

## **“A Cultural Occupation?” UNRWA’s Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance Programme: Perspectives from Balata Camp**

By Gabriella Pinto ([gabriella.elaine.pinto@gmail.com](mailto:gabriella.elaine.pinto@gmail.com))

### **Contextualization**

In recent years, human rights education (HRE) has been increasingly employed as a core component of peace education programming in societies enduring or recovering from conflict. Advocates champion HRE as an effective vehicle to promote tolerance and reconciliation (e.g. Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Hicks, 1997) and even explicitly to curb extremism (Davies, 2008). Yet an aim of this study is to problematize this increasingly prevalent use of HRE, arguing that such ‘coexistence’ (Bajaj, 2011) programmes are often too narrow in their understanding of the drivers of conflict – focused largely on addressing interpersonal animosity with insufficient regard for broader structural inequities. If a HRE programme is built around such a limited understanding of conflict – one that may often be sharply incongruous with participants’ own lived experience – the programme may alienate, or even antagonize, teachers and learners.

**Abstract:** *This study centres on HRE in the Palestinian context, specifically the Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance (HRCRT) Programme instituted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Working from a critical perspective, the study seeks firstly to examine this curriculum in relation to the broader discourses around Israel/Palestine and secondly to explore Palestinian responses. The study employs a combination of qualitative research methods, including document analysis of UNRWA’s policy framework and curriculum materials, as well as focus groups/interviews conducted with teachers and students in the West Bank. The study finds evidence that UNRWA’s HRCRT curriculum, premised on a profound misunderstanding of the ‘problem’ in Israel/Palestine, seeks not to assist learners in claiming their rights, but rather to reform Palestinian attitudes and ‘culture.’ Perceptions of this curriculum among the students and teachers interviewed are largely negative, and across all demographic groups, broad agreement is evident that UNRWA’s curriculum fails to meet students’ needs by refusing to engage with, or even acknowledge, Palestinians’ daily reality of ubiquitous rights violations.*

### **Introduction**

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a powerful consensus around the use of HRE as a tool of peace-building. In 1993, the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights officially proclaimed HRE to be essential for the “promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance, and peace” (UN). The Vienna Declaration, followed rapidly by other significant international conventions celebrating the benefits of HRE (UN, 1995; UN, 2005), gave strong impetus to the use of HRE as an intervention in conflict/post-conflict contexts. Throughout the 1990s, HRE became an increasingly prominent component of UN peace-building efforts, including in Cambodia, Guatemala, Bosnia, and East Timor (Holland, 2010). HRE was also adopted as a post-conflict strategy at the state level – for example, in Northern Ireland (Smith, 2011) – and a myriad of NGOs, both international and local, began to incorporate HRE into their post-conflict programming. With HRE embraced by such a diversity of actors, it is now widely

agreed that HRE is a crucial ingredient in “establish[ing] the infrastructure” (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009, p.564) for a transition to a peaceful, stable society.

Yet the enthusiasm for HRE as a component of peace-building elides the significant distinctions among HRE programmes in their ideological leanings, particularly their conceptualizations of conflict and peace. Any HRE programme – even one which does not explicitly address the details of a given conflict – will inevitably be structured around a specific understanding of the causes of conflict and the strategies necessary to address them. This understanding, in turn, will infuse and inform the content and goals of the HRE curriculum.

This study seeks to explore the ways in which both the form and impact of a HRE programme are mediated by the curriculum’s assumptions regarding the nature of conflict and peace. The study focuses specifically on the Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance (HRCRT) Programme introduced by UNRWA in 2001 into its schools for Palestinian refugees. The study works firstly to situate this programme in relation to dominant discourses around Israel/Palestine and to examine the extent to which the curriculum’s messaging may be informed by these discourses. Secondly, the study seeks to explore Palestinian students’ and teachers’ perceptions of, and responses to, this curriculum.

In pursuing these dual research objectives, the study works to contribute to the scant existent literature on UNRWA’s HRE programming. Despite the scale of UNRWA’s programme – which is taught in every grade in every school in each of UNRWA’s five fields of operation (West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon) – it has received remarkably little academic attention. The study seeks secondly, and far more modestly, to contribute to the growing body of literature which approaches the use of HRE in peace-building with a more sceptical eye.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

This study adopts a critical perspective and is informed by the work of critical education theorists (Apple, 1978, 1990; Cherryholmes, 1988; Giroux & Aronowitz, 1993) on the interrelationship between knowledge and power and the way this relationship may manifest in curricula, as well as the broader structures of schooling. I follow these theorists in suggesting that the content of a curriculum is never neutral or objectively determined, but rather choices as to what is taught and what is not are inevitably ideological and value-laden. As Apple notes, “the language of learning tends to be apolitical and ahistorical, thus hiding the complex nexus of political and economic power and resources that lies behind a considerable amount of curriculum organization” (1978, p.372). In the following sections, I seek to turn attention to this ‘nexus,’ as well as to the diverse ways in which students and teachers interact with a curriculum to “produce, negotiate, modify, and resist” the meanings that may exist (Giroux, 1988, p.5).

## **Models of HRE**

While scholars have developed a number of different schematizations to attempt to categorize the tremendous diversity of practice that now falls under the umbrella term ‘HRE’ (e.g. Tibbitts, 2002; Tarrow, 1992), this study relies on a schema developed by Bajaj (2011), which distinguishes models of HRE based on their ideological goal – the designated end to which HRE is the means. Among the models of HRE identified by Bajaj, two – the ‘coexistence’ model and the ‘transformative action’ model – provide useful points of contrast. When applied in conflict/post-conflict contexts, these two models can be seen to differ not only in their ideological orientation, but in their foundational understanding of the causes of conflict and the nature of peace.

As Bajaj notes, these two models differ firstly in their conceptualization of the purpose of HRE. In the 'coexistence' model, HRE is employed primarily in an effort to encourage tolerance and acceptance of difference. Framed in an apolitical rhetoric of healing and shared humanity, the 'coexistence' model aims to recalibrate learners' attitudes in such a way as to encourage reconciliation. In stark contrast, a 'transformative' HRE programme aims to incite learners toward collective action. Derived from Freirean (1970) ideas of pedagogy, this model seeks to encourage learners to critically analyze the violations of rights occurring in their daily lives and to actively work to correct them. Underpinning this model is the use of HRE not as a tool of reconciliation, but as a "politics of inclusion and social justice" (Bajaj, 2011, p.491).

In conflict/post-conflict contexts, the choice to implement a HRE programme that strives toward either 'coexistence' or 'transformative action' reflects a particular understanding of the drivers of conflict. The 'coexistence' model very often rests on the fundamental assumption that values and attitudes fuel the conflict, that it is "principally attitudes toward the 'Other' that need to change for peaceful coexistence to become possible" (Hart, 2011, p.23). The 'transformative action' approach, however, presumes the existence of material, structural causes to the conflict and the corresponding need for structural redress.

By drawing on Galtung's (1969) seminal distinction between negative peace (the absence of personal violence) and positive peace (the absence of structural violence), it becomes apparent that the two models are, at root, premised on different notions of peace. In striving for merely attitudinal, rather than structural, change – for tolerance, rather than justice – the 'coexistence' model can be seen to be based around the narrower ideal of negative peace. Its primary goal is to deter or prevent future violence – and as such, might more broadly be referred to as a 'preventive' model of HRE – while leaving social structures unexamined and unchallenged. A 'transformative' HRE programme, by contrast, works explicitly to lessen structural violence, to actively combat rights abuses, to move toward positive peace.

These two models thus represent not only opposing conceptions of the purpose of HRE, but also fundamentally distinct visions of the strategies necessary to reduce conflict and the very nature of peace.

### **HRE & The Palestinian as 'Other'**

Before examining UNRWA's particular HRE programme, it is important to first contextualize this effort against the broader discourses governing the representation of Palestinians and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This section seeks to highlight the ways in which the frequent calls for HRE in the Palestinian context (e.g. Pina, 2006, Velloso, 1998) very often derive from deeply problematic assumptions regarding the dynamics of the conflict and the role of education.

It must firstly be acknowledged that contemporary discourse has become saturated with a distorted portrait of a Palestinian culture permeated by fanaticism and fundamentally hostile to the 'Western values' of tolerance and respect for human rights (Ashcroft, 2010; Said, 1978/2003). As Edward Said notes, characterizations of the Palestinian "in such public locales as the American television screen, the daily newspaper...shrink to a few stereotypes – the mad Islamic zealot, the gratuitously violent killer of innocents, the desperately irrational and savage primitive" (1988/2001a, p.3).

This representation of Palestinians – suffusing popular media and more subtly informing international discourse – crucially serves to shift the understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from an anti-colonial struggle to a cultural one (Said, 1988/2001b). In this way,

Palestine is an archetypal example of what Brown (2006) terms the ‘culturalization of politics’ – the tendency to reduce and naturalize what should be understood as a political conflict to an inherent clash of religious, ethnic, or cultural identity. Palestinians’ historical and present grievances are accordingly excluded from discussion, producing the narrative that it is largely Palestinian culture, not Israeli practices, that must be changed if there is to be peace (Said, 1988/2001b).

If the ‘problem’ then is understood as one of culture and character, education – and HRE in particular – may appear appropriate as a solution. Indeed, the Palestinian education system is frequently framed as both culprit and cure – currently contributing to the reproduction of a “culture of intolerance” (Cronin, 2004, p.97), while also thought to offer a potential corrective. Education is commonly envisioned as a vehicle that could and should be used to more actively promote peace, to instill the values of tolerance and respect for human rights thought to be missing from Palestinian society (Pina, 2006). Such an educational project – deploying human rights primarily to “fill a ‘values gap’” (Andreopolous & Claude, 1997, p.xix) – aspires to correct what is perceived as a cultural problem.

But, of course, framing the ‘problem’ in Israel/Palestine as cultural – as one of Palestinian intolerance that can be attenuated by education – requires a willful rejection of produced historical oppression and a fundamental reliance on Orientalist imaginings of the Palestinian as culturally flawed. The repeated calls for human rights/tolerance education in Palestine must be understood then in this wider context and seen to be in many ways symptomatic of this Orientalist discourse which constructs the Palestinian subject as aggressive, intolerant, and ‘in need’ of a certain civilizing influence. While perhaps appearing innocuous and well-meaning, projects promoting human rights/tolerance education in Palestine must be critically examined for their degree of complicity with this discourse.

## **Research Context**

### **URNWA**

UNRWA was first founded in 1949 to provide humanitarian assistance to the wave of 700-900,000 Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. As the Palestinian refugee crisis has persisted and intensified over subsequent decades, UNRWA has moved beyond relief and evolved into a quasi-state role, providing education, healthcare, and other social services to the Palestinian refugee populations in its five fields of operation (Schiff, 1995; Bowker, 1995).

It should be noted that, in order to carry out its operations, UNRWA must navigate an intensely politicized climate, balancing the competing demands of Western donors, host governments, Palestinian and Israeli authorities, and the refugees themselves. It is an impossible tightrope to walk, and any criticism of UNRWA’s choices must be tempered by an understanding of the incredibly contentious environment the organization inhabits. Given the depth of the vested interests on all sides, there are very real limits to the latitude UNRWA can exercise and the results it can be expected to achieve.

### **Balata Camp**

To explore Palestinian perspectives on UNRWA’s HRCRT programme, primary research was conducted in Balata Camp in the West Bank. Located on the outskirts of the city of Nablus, Balata is the largest of the West Bank camps – home to over 23,000 refugees, densely packed on only 0.25 square kilometres (UNRWA, 2012).

It is important to briefly note the symbolic resonance attached to the refugee camps, which have long stood as the very embodiment of Palestinian grievance and a bastion of commitment to the Palestinian national cause. In keeping with this role, both assigned and embraced, as the “authentic heart” (Hart, 2008, p.76) of the Palestinian community, the camps tend to display both greater adherence to conservative, traditional values, as well as more active commitment to the national struggle.

Balata Camp, in particular, has a long tradition of popular organizing and resistance activity, of which residents are fiercely proud (Collins, 2004). Yet precisely because of this reputation, Balata has been a repeated target of Israeli military action. During the Second Intifada, the camp was invaded by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), inflicting massive damage to the camp’s infrastructure and heavy casualties. The camp is still subject to routine night-time incursions, and its residents to random detention and abuse by the IDF.

## Methodology

Research in Balata Camp was conducted over a period of four weeks in May 2012. A combination of qualitative research methods was employed, including:

- *Document analysis.* UNRWA’s 2011 Policy Framework and Strategy for HRCRT was examined, as well as a small sampling of curriculum materials (eight storybooks and a collection of twenty-one human rights lessons).
- *Focus Groups.* A total of eight focus group discussions were conducted. Two samples of participants were drawn from each of the following four demographic groups: male teachers, female teachers, male grade 9 students, and female grade 9 students.
- *Individual Interviews.* Follow-up interviews were conducted with four of the participants from the focus groups. To provide additional context, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with three UNRWA staff members involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the HRCRT programme.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted with the assistance of a translator. It should thus be remembered that conversation extracts presented in the findings below are not a precise reproduction of participants’ speech. Rather they are a best representation, produced in collaboration with the translators after careful and repeated listening to audio recordings of the discussions/interviews.

## Ethical Issues

When working with vulnerable populations – in this case, children and Palestinian refugees – special consideration is warranted in considering the ethics of research. Care was taken particularly around issues of consent and anonymity. Before any focus groups/interviews commenced, the goals of the research and the use to which data would be put were thoroughly discussed, and it was strongly emphasized that participants should feel free to withdraw from the discussion at any time for any reason. Procedures regarding anonymity were also explained in this initial discussion, and in the following presentation, all names have been changed to protect the identities of participants.

## Analysis

The document analysis that follows is a product of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA takes as its central concern the “often opaque” (McGregor, 2003) relationship between

power and language and the ways in which relations of dominance and inequality are reflected and reproduced in text and speech (vanDijk, 1995; Fairclough, 2003, 2005; Wodak, 2006).

Analysis of the policy framework makes use, in particular, of CDA's notion of intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003; Bazerman, 2004), focusing on selective quotations from other declarations and guidelines, and the way in which the policy framework "draws upon, incorporates, recontextualizes, and dialogues with other texts" (Fairclough, 2003, p.17). Analysis of the curriculum materials similarly highlights the assumptions embedded in the materials' language, but also draws attention to textual silences (Huckin, 2002). This section explores the relationship between what is present and what is absent, stressing the importance of that which has been left unspoken (Hall in Huckin, 2002).

Analysis of focus group and interview data, while still informed by a critical perspective, should more rightly be considered thematic, rather than discourse, analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). As nearly all data had been translated from its original language, less attention was given to the nuances of speech and syntax than to the themes that emerged in participants' discussion.

Though widely used in qualitative research across a variety of epistemological positions, thematic analysis remains a surprisingly "poorly demarcated" technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77). Given this, an explicit description of the analysis procedures undertaken is warranted.

Codes were developed inductively from the data in an iterative process. Through the process of transcribing the translated recordings, an initial set of codes was identified. Data extracts were collated by code, taking care to include sufficient surrounding material to preserve the original context (Bryman, 2001). New codes were then added through progressive familiarization with the data. When no new codes seemed apparent, existing codes were consolidated into themes and related back to the original research questions.

## **Document Analysis**

### **Policy Framework**

It is natural that UNRWA, as a subsidiary organ of the UN, should draw often on language from other UN declarations in defining the form and aims of its HRCRT programme. However, an intertextual analysis of these selective quotations – noting what is included and how, as well as the new resonances these quotations take on when resituated in the Palestinian context – provides illuminating information on UNRWA's approach to HRE. Analysis suggests that, subtly informed by the Orientalist ideas of the Palestinian discussed above, UNRWA's programme stresses the 'preventive' function of HRE as a deterrent of violence and actively works to avoid its more 'transformative' dimension.

Firstly, UNRWA's policy framework states clearly that "the ultimate aim of human rights education is to foster a culture of human rights" (UNRWA, 2011, p.6). This phrase – a 'culture of human rights' – recurs repeatedly throughout the document, appearing nine times in a few short pages. The phrase is taken directly from the definition of HRE found in the 1995 Plan of Action for the UN Decade on HRE, but read in the Palestinian context, the aim of fostering a new 'culture' must be viewed with some suspicion. Though UNRWA's language operates in a distinctly different register from the media discourse discussed earlier, it can be interpreted to participate in a similar narrative that insists Palestinian culture be reformed and brought in line with 'global' values.

Similarly, the emphasis on conflict resolution and tolerance – prominently featured in the title of the programme – carries the implication that Palestinians are deficient in these areas. Indeed, in its definition of tolerance, taken from the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995), the framework includes the following quotation: “Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace” (UNRWA, 2011, p.9). Here there is again the problematic invocation of culture as the root of conflict. But more remarkably, the quotation specifies tolerance as *the* virtue that makes peace possible – not one of many, but the singular virtue necessary. Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the passage implies it is Palestinians’ lack of tolerance that is the primary barrier to peace.

Taken on their own, these external source quotations are perhaps only subtly suggestive of a problematic foundation to UNRWA’s HRE curriculum. However, attention to the framework’s selective omissions offers more persuasive evidence that the curriculum is built around a strictly ‘preventive’ notion of HRE. For example, although UNRWA’s policy framework draws often on language from the 2005 World Programme for HRE, it noticeably alters the Programme’s tripartite definition. The World Programme stipulates,

Human rights education encompasses:

- (a) Knowledge and skills — learning about human rights and mechanisms for their protection, as well as acquiring skills to apply them in daily life;
- (b) Values, attitudes and behaviour — developing values and reinforcing attitudes and behaviour which uphold human rights;
- (c) Action — taking action to defend and promote human rights (UN, 2005, I.A.4).

However, the UNRWA definition noticeably omits the ‘action’ component from its formulation:

The UNRWA HRCRT Programme will...equip UNRWA students with human rights knowledge and skills in an attempt to positively influence their attitudes and behaviour which in return will contribute positively to their society and the global community (2011, p.7).

Further evidence of an effort to deemphasize the ‘action’ domain of HRE – and thereby to depoliticize the treatment of rights – can be found in UNRWA’s list of ‘core competencies’ that students are expected to acquire. UNRWA states that their competencies have been adapted from the Human Rights Education Guidelines for Secondary School Systems developed by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR). But a comparison of UNRWA’s ‘adapted’ competencies and the original OSCE/ODIHR list is telling. UNRWA has noticeably omitted any criteria that make reference to encouraging students to take action, or even preparing them to do so through critically analyzing their situation. The ‘Knowledge & Understanding’ category, for example, includes academic criteria such as “the history and philosophy of human rights...” or “human/children’s rights principles...”, while the following, more critical criteria have been removed:

- Factors contributing to supporting/undermining human rights in one’s own environment...
- How to make complaints and take action against a rights violation in one’s own environment

Similarly, the ‘Attitudes & Values’ section maintains those criteria that focus on the personal and the private, e.g.:

- Respect for oneself and tolerance and respect for others...
- The belief that one person can make a difference in the world...

while omitting those related to collective action:

- Confidence in claiming human rights...
- Interest to work collaboratively with others to promote human rights in and beyond one's own environment.

And finally, the 'Skills' section, which suffered the most severe amputation with over half the criteria removed, provides further conclusive evidence of the trend. The 'skills' that remain are innocuous and apolitical, e.g.:

- Locate information and sources on human rights relevant to one's personal and academic needs and interests.
- Take an active part in discussions, debates, and controversies related to human rights.

While among the many criteria discarded were the following:

- Use human rights standards to claim rights...
- Carry out various actions to promote human rights in the private and public domain, including expressing points of view and carrying out public awareness activities; organizing or joining campaigns for those deprived of freedoms and rights; influencing mainstream politics (UNRWA, 2011, p.11, 28).

Comparison of these two sets of competencies thus indicates that, in the drafting of the HRCRT policy, any encouragement of critical analysis or political activism was carefully avoided.

Taken together, these selective quotations suggest that the broad aim of the HRCRT programme is decidedly 'preventive' rather than 'transformative' – that HRE is being deployed largely as a vehicle to adjust Palestinian attitudes, while shying away from any potentially 'inflammatory' calls for change.

## **Curriculum Materials**

Curriculum materials similarly show a depoliticized treatment of rights and a strong tendency toward a 'preventive' model emphasizing tolerance and dialogue.

When examining these materials, it is immediately noticeable that very few even contain the word 'right' at all. Instead, the materials strongly emphasize non-discrimination and the importance of dialogue and compromise in conflict resolution. When rights are mentioned, treatment is limited to a very small selection – e.g. the right to education, the right to play – that can be considered relatively apolitical.

But what is perhaps most remarkable about all of these materials is that there is no discussion whatsoever of the violations of rights in the Palestinian context. There is, throughout the curriculum, a profound textual silence (Huckin, 2002) around the existence of occupation and violence. Rather, the curriculum presents a sanitized world devoid of conflict. A lesson on the right to life, for example, discusses not the violence of occupation, but rather the dangers of pollution. A lesson on security centres mainly around the care of the elderly. And a lesson on 'social security' (with the secondary concept of the lesson being "relaxing and having fun") is accompanied by the following image of children playing football on the beach (UNRWA, n.d.).



Given the fact that West Bank Palestinians have been barred from travelling to the Mediterranean coast for over a decade, this image perhaps best encapsulates just how cruelly distant the cheery reality of the curriculum is from Palestinians' own lived experience.

The reasons behind this thorough textual silence on the subject of the occupation are complex. Among the five types of textual silence identified by Huckin are discreet silences – defined as “those that avoid stating sensitive information” – and manipulative silences “those that deliberately conceal relevant information from the reader/listener (2002, p.348). In the case of UNRWA’s curriculum these two types silences can be somewhat conflated. UNRWA’s actions are closely scrutinized by donors and Israeli authorities who consider any reference to violence/occupation overly ‘sensitive’ and tantamount to incitement. Yet, as will be discussed below, in the eyes of Palestinian students and teachers, these silences are also seen to be manipulative, denying students information that is ‘relevant’ to their lives.

### **Participants’ Criticisms of UNRWA’s Curriculum**

Perhaps the single theme that emerged most strongly in all focus group discussions conducted – regardless of the age or gender of participants – was a sense of frustration at the cavernous gap between the idealized utopia presented in the human rights materials and Palestinians’ daily experience. Both students and teachers suggested there was a kind of painful absurdity in the curriculum’s presentation of rights when juxtaposed with a reality of ubiquitous rights violations. One male teacher commented:

*What does it mean to talk to students about the right to play when they don’t have playgrounds? How can we talk about the right of free expression while it’s not there?*

A female teacher voiced a similar sentiment:

*For example, to teach about the right to live in peace. Every day we see the Israeli soldiers break in and arrest our neighbours. These people are students’ parents. So how can we tell them about the right to live in peace?*

And the following excerpt from a discussion with male students stresses the same idea again:

*Jihad: For example we studied about children's rights...but what we notice is that not only here, but in many countries, the rights of children are violated. Why is that?*

*Tawfiq: They talk to us about the right of freedom, but we know the prisoners have no freedom. How can we discuss the right of freedom while the prisoners have no freedom?*

*Abdallah: First they educate us about human rights and then our human rights are violated as if we did not study about it.*

*Hassan: Human rights are written in books, but they are not practiced on the ground.*

These excerpts communicate students' and teachers' resentment at the disjuncture between the ideals of human rights that are 'written in books' and students' reality 'on the ground.' Participants also suggested that, in light of this disjuncture, the curriculum's abstract treatment of topics like the 'right to play' even exacerbates Palestinians' sense of injustice, in a way, adding insult to injury.

Secondly, it is not only the rosy tone of the curriculum that students and teachers find alienating, but also the specific set of priorities UNRWA has chosen to emphasize. In the early stages of each focus group, participants were asked to identify what rights they felt were most often stressed in curriculum materials. All groups cited the right to education and the right to free expression as among the top priorities of UNRWA's curriculum. Six out of the eight also included the right to play as a significant focus. The rights of disadvantaged populations – including women, the elderly, and the disabled – were very frequently mentioned as secondary priorities. And finally, a few groups mentioned certain stressed values, including 'understanding' and 'cooperation.'

Students and teachers felt that these priorities did not match their own, nor reflect the needs of the Palestinian situation. One male student commented:

*The UNRWA curriculum does not take account of the rights that take priority in Palestine – like the right of return [for Palestinian refugees displaced in the 1948 and 1967 wars to their former homes in what is now Israel], like the right of freedom...The human rights curriculum does not give priority to the rights of Palestinians that we need to call for.*

And one female student remarked dismissively, "Free expression, education, and going to places like parks and gardens are more important than freedom and the right to live in the UNRWA curriculum."

Both students suggest that UNRWA is placing emphasis on rights that are secondary or even frivolous ('going to parks and gardens') at the expense of more basic and fundamental rights. It is this serious misalignment between UNRWA's priorities and Palestinians' priorities that fuels students' and teachers' frustration and criticism of the curriculum.

## **Censorship**

Both male and female teachers were quite blunt in their opinion that the priorities and content of the HRE curriculum were the result of censorship by either Israel or foreign donors. One female teacher's offhand comment, "Of course our curriculum is being censored," is representative of teachers' general attitude that censorship was expected and routine.

Indeed, teachers seemed long-accustomed to curriculum censorship, and all could readily recount examples of materials from other subject areas being noticeably edited between a first and second draft to exclude content deemed 'too political.'

Several UNRWA officials shared this attitude and also acknowledged the existence of another kind of unspoken censorship – an understanding gained from long experience of which curricular topics would or would not be acceptable to donor review. Regarding this tacitly understood prohibition on controversial or sensitive topics, one UNRWA official acknowledged:

*This is not a secret because you know your limits and you know where you can and cannot go. You know that you can't talk about the right of return, for example. It is certain that if you talk about the right of return you will not be funded.*

The large majority of adult participants therefore concurred that the content and, importantly, the omissions of the curriculum were, to a significant extent, the result of foreign approval and influence. However, of all demographic groups, it was perhaps male students who were the most vigorously outspoken on this point. As illustrated in the extract below, male students explicitly suggested that the shaping of the curriculum was a tool to maintain the subjugation of the Palestinian people:

*Fadi: The curriculum only talks about the right to play.*

*Imad: They don't want children to be aware of their situation and what they have been suffering from.*

*GP (to Imad, to clarify): You think the curriculum was deliberately designed so that Palestinian children wouldn't be aware of these things?*

*Fadi: Yes.*

*Imad: Definitely.*

*GP: So what makes you think that?*

*Fadi: Israel is involved with this. It's like a cultural occupation.*

*Imad: So now we are occupied militarily and in terms of education.*

These students articulate here a powerful idea that Israel is attempting to dominate not only their physical space, but their cultural space as well. In their view, the silences in the curriculum are not accidental, but rather deliberately manipulative, seeking to keep Palestinian children disempowered and uninformed.

## **Extracurricular Restrictions**

Teachers and students chafed not only at the limits on curriculum content, but also at UNRWA's broader restrictions on the school environment and extracurricular activity. Participants complained bitterly that UNRWA schools in Balata camp are not allowed to fly the Palestinian flag nor commemorate Palestinian national holidays. For example, on Nakba Day – one of the most important Palestinian national occasions, commemorating the expulsion of Palestinians from what is now Israel in 1948 – students of the government schools in nearby Nablus are both allowed and encouraged to attend ceremonies in the central square. Balata students, by contrast, are kept in school until long after the ceremonies are over. Similarly, while governmental school students are permitted to attend

demonstrations and vigils in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike, UNRWA students in Balata are forbidden from doing so. These restrictions demonstrate that, not only does UNRWA's HRE curriculum fail to encourage any kind of collective political action, UNRWA policies actively discourage it.

All groups expressed frustration at being denied the opportunity to participate in these events. The following comment from a male teacher is both representative and illuminating:

*Yusuf: Sometimes we have national occasions. The students themselves ask, 'What will we do for this occasion? Why do the governmental schools do certain things? We are Palestinian like them, so why don't we do these things?' We are forced to tell them that UNRWA does not interfere in politics. When the governmental schools do something in solidarity with the prisoners, we never do that. We don't have prisoners.*

Yusuf suggests firstly that students feel unfairly punished by UNRWA's regulations, robbed of a fundamental entitlement to participate in Palestinian political life. But perhaps more painfully, Yusuf's final comment – 'We don't have prisoners' – suggests being robbed even of a Palestinian identity – being made separate by membership in an UNRWA 'we' and forcibly divorced from the broader 'we' of the Palestinian community.

Students and teachers perceived these restrictions on national/political expression, like the censorship of curriculum materials, as a blatant attempt to suppress Palestinian national identity. One male student best captured this sense that UNRWA's restrictions both inside and outside the classroom were designed to pacify and depoliticize, even 'de-Palestinianize' students: "They try to take out the national motive from all of us. So when the day of Nakba comes, you feel normal."

### **Teachers' Response: The Curriculum-In-Use**

Predictably, teachers find ways to work around these restrictions, to reintroduce national identity and content despite the official prohibition on such topics. As a result, the 'curriculum-in-use' is often quite different from what the materials might suggest. One UNRWA official even acknowledged:

*But when we talk about the unofficial education, the Palestinian teachers are creative. It's not logical to believe that a Palestinian teacher in an UNRWA school forgets about these issues that are related to his homeland. No, he teaches these values to his students.*

Male and female teachers described a number of ways, through both curricular and extracurricular activities, in which they subverted official restrictions in order to stress national rights in the curriculum. Several teachers mentioned organizing activities within Balata schools to quietly commemorate the Nakba Day. Others mentioned informal classroom discussions prompted by students:

*Sometimes a student in the classroom might ask 'What does the right of return mean?' As a teacher, I can't ignore his question, I have to tell him and I have to explain about the right of return.*

Still others discussed ways they adapted the existing rights materials to more clearly address the Palestinian situation:

*When we talk about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we talk about the right of having a home and having a land. Or when we are supposed to talk about living in a clean environment and the right to free expression – we try to link this to our reality in the context of the occupation.*

The comment of one male teacher humorously summed up the general attitude among both teachers and UNRWA officials toward the limitations of the HRE materials: “A Palestinian has to be flexible and adapting and... When there are laws that you can’t go straight, you will take another way. (Laughter).”

## **Benefits of UNRWA’s Curriculum**

Though overall, perceptions of the curriculum were largely negative, certain groups – particularly female students and adult males – did find benefits in individual aspects of the HRE programme.

### **Women’s Rights**

Of all the demographic groups, female students were the most positive about the curriculum, and several suggested the curriculum did, in fact, empower young girls to speak about their rights. One girl commented, “It [the curriculum] helps us to trust ourselves and to be confident to talk about our rights.”

Yet even among the girls, positive endorsements of the curriculum had to be balanced against its flaws. The following excerpt captures a disagreement between two girls over the value of the curriculum and its utility for girls’ lives:

*Sara: The curriculum is always talking about rights, but it is just talking. Nobody talks about how to apply our rights in reality.*

*Dunya: But it does talk about how rights can be applied. It talks about the steps of how to get your rights – by telling those who are responsible about your rights... If our parents prevent us from getting an education, the curriculum tells us how to convince them that we have the right to education. Or another example: when I talk with my brother and he will stop me and say ‘It’s not your business,’ I can say ‘No, it’s my right’ because I learned it in the curriculum. The curriculum taught us how to express our feelings.*

*Tala: It gives us solutions about other rights also...*

*Sara (interrupting): But not all of them. Like the curriculum talks about justice but not how to apply it. It doesn’t talk about the application of solutions to our problems. It just talks about definitions and the perfect ideal of justice.*

On the one hand, Dunya, like the first girl quoted above, is positive about the curriculum, citing practical examples of the ways in which knowledge of women’s/human rights has changed how she is able to interact with male relatives, giving her newfound confidence and language to express her views. Sara, by contrast, seems to prioritize the national struggle over domestic concerns. She expresses the frustration heard in other groups that, on the subject of the endemic rights violations of the occupation, the curriculum includes no guidance about how students might translate rights into reality. In this regard, Sara

resembles her adult female teachers, who consistently dismissed the curriculum's treatment of women's rights as shallow, at best, and, at worst, a calculated distraction from national rights. But while Sara's comments resonated strongly with those of other demographic groups, among the female students her voice was a minority. Most young girls viewed the curriculum's discussion of women's rights as a genuine aid that could better equip them to confront, if not the occupation, at least the patriarchal norms regulating their lives.

### **Tolerance**

I have suggested that underpinning the discourse of HRE in Palestine, and of tolerance education in particular, is a broad attempt to civilize and pacify the stereotypical idea of the violent Arab male. Yet, of all demographic groups interviewed, it was the adult men who most championed the idea of tolerance education. What emerged strongly among adult male participants was an appropriation and re-application of the ideas of tolerance and rights to the internal Palestinian context. Several men emphasized the idea that tolerance education could have great value in improving the way Palestinians treat one another. Following the contested elections of 2006, which sparked a civil war between Fatah and Hamas for control of the Territories, Palestinian society has remained riven by bitter factional disputes and recriminations. Referencing these longstanding divisions and lingering hostility, one UNRWA official commented, "We Palestinians have been living in a period of national struggle. There is now a huge need for dialogue among the Palestinians." This official, with other male teachers, suggested that raising the younger generation on the ideals of tolerance and dialogue might help to repair eroded Palestinian cohesion. To these men – members of a generation that has witnessed the collapse and fracturing of the nationalist movement – tolerance education represented a potential vehicle to restore the solidarity and spirit of unity they feel has been lost.

### **Conclusions: Toward an Ideal HRE**

These discussions around the benefits of the curriculum – as well as teachers' creative efforts to stretch, adapt, and appropriate curriculum material to meet the needs of the Palestinian situation – demonstrate the efforts made by students and teachers to find value and relevance in UNRWA'S HRCRT programme. However, a strong consensus was palpable among participants that these efforts were, in a sense, working against the grain of the materials, and that the official curriculum was, in fact, deeply flawed. Participants were most critical of the curriculum's failure to usefully engage with, or even acknowledge, the violations of human rights occurring in Palestinians' daily lives. The presentation of human rights content in a manner that was instead cheerfully abstract and thoroughly detached from this reality was deeply alienating to both teachers and learners.

Yet even given their severe frustration with UNRWA's current HRCRT programme, all participants were still emphatic in their commitment to the ideals of human rights and the need for HRE. They simply demanded that a HRE curriculum reflect Palestinian priorities, honestly address the violations of rights in the Palestinian context, and include guidance on actions that might be taken to remedy these violations. In articulating these criteria, Palestinian teachers and students merely asked for a curriculum that is rooted in and relevant to their experience, one where they might "see its value in their daily, violence-punctuated lives" (Bernath et al., 1999, p.16). In essence, participants requested no more nor less than a curriculum that fulfils the UN's own standards of what HRE should include and achieve.

On the one hand, given the highly sensitive political climate and UNRWA's unavoidable accountability to donor interests, it could hardly have been possible for UNRWA staff to implement a 'transformative' curriculum promoting a substantive notion of rights and rights

activism. Yet on the other, it cannot be said that the goal of UNRWA's HRCRT programme, in its current form, is genuinely to promote human rights. As the document analysis indicated, HRE is instead being employed primarily as a vehicle to promote 'soft skills' around tolerance and dialogue. The ultimate aim of UNRWA's HRE programme is, it appears, not to aid Palestinians in claiming their rights, but rather to deter Palestinian violence and reform Palestinian attitudes.

In its foundational assumption that Palestinian attitudes are, in fact, in need of reform, UNRWA's curriculum reveals itself to be premised on the widespread, but profoundly misguided, notion that Palestinian attitudes are a primary engine of the conflict. In the logic of this deeply Orientalist discourse, it is assumed that if Palestinians could be re-educated and made more tolerant and more respectful of human rights, it would hasten the arrival of peace to the region. This fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict – as a clash of attitudes and culture rather than a political struggle for justice and self-determination – underpins UNRWA's entire curriculum and clearly shapes its content and priorities.

And while Palestine is perhaps an extreme example of the tendency to 'culturalize' understandings of conflict, it is not uncommon for conflict/post-conflict education programming to prioritize the adjustment of attitudes with insufficient regard for broader, structural drivers of conflict. In so doing, such programmes may place themselves irreconcilably out of touch with learners' own understanding of the conflict they have endured, appearing irrelevant, at best. It is essential therefore that greater attention be given to the underlying assumptions of HRE programmes in conflict/post-conflict contexts regarding the nature of conflict and the strategies necessary for peace. Perhaps most importantly, a HRE programme must be critically examined to ascertain its primary aim for learners, to determine whether the programme is truly designed to actualize the transformative potential contained in human rights rhetoric.

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