE has the utmost intention of reform as stated in the EDSP.

At the larger scale of education policy, one interviewee declared that

"We need to concentrate on quality rather than quantitative measures of education.. our students lack creativity, critical thinking and holistic development... the classical educational model is not surviving and is not a solution to our problem. Reviving the system is almost impossible due to lack of funding so it cannot be revived. Our only option is to innovate in ways that meet the needs of our context. Neither is there research or documentation to really investigate alternative models of approach"

Whilst another asserted that

"We need to develop models that are associated with low cost implications and involve stakeholders. These models will lead to better outcomes.. There is no system or direction in place towards solving our problems. There are no solutions and this is what we need [for real and tangible reform]".

It is evident that the MOEHE needs to self evaluate the current system with the collaboration of stakeholders, to identify our actual and tangible capacity, our resources, understanding our weak points and turning them into strengths by truly evaluating what we have, what we don't and reflect on our position in education and decide how we want to get there and propose the solutions accordingly. Greater focus is required in truly understanding the characteristics we seek in our students and accordingly plan for long term development in education. Such an evaluation requires greater focus from within the system to truly reflect the context. It is also a definite quality precondition to have local evaluators more involved as they have a much better grasp of local needs.

Even though the Ministry has aimed to increase decentralization of government practices, most NGO's felt that this was not happening on ground. They also felt that the MOEHE are rigid, not open to new ideas and consistently seek greater involvement in the NGO's, which at times has hampered the work of NGO's and at a larger level diminishes the level of collaboration. In more extreme cases may increase distrust between both sides.

One interviewee stated *"There is more and more centralization so NGO's cannot approach the Ministry. Even if it is not necessarily part of the national system staff are still bureaucratic and issues are left to the discretion of staff moods"*,

Another stated that *"the MOEHE still widely practices bureaucracy and long procedures. They interfere and want larger involvement [with the work of NGO's]"* Another interviewee asserted

"I hope the ministry can stop being an obstacle, they want to implement all the programs, if for example, a good project came through, the ministry wants to implement it.. most often than not it gets lost in the system and between departments. There are institutions that can implement the project, they have the capacity and the system, why do we not utilize them".

Role of NGO's in the Educational Process

NGO's asserted that greater coordination and cooperation needs to be substantiated between the Ministry and local NGO's. One interviewee, said that *"the Ministry has better relations with International agencies than local NGO's"* in that the former tend to take precedence in participation

and involvement in policy meetings than the latter, and similarly possess a much larger stake and role in vocalizing policy issues. Others asserted that the Ministry do not involve NGOs to the extent required for greater impact in the educational process as a whole, and in specific to strategic planning in education, especially those carried out through steering committees or networks or even joint meetings. Conversely, those who acknowledged the presence of NGO's in certain networks or steering committee, felt that their role is weak and that their involvement is "*superficial*" and more so as a "*decorative status*". Whilst it is acknowledged and vital that international expertise in subject matters are vital for educational exchanges especially with regards to enhancing international models of best practices in education, it does not however confront core context problems evident in Palestine through the eyes of local stakeholders, be it NGO's or field educationalists, and thus creating total asymmetries in developing a real national strategy.

NGO's also felt that there are negative sentiments towards them from the Ministry's side. The reasons suggested is that this could be due to a lack of interest from the Ministry in terms of utilizing NGO expertise, or that the ministry is not entirely convinced in adopting or integrating NGO's in the overall process or a misunderstanding between the two sides in terms of the partnership that should take place, in terms of its form, its shape and the expectations of the other, or due to the lack of transparency and accountability from the NGO's side that may have tarnished the local NGO sector. Despite the reasons behind this gap, theoretically, there is a comprehensive educational plan in Palestine and the work domain of both educational NGO's and the Ministry are complementary, however, in practice there is still a feeling among some of those interviewed that NGO's "*do not know where they stand in the process*" and they are "*disempowered as potential agents of change*". Such a discrepancy evidently marginalizes the work of NGO's from necessarily fitting into the greater national development plan of educational reform at a larger scale and not merely in terms of developing education projects they implement as part of their daily work at their organizations (i.e. at the micro-scale of educational development).

NGOs see that the MOEHE have the overall responsibility of education and that NGO's have the space, flexibility and capacity to work, implement projects and develop. Linking the two sides together can evidently enforce better work and meeting real needs. NGO's feel that they should be filling the gaps in the educational system in line with the government not, as described by one interviewee "*working for the government*". Filling Gaps, such that NGO's take on specific areas to decrease the Ministry's load, according to the specialization/field and capacity. This enables the taking over of fundamental qualitative priority issues not being tackled by the government due to both monetary and non-monetary resource restrictions and its heavy load in terms of educational reform, thus complementing the vision of the government, creating positive and joint assistance and achieving real constructive change. As things stand, NGO's highlighted their disempowerment as core service providers and that they are not perceived by the Ministry as real partners of change.

The way the system currently stands, this form of cooperation is a clear missed opportunity. Should this opportunity be pursued, the work load of reform can be dispersed upon all educational institutions, carry a load off the governments back, and facilitates greater development towards real reform in areas that may be left abandoned even though clear reform needs to take place. This will also create greater support, understanding and most importantly trust, that is very much needed to dampen conflict or opposition that have risen in the past, or that may arise in the future between the two sides.

On the flip side of the coin, NGO's are not entirely clear in terms of their own faults. One interviewee stated that the problems with NGO's is that they have

"not renewed themselves.. [NGO's] are unilateral in ownership, by which the same individuals have headed organizations since establishment.. [NGO's] are not effective at the moment because they are not vocally critical and often resort to "soft criticism" towards the PNA. NGO's have also not turned into national mobilization and the lack of transparency evident has weakened NGO credibility"

The interviewee asserted that reinvigoration and increased enrichment is needed for NGO programs and projects, as some offer “*superficial programs*” and “*must deepen their scope of work for greater effectiveness*”. If greater coordination and partnership is cherished between both the NGO’s and the PNA, through a joint vision of prioritizing educational issues, not only will it enable the work load to be dispersed, but will also enable NGO’s to deepen programs and ensure they are in line with priority educational issues, creating increased efficiency from both sides, enhances greater social, public and government acceptance towards the absorption of NGO’s and linking it in the overall educational process, thus, widening the base of NGO sharing responsibility with the PNA and enhancing accountability on both sides. It has also been stated that NGO’s require financial independence from the PNA in order to operate more effectively.

It is also just as important here to scrutinise the level of civil society and educational stakeholders engagement in the overall process. As several interviewees took the argument further than asserting that a clear understanding of “true and real” partnership does not exist between the government and NGO’s; affirming that nor does it exist with the government and its surrounding environment. Surrounding environment in this sense refers not only to NGO’s/CBO’s, but also to core players of the educational process in the civil society, i.e. other educational stakeholders, such as parent councils, educational field experts, even parents and teachers. Unless the government fuses together educational stakeholders in the educational process, i.e. including their voices in constructing ideas, implementing it, evaluating it and reflecting on the inputs and outcomes jointly, the government will effectively preclude social human capital from the educational process. Parent councils were specifically highlighted as an untapped and fundamental resource that should possess a greater stake in the educational process as they can play a focal role in educational strategies and also help schools in achieving many of their objectives. One interviewee stated that parent councils are currently being contained by the Ministry in which the latter has direct control of the council, hampering council effectiveness on the one hand, and adversely impeding on democratic processes taking place in parental elections on the other, thus preventing the democratic election of highly capable parents who possess a superior educational vision. It had thus been affirmed that the government must establish a means to activate the participation of such bodies as core partners and facilitate their effectiveness rather than hamper or cripple their participation. This facilitation should also include the independency of parent councils from the ministry in order to substantiate their role in objectively monitoring and speaking out on perceived shortfalls in the education system. If parent councils are provided with the space to become more active, influential and independent, it is expected that this will result in generating greater civil society integration and engagement in the educational process and will more importantly unleash social capital synergies. This line of thinking can also be applied to various educational stakeholders as well as parent councils, such that Palestinian educational public policy becomes informed by a wide range of local actors and educational stakeholders who are intrinsically part of the process and understand educational needs.

The still perceived lack of coordination between NGO’s (as well as educational stakeholders) and the government complicates any tangible moves towards real national policy development. It is evident that NGO’s see that a non-hierarchical exchange needs to take place between both to facilitate greater support, negotiation, understanding and involvement between the two, and is also the only way to legitimize the role of various actors in Palestine and unify the development agenda in which work projects are strengthened between one another, sharing a vision of togetherness rather than competition. This policy platform does not currently exist and should be properly utilized so that NGO’s focus their attention on the evident gaps, but specifically the gaps considered as priority areas.

The governance model that should be adopted should seek public policy informed by a wide range of local actors. This will allow strategic interactions and partnerships with stakeholders, non-state actors and civil society, and not fully depend on pure interactions between the government and international agencies as seen by several. Collective action in this sense will dampen conflict and enhance the level of interaction required for constructive organization for real policy reform and

towards a common objective. Moreover, creativity is needed in dealing with the current educational challenges and constraints. The limitations of the government not being able to implement activities in Jerusalem for example, require the concoction of alternative solutions, which again can be carried out with the joint vision of educational stakeholders.

Research

Research in this domain has been highlighted as an important solution. Most NGO's asserted that alternative models of education need to be put in place in order to find solutions for the educational problems bearing in mind the political and economic constraints evident in the educational system. Collaborative research has been asserted as an important driving force to *"build on what is already there and learn from one other. starting from the grassroots"*. The lack of local research publications has hampered innovative and progressive means to advance the knowledge base for real educational development. It is evident that greater research can identify and offset shortfalls in the educational system and propose methods and alternatives for change, however, the current environment is restricted to the lack of progressive high quality work and funding in this domain as a whole.

Teaching and Teacher Conditions

The most recurring theme outlined as a major priority area in need of immediate reform referred to teacher and teaching conditions. The conditions of teaching and for teachers have been emphasized most as a crucial quality measure that needs to be tackled first and foremost.

As a teaching profession, the *"lack of respect"* and *"stigma"* correlated to the teaching profession in Palestine is seen as a major force in repelling good candidates entering the profession and disgruntling teachers already in the profession. It has been asserted that the stigma has become a widely associated social phenomenon related to low salaries, lack of incentives available for teachers and low qualifications of teachers. According to one interviewee, low salaries, lack of incentives and poor teaching conditions is *"affecting teacher loyalty and motivation to teaching"*. One asserted that *"such conditions are perpetuating high teacher attrition rates"*, whilst another emphasized *"teachers have to work two jobs to make ends meet. Let alone the teaching work load already present"*. Teachers having to seek further employment to compensate for their low wages as we have seen not only decreases teacher motivation and loyalty to the profession but also increases teacher stress of having to juggle two jobs at any given time. Clearly, a high cost to pay for the educational system, not only for having to train new teachers but also at the cost of quality education for the students.

Teaching in schools is seen as *"authoritarian and dictative"*, while teacher qualification levels and ability have been described as *"poor"* and *"limited"*. One interviewee stated that *"ignorance in teaching methods is a problem and teachers are unable to put information across to students during in-service teaching"*. If teachers are failing to 'put information across to students' this questions the degree of teachers achieving transactional levels of teaching. Transactional teaching is achieved when students are only expected to synthesize the information given by the teacher, in other words, pure information intake and retention of students. The very basic condition of an educational system is achieving at the least, minimal levels of transactional teaching/learning. If this is the case, then there is a clear problem not only with the fact that the teaching methodology used is heavily instructor-centred but that Palestinian teachers have not necessarily reached basic 'transactional teaching levels'. This puts the current educational standard of teaching at a double disadvantage, the first is that teaching is not necessarily reaching the basic level of student information intake, teaching in Palestinian schools is evidently highly instructor-centred leaving no room for creativity, thinking outside the box or enhancing critical thinking among students, thus, making it much more difficult to reach higher levels of educational practice. Given that educational literature is focusing more on higher educational teaching practices emphasizing a move away from transactional teaching

methods towards more learner focused methods that can be achieved through transformational teaching methodologies and styles that capacitate students towards critical inquiry, means that the second disadvantage lies in the fact that the level of teaching in Palestine has a long way to go in terms of reaching transformative teaching styles.

The solutions to achieving at least basic transactional teaching levels can be carried out through raising qualification standards of teachers through training in teaching pedagogies and not just by expertise in subject area. While there is a good move from the Ministry and Universities in raising quality standards as seen in the previous section, bearing in mind that training is still required on diverse teaching and learning methods and applied to all science and social science subject areas and all grades, and applied by all Universities in Palestine. Furthermore, it is imperative that teachers acquire more practical in-class training in schools as part of rigour training prior to teaching. This may somewhat solve the problems of new teachers in the profession but does not solve the problem of teachers already in the system. Programs for rehabilitation in teaching techniques need to be implemented for teachers who are already in the system and lack good teaching practices. This can be carried out through teaching training and enrichment programs, in addition to enhancing control and creating an accreditation and monitoring system. It is also important that accreditation or monitoring is not conducted by supervisors as a method of 'slashing teaching abilities' or a perquisite for expulsion, but a process in which a teacher is able to gain full support from the school and supervisory district. There is currently no accreditation system in place, diminishing the level of educational control on the one hand, and the ability to assess and evaluate teacher performance on the other. Furthermore, teachers' professional development should not only be seen as a one-off development process but a continuous process. Teachers should be given support throughout the life time of their career which is currently not the case. There should be a support unit for teachers to fall back on, low-cost initiatives can entail a teacher network in which teachers can jointly reflect on their expertise, experiences, exchange knowledge and methods. While more costly initiatives can entail supervisor support, continuous in-service trainings and accreditation. The development of teacher also allows for early identification of problems within the classroom.

It is also just as important to reward teachers and thus, keep incentive and motivation high. This can be carried out through various means; if teachers are appraised then good teaching practices can be reported on and tested. Teachers know their students best, listening to teachers more can narrow this gap. This also requires a degree of openness and leadership from principles to acknowledge and recognize successful teaching methods in their schools. It is also simultaneously important to attract talented teachers into the education system, and reward those who are succeeding in the classroom. Moreover, it is important that teachers feel ownership, one interviewee stated "*that teachers need more space, leadership and authority than what is currently granted to them*"; providing teachers with this sense of ownership can enhance their leadership skills and increase motivation. More importantly, increased ownership teachers are also better able to serve for their pupils if they are given this flexibility, as they know their pupils best and are more familiar with their needs.

Curriculum

Curriculum and teaching 'go hand-in-hand' in developing students at the cognitive level and in terms of creating students with self-learning, problem solving and reflexive skills. The curriculum has been described as "*lacking in relevance*", "*lacking in excitement in attracting student engagement*", "*entirely based on memorization*", "*lacking in the enhancement of ideas such as acceptance, tolerance or even providing students with various cultural and religious perspectives*" and "*marginalizing other cultures*". Relevance is double faceted; it can refer to the relevance of relating to the student and context, and on a holistic level can refer to the relevance to the needs of a society and the development of future human resources within this context. Both sides of the relevance argument have been highlighted as inadequate in the interviews. Matching these arguments in line to those we have also already seen in the previous section, it is clear that at the current level, Palestinian students are only expected to

synthesise the information given by the teacher (i.e. the very basic condition of learning). Greater emphasis is therefore, required in not only reinvigorating teaching styles to transformational teaching methods (as discussed), but also reinvigorating the curriculum such that students are more exposed to critical analysis, problem solving and reflexive thinking within the curricular content itself, thus taking students beyond the level of pure informational intake per se and towards critical inquiry, ultimately leading to both increased levels of student involvement and interest in the subject and material and secondly facilitates higher orders of cognitive learning.

Constructivist pedagogy asserts that *“a learning environment must enable students to search for meaning, appreciate uncertainty and inquire responsibly”* (Jackson 1993, p.v). The Palestinian curriculum lacking relevance and excitement highlights students’ inability to search for meaning in the concepts learnt. Moreover, the focus on memorization in the current curriculum also hampers students’ retention of information, which is highlighted in Katz’s research, in which he found that emphasis on performance and ‘spoon-feeding education’ results in minimal long-term recollection, whereas a focus on learning results facilitates long-term understanding and ability to use the concepts and information out of the classroom (Katz, 1985). Given that the curriculum focuses greatly on memorisation and spoon feeding as evident from the interviews, it is unsurprising therefore that Palestinian students either lack understanding of the content material as they are unable to relate or search for meaning within the content taught and studied; or tend to have minimal recollection of taught material due to the spoon feeding characteristic of both the curriculum and teaching styles of teachers they are exposed to in classrooms; or a mixture of both factors. In all cases, these two factors ultimately hamper students’ interest in the syllabus material. It is therefore imperative that the Palestinian curriculum thus requires a change in transforming student from being passive information takers in classrooms to active participants of the learning process, which can only be carried out through involving students more in the curricular content through the acquisition of their interest and allowing for greater content probing by the students. In order to achieve this, the curricular content must be revised accordingly and teaching styles of teachers must be adapted in order to match this requirement.

Classroom openness is highly valued and crucial in the general education process and classroom environments in specific. Several interview respondents highlighted the lack of openness evident in Palestinian classrooms, in which classroom environments are rigid and do not enforce openness. Lack of openness hampers students’ ability to think in more sophisticated ways or to feel safe in making mistakes without embarrassment or reprisal. Classroom openness has relatively no associated cost and merely requires teachers to enhance this characteristic within their classrooms and within their teaching methods. It is therefore, imperative that the government takes this role in fostering greater intellectual openness in classrooms by increasing teacher’s awareness of the importance of it and take the lead role in ensuring its proper facilitation within each educational directorate. This does not necessarily require training of any kind and may be carried out through teacher-principal meetings at schools.

Moving away from the technical aspect of the curriculum in developing purely the cognitive learning of students and towards the holistic development of students, one must scrutinise all factors that are interlinked to the learning process, i.e. the role of thinking (cognitive), feeling (affective) and inner reflection/intuition (spiritual); all of which are interlinked to the learning process (as seen in Cove’s analysis (Cove, 1996)). The interviewees highlighted the lack of holistic characteristic development of the pupils from an intellectual, social, spiritual, physical and emotional aspect of wellbeing. One interview asserted that *“holistic development is interconnected with the learning process and must be integrated into the educational process”* while another stated that *“the importance of physical education, extracurricular activities and non-formal education are being neglected. even though they enhance the total well-being of students”*; *“little focus is given to physical education even though it is an important aspect in developing the child”*. Schools do not take these lessons seriously, when asked why, *“recreational facilities are not enough in schools, or there is a lack of safe areas”*, *“inability to*

utilize recreational facilities after school or lack of incentive from teachers in giving more time to students for extracurricular activities”.

Violence in schools has also been emphasized as a major problem affecting the holistic development of children and must be counteracted through the curriculum. Another interviewee further asserted that

“Students hate school, we need to improve the environment at schools to make them love and be loyal to their schools. For example, the last day of school should be a fun day not an exam-based day, we need to cherish an enjoyable last day of schooling for students, leaving them with a nice memory of their teachers and stop routine in schools. The school activities are too traditional”

Such statements emphasize that schools are not playing the dual role it is meant to play in enhancing students' cognitive order on the one hand, and enhancing holistic development on the other. At the moment, the cognitive dimension of students is only currently seen as the cornerstone of the learning process in Palestine, even though the pure mental aspects of students does not really assess other student skills or learning outcomes. Furthermore, this pure concentration on curriculum, finishing the syllabus and spoon feeding is taking over at the expense and neglect of the holistic dimension of education. One may also argue that this may be contributing to students overall detestation towards schooling and towards learning. Since learning can be facilitated or hampered by emotions as emotions drive learning and memory (as seen in Cove, 1996) and depressed mood states are correlated with decreased motivation in classrooms (ibid). Therefore, students' detest of school may also be contributing to their lack of motivation in classrooms. Similarly, schools are for learning and not for forcing, it should enrich students rather than force or dictate ideas. It is therefore, imperative that schools and teaching become more attractive to students and by allowing an element of fun in schools. It is also noted that many schools in Palestine do indeed suffer from lack of recreational facilities such as playgrounds and at times when these facilities are available they are not completely utilised. What is important is that real measures are carried out towards appreciating subjects that students deem enjoyable, such as physical education, art or drama etc, and not neglected at the expense of completing the specified syllabus or neglected for any other reason. Furthermore, extra-curricular classes or activities are just as important and should be integrated to the schooling process as they are able to inject this element of fun whilst developing the holistic well-being of students.

Values is an intrinsic aspect of pupil development and cross cuts holistic character development. Most of the interviewees had directly or indirectly touched on the lack of value-related concepts in the Palestinian curriculum on the one hand, and the lack of values upheld by pupils themselves on the other. The interviews affirmed that the curriculum lacks enhancement to codes of values and related virtues such as respect, acceptance, tolerance and diversity in the curriculum. The inability to provide students with various cultural and religious perspectives/insights was also discussed, some of whom described it as the 'marginalisation' of other cultures or a mere lack of exposure to other cultural beliefs, traditions and virtues. More importantly however, is the emphasis placed on the phenomenon of increased violence in schools, which is unsurprisingly considered as a pivotal aspect. The redundancy of value related codes had been suggested as one of several but fundamental aspects contributing to increased violence in schools and increased juvenile delinquency; while another had taken the argument much further asserting that higher levels of moral degeneration are becoming visibly more apparent in Palestine in terms of respect, violence and tolerance at the micro level, and the rise of factionalism and general familial, social and political-based dissidence at the macro level. This moral regression is in essence considered to be stripping pupils away from superior values related to virtuous conduct and behaviour who possess a real concern and regard for individual as well as social welfare and wellbeing (including the well being and welfare of their community/nation), i.e. values of being good 'citizens' so to speak, and towards a general disregard to public welfare. In essence underlining that deep-rooted values, ideas and attitude are changing negatively and causing greater repercussions.

Values can be influenced by a broad range of factors including the immediate environment be it the cultural, social and familial environment, the curriculum or the schooling environment, among others. Such values can be instilled and nourished in students by the method of providing students with the ability to think, ponder and interpret critically by enhancing higher orders of learning in which students are empowered to think more openly, question and reflect on self value and social/environmental values, allowing students to reach self judgements in constructing and restructuring their knowledge of the community in which they live including inner self virtue even when it diverges from the values upheld under the status quo. The second method of instilling such values directly relate to curricular content. Values in education have often been left for traditional subjects that deal with daily values and conduct, such as religious education and/or civic education, even though many educationalists have in essence called for the inclusion of related values to all subject areas. It is therefore imperative that the Ministry takes a stand towards enhancing values in the educational environment to counteract the apparent erosion. Civic education should not be marginalised or considered of less value to students, instead should be used to seed virtue in students on the one hand and used to cultivate social and community cohesion on the other. In order to also increase the efficiency of teaching virtue and values to students it is also imperative that the education maintains a balance between the theory learnt and practice in order to mitigate deviations. This should be done by giving more value to subjects such as civic education and by similarly giving value to civic education teachers. Civic education teachers must use this subject to foster, cultivate and infuse good values and the Ministry must similarly allocate qualified and specific teachers for the subject, contrary to current practices as generally any teacher is allocated to teach the module and in most cases 'civic education' is 'thrown upon' them, hence it is unsurprising if the teachers are additionally uninterested in teaching the module and thus negatively impacting on the quality of instruction. More importantly however, is that these teachers in effect are unable to reap the benefits that this module can provide for the students.

Mainstreaming Gender in the Curriculum

Gender remains a much deliberated focus of many educationalists and NGO's, and is also one of the 2nd pillars the government seeks to improve as stated in the strategic plan, yet this issue remains a contested subject among NGO circles in that little improvements have been materialised in this domain and most notable achievements have been substantiated merely in quantitative measures, such as, achieving as close to gender parity as possible in enrolment rates or dropout rates etc. Most contested however, that core improvements in gender mainstreaming have not taken place because core root changes are required in terms of not only quality measures but also the 'hidden curriculum', i.e. the norms, values and social expectations conveyed through school and non-school settings and even through the organisational characteristic of educational institutions and the ministry of education.

In terms of quality curricular measures, the interviewees highlighted that gender stereotyping are profusely apparent in the curriculum and changes need to be addressed, not only of written curricular content and texts but also in terms of imagery or the unconscious prejudices that may exist within the material (be it text, picture, symbolism or imagery). Gender mainstreaming would therefore have to take its shape in the content, methodologies and processes of the curriculum. However, mainstreaming gender in the curriculum cannot solve gender prejudices alone and also requires a degree of gender sensitisation from teachers, principals and educationalists within the school environment in order to ensure that gender prejudices are not reproduced within classrooms by teachers or in the schooling environment by teachers, principals and educationalists. Gender prejudices in the overall educational environment can in effect counteract measures towards gender neutrality learnt through the curriculum. This can also be counteracted by the hidden curriculum, as one of the interviewees affirmed that non-material educational inputs related to the environment, or even the representation of women in decision making processes in the educational body, do not reflect real changes or moves towards gender mainstreaming and sensitisation in the educational process and merely reflects formal pernickety [i.e. nominal formality which is substantially false] in

gender mainstreaming. In terms of the hidden curriculum, much emphasis needs to be also given to institutional settings, such as involving more adequately qualified women in decision making, or in higher levels of education management to reflect a real move towards gender sensitization in the overall educational environment.

More importantly however, is that if real core changes need to take place in terms of gender, it is imperative that changes in the curriculum must be accompanied by solid educationalists dedicated towards this reform who will in turn carry it through. Ultimately it is the educationalists and social support that may facilitate or cripple the process towards reform in gender issues. Since the Ministry seeks this move, it cannot suffice by merely concentrating on quantitative measures of gender parity and neglecting quality measures or the hidden curriculum; none of which are apparent or discussed in the strategic plan.

Conclusion

This report has shown the importance of creating greater coordination and cooperation between the Ministry and local NGO's and creating such a solid linkage can enforce better work and meet real needs. It is also evident that the latter should possess a much larger stake and role in vocalizing policy issues which can dampen asymmetries in developing a real national strategy in education. NGO's and grassroots movements should be utilized and empowered as core agents of change as they possess expertise in their given fields and the capacity to implement sound projects. If real NGO utilization is to take place they need to be filling the gaps in the education sector. It is evident that the governance model that should be adopted should seek public policy informed by a wide range of local actors and enforce a non-hierarchical exchange to take place between NGO's, stakeholders and the government for strategic interactions of partnerships, support and involvement. Similarly, it is evident that greater space is needed by the MOEHE in allowing NGO's the space to work, especially with regards to intervention, bureaucracy and long governmental procedures. Greater coordination and partnership of a joint vision of educational prioritization between the NGO sector and MOEHE will allow work load in reform to be dispensed between the two partners and similarly deepen NGO programs to ensure they are in line with priority strategies. It is also just as important to create alternative models and solutions in dealing with current contextual restrictions, this includes monetary restrictions, occupational restrictions, resource limitations and the PNA's limitations of dealing with education in Jerusalem or Area C.

The completion of a strategic plan is a positive step towards visualizing and reporting on educational issues that need to be addressed and reformed in Palestine and the MOEHE's intention of developmental reform has been acknowledged. However, the areas that require greater focus include, setting forth priority areas of education in the EDSP, thus breaking down reform into priority segments based on finding of a needs-assessment and should mirror the actual implementation process, the direction the MOEHE is taking towards educational reform and how it fits into the holistic development process. It should also provide solutions to these problems. It is evident that NGO's see that all educational stakeholders need to be involved as core contributors in the educational process and their opinion need to be reflected on during educational reform decisions, moving towards a more bottom-up educational approach. Furthermore, financial constraints have crippled the educational process of reform, thus unless the educational budgets are increased, this problem will be longitudinally sustained and many areas of educational reform stated in the EDSP will remain unchanged. It is evident that the MOEHE needs to self evaluate the current system with the collaboration of stakeholders, to identify actual and tangible capacity, resources and ways in which reform can be achieved given the heavy constraints and propose solutions accordingly.

It is evident that gravest concern among NGOs are the problems related to quality education, in specific, teaching and teacher conditions, curriculum and research. A cross cutting area is the need for increasing standards and performance, greater follow up and monitoring and evaluation for all three problems.

There is growing consensus among educators and researchers that the most important factor in the performance of students relate back to the teachers ability and quality. It is thus unsurprising that teaching and teacher conditions have been extensively highlighted among those interviewed. The concerns raised with regards to teaching and teacher conditions, include the poor social status of teaching in Palestine; quality of teaching and the lack of qualifications standards; lack of incentives provided to teachers; poor teaching conditions with regards to resources; and low teacher loyalty and motivation toward teaching. Teaching has also been reported as authoritarian, dictative and heavily instructor-centred leaving no room for creativity, openness or enhancing critical inquiry among students. It is evident that the gaps in these areas are hampering improvements in the quality of students.

As for the curriculum, its relevancy and inability to enhance higher orders of cognitive levels of students is not developing the holistic characteristics of pupils in intellectual, social, spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing. There are additional concerns over the neglect of extra-curricular and non-formal education in the educational process. It is clear that the curriculum has not reached the levels of creating students with self-learning, problem solving and reflexive skills neither does it capture student interest. It is thus imperative that a change is required in transforming student from being pure passive information takers in classrooms to active participants of the learning process by moving away from spoon feeding education.

Recommendations

- The MOEHE should take in its stride enhancing the role of NGO's and educational stakeholders in the process of educational reform and refer to local NGOs on at least equal par with international agencies, if not higher, for increased context relevance and context creativity to dampen perceived asymmetries in the current national strategy and plan.
- The educational strategic plan must be formulated such that it specifies areas of educational priority given the limited amount of financial resources available with the contribution of local stakeholders and NGOs. Upon the agreement of policy areas the role of NGOs must be clearly marked into the overall plan. The roles can then be divided between NGOs and the Ministry of Education, such that NGOs take over core developmental issues in areas of expertise of the NGO that the Ministry cannot carry out due to financial constraints. If roles are clearly stated under the approval of the Ministry of Education and clear partnership and cooperation is emphasized between the two sides, this dampens conflict of interest and enforces cooperation towards a joint vision and goal. Schools can then directly contact NGOs in areas of need, depending on the NGOs expertise. This will also deepen and enrich NGO programs to meet the national plans for development and needs.
- To unify the educational vision of NGOs with that of the MOEHE's. Unifying the vision and process of reforming educational inputs between NGOs and the MOEHE will enable collaboration and the division of the work load and enable NGOs to fill the gaps in education and make strategic goals more work-effective and more attainable.
- Greater understanding is required regarding the social and economic priorities and then translating them into a feasible educational work plan to be implemented by the government and local NGOs together.
- To diagnose the real problems in education by carrying out a thorough and realistic needs assessment to diagnose weaknesses. Furthermore, planning according to the limited monetary and non-monetary resources such that the diagnosis is realistic and adaptable. Moreover, operating entities should be interlinked with funding to allow for the realistic sustainability of educational goals; followed by increasing accountability and holding those accountable to ensure that inputs, outputs are linked to educational outcomes and impact.
- The MOEHE should implement greater rigidity in the laws and structures to further decentralization, decrease bureaucracy and long procedures of work processes. The MOEHE should also grant NGOs greater financial independence for increased efficiency.
- The MOEHE needs to focus more on the qualitative aspects of schools in Palestine rather than the quantitative aspects. If qualitative improvements cannot be achieved due to financial restrictions, then the MOEHE should consider outsourcing to NGO's or appealing to the private sector for financial assistance.

- Innovative and alternative education models should be concocted in dealing with current educational constraints in Palestine; the models should be characteristically cost efficient and deal with the current financial and infrastructural constraints, these models can be the product of teachers, principals, NGO's, the MOEHE, or joint partnerships between the various stakeholders. The MOEHE should also allocate expenditure, specifically for research and development, in this area and encourage the private sector in assisting with such financing and universities and research institutes in allocating more research towards educational solutions.
- To introduce a functioning accreditation system that both monitors and evaluates school systems, whilst serving the purpose for quality control and regulating standards. The accreditation should aim to carry out early identification of problems at the field level; ensure that there is educational follow up throughout; and also serve as a support base for teachers and schools alike. It should also institutionalise a law to provide various types of supports and interventions to schools, such as technical assistance, again this can be carried out with the help of NGO's.
- To legally institutionalise teaching on pedagogical and teaching techniques in all Palestinian Universities offering teaching degrees in all subject areas and in training courses for newly qualified teachers. It should consist of both training in diverse teaching methodologies and emphasize practical in-classroom training as part of the teaching degree, prior to entering the profession. The in-classroom training should take place for, at the least, one full university term and constitute a graduation requirement. The students should be supported, accompanied and mentored by trained educational mentors/experts (who have already been trained, who are experienced and who are considered teaching experts).
- To raise standards for teachers already in the profession by implementing comprehensive training courses in diverse teaching methodologies and techniques for teachers with an emphasis of turning teachers into reflexive practitioners.
- To establish greater teacher support for teachers throughout their careers to deal with educational challenges and establishing a medium of exchange between teachers to reflect on their experiences and allow for peer-to-peer teaching exchanges. This will automatically enhance the professional development of teachers at low costs.
- To shift away from instructor-centred learning approaches and towards pupil-centred approaches.
- To enhance principal leadership skills to recognize and report on successful teaching practices already evident in schools so that successful models are reported on, experimented on and subsequently scaled up and implemented across the country. Provide schools and teachers with a reward system to encourage principals and teacher to seek best practicing models being used in their schools. Teachers should also have the space to experiment their styles to understand what works best and what does not. Encouraging ownership and independence is a way of incentivising teachers, keeping morale high and bringing out the best in teachers.
- To provide teachers with incentives or a reward system to retain good teachers and raise the social status of teaching in Palestine to attract good candidates to the profession.
- To improving work conditions of teachers through lowering classroom over crowdedness and lowering the work load of teachers.

- To assess and identify what kind of students the educational system wants to produce, identify key reform areas and develop accordingly ensuring that the type of learners that should be developed need to fulfil current and future life needs in Palestine.
- Education needs to develop the holistic character of students at all levels of education because schools need to play the dual of enhancing students' cognitive order but enhancing holistic development. Initiatives with no associated cost should start in schools with valuing subjects such as physical education, arts, music or drama. This can also be carried out by increasing extra-curricular activities for students in schools. Increasing non-formal educational activities is also important but is associated with higher costs. Accordingly, the education and instruction system, including the designs of textbooks, focus on developing modes of thinking where problem solving can be enhanced.
- Concentration on curriculum and finishing the syllabus in the allocated time should not take over at the expense and neglect of the holistic dimension of education and the holistic development of students.
- The Ministry must enhance individual and social values in the educational environment and curriculum to counteract the apparent erosion; whilst utilising school subjects such as civic education to seed virtue in students, enhance their concern to public welfare and cultivate social and community cohesion.
- Gender mainstreaming in the curriculum must take its shape in the content, methodologies and processes of the curriculum, in other words, content (written curricular content/text, imagery, picture or symbolism); unconscious prejudices that may exist within the material or within the system; quality indicators and the hidden curriculum. The curriculum must also be accompanied by solid educationalists dedicated towards gender reform.
- To revise the curriculum so that it is based less on memorisation and on the contrary, allows students to search for meaning in the taught material and exposes them to greater levels of critical analysis, problem solving and reflexive thinking; or devise curricular enrichment materials to be used in line with the curriculum.

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