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Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

The Burden of Palestinian Education: Undoing Humiliation

Last May we visited two schools and one university in the West Bank of Palestine: Friends Lower School in Ramallah, Bethlehem Holy Child Program in Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, and Birzeit University in Ramallah. Our purpose was to discover how students were managing in an environment of conflict and uncertainty. What we learned is that Palestinian children bear the burden of their parents' humiliation and depression. The schools struggle to help them salvage some aspect of normal childhood education. They offer a restorative education that attempts to compensate for the unhappiness that surround the children and their parents. The hope of Diana Abdel Nour and Diane Rzegocki, who are in charge of the two schools, is that by providing the students with safety, affection, and intellectual stimulation the programs can compensate for the troubled environment in which the children live. Yet, as our conversation with university students suggested, despite the best efforts of these talented educators, good schools alone cannot compensate for the troubled times which these young people must endure.

The two schools have different histories and missions, which make comparing them difficult. Friends School has a long history. Unlike most American preparatory schools, the Friends began with small schools for girls in the area surrounding Ramallah in 1869. In 1889, Friends Girls School opened as "The Girls Training Home of Ramallah." Not until 1901 did the Friends start to educate boys (<http://www.palfriends.org/schoolhistory.php>). In 1990 the two schools became co-educational. At that time the girls school was converted into the lower school

while upper school took over the boys school property. Diana Nour, the person we talked to, went from being principal of the girls school to running the lower one.

The mission statement emphasizes the high academic standards of the school. They aspire to offer Palestinian children “a rigorous program guided by principles of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)” (<http://www.palfriends.org/mission.php>). The children who apply for admission have to pass tests in Arabic, English, and Math (<http://www.palfriends.org/admission.php>). As a result of the students’ competence in English, they are able to maintain web links to American schools, and to produce magazines written in English. The e-zines produced by the two schools indicate the problems that educators in Palestine face despite the best intentions.

The lower school has a magazine for 10-12-year-olds, called Children without Borders, which is composed in conjunction with Park Day School in Oakland, California. This magazine began in response to 9/11. Some of the Park Day School children are Jewish and want to learn more about the Palestinian children. The teachers hope that the contact will “broaden the vision of the children to see things from another perspective.” The youngsters from both schools interview each other and perhaps to their surprise find that they have much in common with the children from the other country (<http://www.palfriends.org/borders.php>). The entries make it difficult to determine which children were Palestinian and which were American. Both groups sounded like American preteens from academically challenging middle schools.

Despite the surface similarities between the American and Palestinian students, Diana Nour told us when we visited the school that many of the Palestinian boys and girls have been deeply troubled by the instability in their country. Realizing their plight, she instituted a

counseling program to help those who were having a specially difficult time. She also started special education programs for students with dyslexia, ADD and ADDHD, Cerebral Palsey, Autisim, Down’s Syndrome, and Williams Syndrome. These programs have been extended into high school. When I consulted the Friends School website, I learned that all the children in the lower school alternate taking ethics and counseling. That way none of the children feel stigmatized by their need to learn to “express him/herself.” The comment on the website reports that the school is aware that developing a strong educational background would not make sense unless it tried to increase the students’ “emotional well being”

http://www.palfriends.org/activities_lower.php.

The upper school emphasizes academics to a great extent and is proud to offer the International Baccalaureate Program. The older pupils produce a student e-zine, called Behind the Wall. The children write short essays on many topics, including abortion, tolerance, and the conflict between Israel and Palestine.¹ These statements are unedited.

Most of the Palestinian children assert that their country tolerates different religions. Palestine, some argue, “is a country of equality. All Palestinians are equal no matter how they look, or what they believe in” (<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-tol>). On the other hand, when they turn to the conflict, a fault line appears between Quaker values and deep feelings of humiliation. Faris declares:

Israel does not care what the religion of the Palestinians is; every day they kill Moslems, Christians, and many others. They don’t care, they just want us out, and they get upset every time we fight for our rights. The whole world is about power

or control, and I think the Israelis would kill Jewish people if they interfered or got in their way; they just don't care.

<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-conflict>

Sami says that Muslims are supposed to be nonviolent, as the Quakers believe, but the conflict between Israel and Palestine requires violence:

Palestine had been occupied by Israelis since long ago, so Isrealis [sic] are the ones who are taking Palestinians' properties and rights. Therefore, violence should be used against those occupiers to defend Palestine from them, so I don't agree with the Quakers that the best way to fight occupation is to fight nonviolently. (<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-conflict>)

On the other hand, Monica sees the conflict as an endless spiral:

It's not our right as human beings to kill people, because human beings belong to God and no one else. So, I agree with the idea of the Quakers. Violence just lets things get worse and that's what's happening here. When Israelis kill a Palestinian, then Palestinians go and carry out suicide attacks, but then Israelis go and kill other Palestinians and so on. So, it's as if both sides are trying to get revenge on each other. That's why I encourage the idea of nonviolence, because in the end peace and communicating is the only solution.

<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-conflict>

Waleed declares that he cannot forgive the Israelis:

I will not forgive those terrorist people ever; they killed young kids, women, and old men. Second they have stolen my land. They didn't let us live our childhood as kids in the world. We are in jail. If you want to travel, you have to get permission from them. How can I forgive them for all the things they did for us?

<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-conflict>

In sum, despite the excellent of the school and its Quaker values, students have absorbed the unhappiness of their elders about the unequal conflict with Israel. As a result of this inherited humiliation, many students feel trapped by the disputes and argue that non-violent solutions would not be sufficient to allow the Palestinians and the Israelis to live together in harmony. Perhaps if the children were taught about the Holocaust and the reason why so many Jews migrated to Israel after World War II, they might soften their anger. Until their elders find a peaceful resolution, however, many of the students reject Quaker values despite their privileged education.

In contrast to the academic orientation of Friends, Bethehem Holy Child Program, in Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, is a much younger institution with goals that combine efforts to improve their charges' mental health with academic improvement. The program was founded in 1995 because parents came to Mother Rose, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist, saying that their

children suffered from nightmares and were not attending school. Diane Rzegocki, the current President of Bethlehem Holy Child program, joined the order when her husband died. The school has only 30 students, and it provides psychological counseling and a safe learning environment for children who have mental health problems and have been exposed “to intergenerational trauma” (<http://www.holychildbethlehem.org/mission.htm>). Rzegocki told us that the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis has dramatically increased the amount of domestic violence in Palestine. She reported that the war in Gaza and the presence of the Wall have frustrated adults so much that some angry men, suffering from humiliation, have turned to wife beating and child molestation. Unfortunately, the children who become mentally ill from abuse are regarded by their families to be a cause of shame. They would be hidden away by their families, Rzegocki reported, if this school did not exist. The program provides an intense therapeutic half-day treatment program and alternative education for these children in the Bethlehem region. The school’s values are Roman Catholic and its goal is to help the children and their families to such an extent that the children will be able to return to normal Palestinian schools. They incorporate “experiential learning activities such as folklore, dancing, music and food.” According to the website, they provide “individual learning activities” for their students (<http://www.holychildbethlehem.org/approach.htm>). According to Rzegocki, the average length of time the children spend at the school is three years although a few have stayed until they are 17.

The day we visited the school, we observed various classrooms. In one a little girl grabbed my hand and did not want to let go. Apparently she regarded me as a possible protector, and it was difficult to extricate myself from the child’s grasp. The school emphasizes the

therapeutic aspect of their education more than the pedagogical, and its ambition is to free the children from their emotional distress as quickly as possible. Unlike Friends, it is impoverished and badly in need of donations. Despite all of its problems, the visit was not depressing. Diane Rzegocki, like Diana Nour, is an intelligent, resourceful person. As long as these children have this safe haven, they have hope for a better future. Wisely the school also works with the parents, trying to ease their burdens and teach them how to help their children more effectively. These graduates might not attend Ivy League American colleges, as some of Friends' graduates do, but those who have been helped, are much the better for the intervention. Because the website gives no statements from students, it is impossible to tell what the children think of the world around them. They represent the collateral damage of the conflict and may never understand completely why they have suffered so much.

Finally, we visited Bir Zeit University outside of Ramallah, shortly after our visit to Friends School. The institution was originally founded in 1924 by Nabiha Nasir, an educational visionary, as an elementary school for girls from Birzeit and the surrounding villages. It was one of the first schools in the area. In 1930, it became a co-educational secondary school, and in 1932 was renamed Birzeit Higher School. In 1961 it became a junior college, and in 1975 a four year college. IN 1977-1778 they added a graduate program in education and a few years later expanded the curriculum http://www.birzeit.edu/about_bzu/p/2542

We met two English-speaking undergraduates, who had both lived for an extended period of time in America. The young man was especially hostile to the United States. He said he suffered from PTSD after being jailed by the Israelis. The American government, he felt, had done nothing for the Palestinians and would do nothing in the future. We tried to remonstrate

with him to no avail. The young woman reported that when she lived in Tennessee, her middle school teachers told her not to talk politics. She retorted that all of Palestinian life is political, but she found a way to tell fellow students what life on the West Bank was like. We learned later that the universities are all politicized. Their elections are between students who support Fatah or those who favor Hamas. If they declare for Hamas, it is almost impossible for them to get a visa to study out of Palestine. Opportunities for paying jobs in Palestine are few and far between so the situation can be quite desperate.

To summarize the situation, the schools and universities are limited in what they can do to compensate for the humiliation that the students and their families experience. Even a fine school like Friends with strong values of non-violence cannot by itself convince students to live by Quaker beliefs. To make matters worse, the Bethlehem Holy Child program helps students return to the Palestinian schools where few students are likely to learn anything about the Israelis, such as the history of the Holocaust. Until the schools on both sides of the wall teach their children about the reasons for each group's sense of victimization, no genuine emotional change will take place.²

Endnotes

1. The statements on abortion are less strident than ones we hear from some of our politicians. One student notes that abortion is limited in Palestine to situations where the child lacks viability or the health of the mother is threatened. Waleed concludes that if the mother aborts the baby because it would be a male and she wants a female child, that would constitute "a sin from God, and [would be] illegal in our country." Marian wrestles with a tangled concern about abortion

and sex. “A strong relationship always needs sex,” she notes, “even if the couples are not married. They find it a strong bond in their love relation. So maybe they have a baby and they don’t want it. I think that all couples engage in sex before they got married.” Nonetheless she does not approve of abortion if the man and woman “only engage in sex for fun or to have a good time.” On the other hand, she argues, that “if the baby is not in a good health, and he/she cannot be a natural human being (or in other words, abnormal)? I support the right for the woman to choose whether she wants the baby or not”

(<http://www.lifebehindthewall.org/default.aspx?id=qa-abortion>).

2. For example, in March, 2009, thirteen Palestinian music students, ages 12 to 17, from Jenin camp played a concert in Holon, Israel, for elderly Holocaust survivors. The language barrier was a problem, but good will and music bridged the gap. On the other hand, it was obvious that the students had no idea what it meant to have survived the Holocaust (Kershner, March 26, 2009). A few days later, instead of praising the effort, Adnan al-Hindi, a Palestinian leader in the camp, denounced the concert. He insisted that the young musicians “had been exploited by the orchestra director, Wafaa Younis, for the purpose of ‘normalizing’ ties with Israel.” He later argued “that the children had been ‘deceived’ and dragged unwittingly into a political situation that ‘served enemy interests’ and aimed to “‘destroy the Palestinian national spirit in the camp.’” Following the principle of no good deed goes unpunished, “Mr. Hindi said that the house the orchestra director rented as a studio had been sealed, and that she was barred by the Popular Committee from all activity in the camp” (Kershner and Aker, March 30, 2009).

References

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