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## Re-conceptualising Human Rights Education: from the Global to the Occupied

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# Re-conceptualising Human Rights Education: from the Global to the Occupied

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## Abstract

*This article provides a critical view of Human Rights Education (HRE) within a context of colonial occupation and an authoritarian national ruling structure. It explores the reasons behind the introduction of HRE in Palestinian Authority (PA) schools in the Occupied West Bank and investigates how teachers and students make meaning of and implement HRE. Through examining the relationship between HRE and the struggles against injustice, the article problematizes the theoretical basis of HRE and highlights the importance of indigenous knowledges and strategies utilized to bring the decontextualized global to the nuanced and politicized local. This article shows that institutionalizing HRE turns it into a harmful tool in the hands of those in power. Reverting to alternative sources of knowledge and linking human rights to the vernacular of the people, adopting a bottom-up approach and allowing for criticality are necessary measures to enable the re-*

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*appropriation of human rights, where HRE becomes a true strategy to build a culture of human rights that can dismantle structures of oppression. There is a need to rethink HRE as a concept, shifting its current reality to one that contributes to building 'critical consciousness'. This shift, particularly in the case of Palestine, will not emerge without developing alternative forms of education. This idea might be considered problematic. However, as critical educators and researchers, it is our responsibility to take on this battle.*

## **Introduction**

I entered the Human Rights Education (HRE) field in 2008 as the HRE Regional Coordinator at the Amnesty International in Beirut. At that time, there was a global momentum for HRE based on the first phase of the World Program of Human Rights Education (WPHRE 2005-2009) and consultations for the second phase (2010-2014) had just started. HRE work of Amnesty International was flourishing across all its sections. This positive environment fed into my passion about my work and I based my practice on international conventions and agreements. I was ecstatic with every international HRE-related achievement. However, over the years, my belief in the human rights regime was shaken. My positionality towards HRE gradually shifted as I engaged with critical literature and praxis. As I left Amnesty International and moved into academia, I distanced myself from institutionalized HRE, and transitioned to a world of questioning.

My critical view and understanding of HRE grew as I conducted ethnographic research for my PhD in the Occupied West Bank. When I approached human rights practitioners, educators, students and activists to interview them, I was faced with the question: "HRE in Palestinian Authority (PA) Schools! Is there such a thing?". This question came with a dismissive shrug of the shoulder or a cynical expression. My answer to these dismissive and cynical questions was: Yes, HRE in Palestine exists in various spaces, shapes and forms: through schooling, extensive campaigns by human rights organizations, trainings by civil society, and media coverage of human rights issues (Abu Moghli, 2016). In schools, HRE is embedded in civics education or in extra-curricular projects carried out in cooperation

with (I)NGOs. But even after explaining briefly, I was often faced with the same cynical look and the comment: “So what?”.

These skeptical responses framed my research and encouraged me to unearth what led to the integration of HRE within the schooling system in the Occupied West Bank, and what implications it had in practice. I explored the perceptions of students and teachers about HRE. I also explored the connection and disjuncture between HRE in theory and in practice. Through my research, I provide an alternative understanding of HRE’s potential contribution to the emancipation of both the individual and the collective within a polarized, multi-layered, and fast-changing context.

While Peace Education (PE) was not part of the initial focus of my research, it was mentioned during some interviews. HRE literature links HRE and PE particularly when examining the integration of human rights values within PE programs. Hence, this article examines the concept of PE as an interconnected field to HRE. Similar to my engagement with HRE through the narratives of the research participants, I examine PE within the Palestinian context, how it is perceived, implemented and problematized. Finally, I propose precepts framed within de-colonial approaches, beyond institutional international law and declarationist models, for critical educators and researchers to consider when designing, planning, and implementing HRE and related educational fields.

### **Research Methodology**

My research took place in the Occupied West Bank over six months, between March 2013 and June 2014, with further data gathered during periodic visits up until 2016. The research drew on ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and classroom observations.

I formulated my research questions based on a pilot research phase between March and May 2013, a thorough literature review and document analysis. The research questions were:

- What are the sources of influence that shape HRE in Palestinian Authority schools in the Occupied West Bank?
- What are the perceptions of teachers and students about human rights in general and HRE in particular?
- To what extent does HRE inform students' and teachers' engagement in social and/or political activism?

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Education, (I)NGOs, academics and human rights activists. I interviewed civics teachers, head teachers and school counselors. Group interviews were conducted with 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students; and I observed citizenship education classes in three schools over a period of three months.

Convenience sampling based on personal connections was implemented for the purpose of the pilot phase during which I gained access to key contacts and insights that informed the refinement of my interview and research questions. During the main research phase, I followed the method of purposive sampling where I defined criteria for selection of schools, age groups, geographic locations and specializations of (I)NGOs and practitioners interviewed. My data analysis, primarily an iterative process, was dependent on emerging ideas and themes. It was not purely inductive, as I have started from the literature and practice of HRE. So I moved back and forth between data, literature and theory, framed under the three research questions.

### **Human Rights Education: Meaning and Relevance**

In the years following the end of the Cold War, the United Nations (UN) convened the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. In this conference, HRE was discussed in detail and a section of the resulting program of action was dedicated to it. Point (I/33) of the program of action reaffirmed that states are duty-bound, as stipulated by international human rights instruments, to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms (OHCHR, 1993). These

international agreements created a global climate in which HRE has become part of the modern state's human rights repertoire (Cardenas, 2005; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). While the Vienna conference marked a milestone in human rights lexicon, theory and activism (Baxi, 1997), in terms of HRE, it marked a regression from the advancements made during previous recommendations.

Education within the framework of human rights had been discussed and highlighted during various UN conventions, congresses and conferences prior to the Vienna World Conference of 1993. For example, the first formal request to educate students about human rights was in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace, and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UNESCO, 1974). The 1974 UNESCO Recommendation was adopted when the remaining dictatorships in Europe were collapsing and military colonial occupations were coming to an end in most of the world. This movement towards de-colonization, emancipation, democratization and self-determination was reflected in Section III, article (6) of the recommendation:

Education should stress the inadmissibility of recourse to war for purposes of expansion, aggression and domination, or to the use of force and violence for purposes of repression... It should contribute to ...the activities in the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in all their forms and manifestations, and against all forms and varieties of racialism, fascism, and apartheid as well as other ideologies which breed national and racial hatred. (UNESCO, 1974)

This is also reaffirmed in Article 18, which stated that education should be directed towards: the equality of rights of peoples; their right to self-determination; ensuring the exercise and observance of human rights, including those of refugees; and the eradication of racialism and the fight against discrimination in its various forms (UNESCO, 1974).

The 1974 UNESCO Recommendation focused on understanding and respect for all peoples, cultures, civilizations, values and ways of life. Additionally, it addressed pedagogy. Article 5 encourages critical thinking and understanding and Article 12 encourages methods that appeal to the creative imagination and prepare learners to exercise their rights and freedoms. The 1974 Recommendation framed human rights and education in new contexts and tackled emerging issues such as self-determination, corruption and power, in addition to highlighting the relationship between socio-economic development and social justice.

In 1978, UNESCO organized the International Congress on Teaching Human Rights. Here the aims of the 1974 Recommendations were articulated and clarified and HRE was mentioned for the first time as a concept. The third point under principles and considerations that came out of the congress stated that HRE and teaching should aim at:

fostering the attitudes of tolerance, respect and solidarity inherent in human rights; providing knowledge about human rights, in both their national and international dimensions, and the institutions established for their implementation; developing the individual's awareness of the ways and means by which human rights can be translated into social and political reality at both the national and the international levels. (UNESCO, 1978)

The quote above highlights the idea of localizing the global. Education about human rights should not only be about distant human rights formulated by global bodies, but should have national dimensions. To reaffirm this, the congress stated that human rights curricula should be adapted to national contexts, and that HRE should protect and promote the rights of marginalized groups, like indigenous populations and people with disabilities, in their own language and according to their needs as identified by them (UNESCO, 1978). When HRE is brought into the local context, and enables oppressed groups to struggle for emancipation, we may refer to it as HRE praxis (Baxi, 1994). Praxis is "reflection and action directed at the

structures to be transformed” (Freire, [1970]1993, p.126). Hence, HRE is not only about knowing human rights but also about doing human rights.

The UNESCO congress of 1978 highlighted the ability of people to discuss human rights critically. This removes human rights from a sacred status to the status where it can be an evolving and changing concept. To this effect, under the second point of its principles and considerations, the congress stated that:

The concept of human rights should not be formulated in traditional or classical terms but should include the historical experiences and contributions of all people particularly in relation to the major contemporary problem of self-determination and all forms of discrimination and exploitation.

Under the first point of its principles and considerations, the congress stressed the indivisibility of rights and the importance of individual as well as collective rights; this was stated in its first guiding principle:

Equal emphasis should be placed on economic, social and cultural, civil and political rights as well as individual and collective rights. The indivisibility of all human rights should be recognized.

A term that was used in the 1978 congress but was not used in any other previous or following UN documents is the “internationalization of human rights”. Point 6 of the 1978 congress’s recommendations affirmed that:

International human rights curricula should emphasize the ‘internationalization’ of human rights, demonstrating the ever increasing international concern with human rights on the basis of the United Nations charter.

This term reflects the awareness at that time of the sensitivity to cultural diversity, the specificity of various cultures and the multiple possible adaptations of HRE in different contexts. Internationalizing human rights entails an inclusion of this diversity rather than an imposition of a universal value system that is perceived as colonial, Western, foreign and hegemonic.

These UN documents that precede the proliferation of HRE resonate with the main critiques of the current formulation of HRE: it is Eurocentric, top-down and detached from the realities of people who struggle against systematic human rights violations (Baxi, 1994; Barreto, 2012; Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013; Zembylas & Keet, 2019). The 1974 UNESCO Recommendation and the 1978 Congress were radical in their view that human rights, and its role within education, are connected to the struggles of people for their own emancipation, freedom and anti-colonialism. However, this vision was diluted in the following UN documents. This dilution can be detected in the conceptualizations and definitions of HRE in the UN programs and documents which were part of the proliferation phase of HRE (Zembylas & Keet, 2019) in the early 1990s and 2000s.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (UDHRET, 2011) is based on two decades of conceptualizations of HRE as proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) starting in 1995 and continuing until after the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-2009). The UNDHRET (2011) states that HRE encompasses knowledge, skills, values and attitudes as well as action. Akin to the plans of actions of the WPHRE, the UNDHRET (2011) reiterates a similar conceptualization of HRE and adds the aspect of education *through* human rights. Consequently, under Article 2 the declaration affirms that:

- (a) Education about human rights, includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) education through human rights, includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
- (c)

education for human rights, includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

UN definitions of HRE during the proliferation phase were directed at national policymakers and institutions; as such, they provide a top-down statement of what HRE is and should be (Flowers et al., 2000; Coysh, 2014). Based on this understanding, international HRE can be viewed as a way of creating and maintaining binary distinctions; sustaining a one way transfer of knowledge; and disrespecting alternative knowledge, value systems and nuanced experiences (Coysh, 2017).

The diverse UN agreements described above point to a global adoption of HRE. Yet, in practice, there remain diverse perspectives on what exactly HRE is and does (Bajaj, 2011). HRE remains poorly understood (Cardenas, 2005); even human rights educators struggle to define what they do (Flowers, 2003, 2004; Sjöborg, et al., 2017). The struggle to understand the exact meaning of HRE can be attributed to a number of reasons: first, the presence of various definitions produced by different actors and numerous models reflecting varied practices grounded in different histories, socio-economic locations and ideological frameworks (Bajaj, 2012). Second, the definitions can be elusive because of the variety and quantity of activity that takes place in the name of HRE (Flowers, 2003), such as civics education and peace education. Third, the processes of adapting HRE create variations in meaning, aims and types as pressure from above tries to depoliticize it and pressure from below attempts to maintain its link to the struggle for justice (Bajaj, 2012). McCowan (2013) argues that there is “widespread evidence of ‘decoupling’, where the content [of HRE] is sanitized so as not to prove too challenging to existing power structures or pushed to the periphery of school experience” (p.154). Hence, HRE will likely be focused on resistance when provided by grassroots bodies or activists, but not when provided by governmental bodies including UN agencies. Similarly, though the ideas of transformative HRE and critical HRE are emerging from pioneering scholars and practitioners in HRE, many educators still depend on international law and UN mechanisms, which

Keet (2012) calls the declarationist framing of HRE. This framing maintains HRE as depoliticised and decontextualized, thus rendered dangerously irrelevant and to be faced with cynicism and ridicule.

### **Education within Skewed Politics**

The signing of the peace agreement, known as the Oslo Accords, between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli Government in 1993 marked a critical juncture in the modern history of the Palestinian national struggle for liberation and self-determination. One of the most significant political consequences of the Oslo process is that it considerably altered the nature and multiple configurations of the Palestinian national liberation movement, including political parties, grassroots groups and bodies. Those configurations, which for decades led the anti-colonial struggle became, under the so-called Oslo peace process, intermediaries to ensure the implementation of the colonial agenda and to embrace an imposed official strategy of state-building based on the two-state formula (Dana, 2015). This substantial alteration allowed for unprecedented external intervention, which effectively influenced internal Palestinian affairs including education. Education has become a conduit through which this formula is transmitted, with limited possibility or space for criticality, discussion or dissent (Abu Moghli, 2016).

Scattered since 1948 across diverse educational systems, Palestinians have been unable to control their education or construct an authentic curriculum (Sayigh 2017). However, many had a vision of education as a tool for resistance and for the preservation of their threatened national, social and cultural identity. Education was linked to solidarity, liberation, struggle and resistance either by creating their own schools or by devising a philosophy for education under the PLO. This drive to ensure the fulfillment of their right to education against all odds is exemplified during the first Intifada, when the Israeli occupation closed all schools and universities, and education effectively became illegal. Teachers and students had to resort to underground classes. The community came together to support students by lending them spaces to conduct their classes.

Meanwhile, the Israeli occupation called these gatherings of students and teachers “*cells of illegal education*” (Baramki, 2010). Through popular education, Palestinians affirmed their right to education and battled discrimination.

While highly nationalist, the values infused in the Palestinian education vision prior to the Oslo process echoed the human rights discourse that can be found in any universal human rights document. For example a PLO 1972 document entitled: *The Philosophy for Educating Young Arab Palestinians [Falsafat al-Tarbiya lil-Sha'b al-'Arabi al-Filastini]* highlighted gender equality, eliminating discrimination based on ethnicity and/or religion and solidarity among nations struggling for just causes and anti-colonialism. The PLO 1972 document stated that as humans we need to create a community that rejects exploitation, oppression and poverty. Prior to the Oslo process, the vision of education for Palestinians, which I call the *Palestinian Education Utopia*, reflects the HRE framework of education about, through and for human rights in a way that ensures the contextualization of the human rights discourse and links it to the daily lives of Palestinians either in relation to the struggle against the Occupation or for social and political change.

The creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a result of the Oslo Accords and consequently the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1994 shifted this vision away from a human rights approach, informed by a collective anti-colonial struggle, towards rigidly institutionalized strategies framed within a statist approach. The statist approach is monopolized by a ruling elite, detached from the collective struggle and led by external political forces. Politicized donors' agendas are an exemplar of these external political forces that falsely assume a post-conflict situation in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The donor funding that poured into the PA after the signing of the Oslo Accords is conditional. These funds are considered to be political rent (Hovsepian, 2008) or a peace dividend (Leone, 2011) – the money is given to the PA in return for silencing the opposition and maintaining the peace process. This is reflected in education where the majority of the content of textbooks is decontextualized, presenting a statist utopia far from the reality of a colonized nation. For example, in the 8<sup>th</sup>

grade civics textbook the second chapter is entitled: “The law is the pillar of democracy”. It includes lessons on the rule of law, law and society, the constitution and political parties. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade civics textbook there are lessons on accountability, participation in elections, paying taxes and establishing and supporting institutions. There is no mentioning of the Israeli occupation or its impact on state and civil society institutions or any of the aforementioned democratic processes.

From the donor perspective, Palestinian education, particularly HRE, must not be linked to politics, nor should academic institutions – schools in this case – be a source of producing anti-colonial ideology and dissent. Any reference to the struggle against the occupation is considered incitement to violence and hatred. In 2005, the MOE issued a statement debunking these claims, the MOE stated that in “A Study of the Impact of the Palestinian Curriculum”, commissioned by the Belgian Technical Co-operation at the end of 2004, concluded that: “In the light of the debate stirred by accusations of incitement to hatred and other criticisms of the Palestinian textbooks, there is no evidence at all of that happening as a result of the curriculum. What is of great concern to students, teachers and parents alike is that although they wish it, students find it difficult to accept peace and conflict resolution as a solution to the conflict, and teachers find it difficult to teach, while soldiers and settlers are shooting in the streets and in schools and checkpoints have to be braved every day. It would seem that the occupation is the biggest constraint to the realization of these values in the Palestinian curriculum”. Still, the donors’ agendas are influenced by the claims of incitement of violence, which lead to withholding funds to the Palestinian education sector. Additionally, donors assume that Palestinian culture is inherently violent and needs taming, deeming it inferior and in constant need of intervention and adjustment (Hovsepian, 2008; Leone, 2011). This narrative justified the need for external intervention and led to the disregarding of previous experiences and knowledges, rendering values education, particularly HRE, enshrined in a civics education that is de-politicized, decontextualized and detached from reality. This contributed to feelings of alienation and detachment, amongst teachers and students, from HRE programs introduced in schools. Similarly, HRE projects implemented

by (I)NGOs in schools and with Palestinian students in the Occupied West Bank, are dependent on donors' funding, hence also on donors' agendas and the thematic trends proposed by donors.

### **Human Rights Education in Palestinian Authority Schools**

The introduction of HRE within an education system shaped and framed by skewed and colonial politics resulted in HRE lacking sustainability, credibility, and with a confused vision. This was expressed by the narratives of the research participants and the content of the civics textbooks.

In an interview with Salma, an academic and women's rights activist, I asked her about the reason for including the issue of gender equality and women's rights in the textbooks, she said: Gender sells! The more gender they [the MOE] add in the textbooks, the more appealing it becomes to donors (May 2014).

The inclusion of women's rights, as Salma reiterated, is tied to the potential of increased funding and framed within international conventions. In civics textbooks, Palestinian women's social, cultural and political participation and their leading role in the struggle for liberation and self-determination are difficult to find.

In the civics textbooks I rarely found references to the relationship between human rights violations and the Occupation. In a 12<sup>th</sup> grade textbook there is a chapter on international humanitarian law, it only mentions Palestine and the Occupation in sentences that include Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Bosnia (Darweesh, 2012). Connecting the Occupation to something distant like wars in other countries prevents students from identifying rights violations committed by the Occupation as part of their everyday reality.

The avoidance of tackling the issues of Occupation and the aspirations for liberation fall under two types of textual silence. First, discreet silences which are defined as "those that avoid stating sensitive information", and second, manipulative silences which are "those that deliberately conceal relevant information from the reader/listener"

(Huckin, 2002, p. 348). It could be deduced that the MOE, as institutional agent of the PA, was reticent to include sensitive information in school textbooks so as to avoid scrutiny and possible withdrawal of support, given the broader context of political rent or discursive domestication as a method to maintain international support. In this way, external politics and the pressure imposed on the PA to keep resistance against the Occupation and opposition to the PA at bay carried over on to the nature of HRE in schools in terms of content. Additionally, the PA's oppressive policies against Palestinians, stemming from their adherence to an external political agenda, trickled down to daily oppressive measures against students and teachers. These oppressive measures contradict the human rights topics presented in the civics textbooks. For example, in the civics textbooks the right of children to participate is presented and discussed within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Palestinian law, and students are encouraged to participate actively and positively within their communities to create social and democratic political change. In practice, students are banned from forming student councils under the pretext that these councils might encourage students to be engaged politically, an action that according to the MOE, might harm the students and the school.

In an interview with Fadi, an MOE official in Ramallah, I asked about students' political activism, and he said: "We want our students to demand their rights, but in a 'civilized' way, we do not want trouble makers" (April, 2014). In another interview, Jamila, an MOE official in the North of the Occupied West Bank, re-iterated the attitude communicated by Fadi, she said:

Our students live under distressing political conditions; they feel they need to rebel against the Occupation. We want them to understand that in our future state they need to act peacefully, [and] know their obligations to get their rights. (April, 2014)

In these two quotes, MOE officials considered the actions of political participation of young Palestinians as *un-civilized*, mirroring a colonial

donors' discourse that perceives the Palestinian culture as inherently violent and in need of taming. Palestinian students according to the MOE officials are now judged by international norms and standards of rights, tolerance and 'civilization'. Their education is a process of conditioning and disciplining. The students are subjects on display, they are judged, measured, and compared with others. They are trained or corrected, classified, and normalized (Foucault, 1977). The normalizing process, or the colonial civilizing mission, aims to produce what the US security envoy Keith Dayton call the "new Palestinians" (Jawad, 2014).

This normalization mission through HRE contradicts with the students' reality. The cover of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade civics textbook shows a group of students in a demonstration carrying placards stating: "Yes to the rule of law, yes to national unity and yes to the freedom of expression". However, in practice students stated that such demands do not concern them and are violated constantly.

"Ya miss! They tell us that we have the right to the freedom of expression and participation! But they ban student councils. Why do they teach us about democracy and elections then?"  
(Ala'a, student from the South of Nablus, April 2014)

The PA had adopted a pseudo human rights discourse to achieve political gains while violating human rights on a daily basis. In 2014, the PA joined 15 international human rights conventions (UN News Centre, 2014) and a year after became a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Erakat, 2015). However, the PA was losing legitimacy due to its failure to end the Occupation and provide adequate services, in addition to its security coordination with the Occupation, an act that was perceived by many Palestinians as treason. The PA was essentially an authoritarian body; Hajjar (2001) describes the PA as "autonomous authoritarianism" (p.9). Hence, the PA's use of human rights language contributed to the de-legitimization of human rights amongst Palestinians.

On 23 February 2016, Palestinian teachers in the Occupied West Bank announced a general strike and arranged a demonstration before the

Prime Minister's Office in the city of Ramallah. Although teachers' striking is not an unusual action in Palestine, the reaction of the PA this time was severe. On the day of the mass demonstration, thousands of teachers marched to Ramallah, only to find the PA setting checkpoints around the city, stopping vehicles carrying teachers. Some teachers told me that PA checkpoints were also erected at the entrances of other West Bank cities and villages to stop teachers from leaving. Yasser, a teacher from Bethlehem described how he managed to reach Ramallah: "Remember how we used to take bypass and dirt roads when the Israelis closed checkpoints? We took the same route!" (March 2016) This conduct by the PA's security apparatus was dubbed by Saleem, a Palestinian human rights lawyer as "the Israelization of the PA security forces" (February 2016). This suggests that the PA's conduct is similar to and parallel with the Israeli occupation, which further erodes their legitimacy and that of their human rights discourse.

The teachers' calls during the demonstration were originally organized to highlight social and economic demands, but after the PA's oppressive actions, their demands turned political. Placards carried by the teachers called for the resignation of the government, a restructuring of the teachers' union and lessening the heavy hand of the PA security apparatus. The repressive measures taken against the teachers are an example of the PA's violation of teachers' right to peaceful assembly and association enshrined in Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which the PA joined in April 2014 with no reservations.

This violation directly affected the conduct of teachers in schools. After the teachers' strikes, Sami, one of the civics teachers I had previously interviewed contacted me and said: "From now on, I will only teach history and geography... let the PA teach human rights to the students." (May 2016) His statement reflects the disjuncture between the narrative of human rights used by the PA and its oppressive conduct against the people. This teacher's anger translated immediately on to the way he perceived HRE. For him, his rights were violated, he became cynical and detached, and the human rights discourse in the textbooks became empty rhetoric belonging to the ruling party.

As a result of the teachers' strike, a group of students from a PA school in Ramallah took to the streets and joined their teachers' demonstration (Abu Moghli & Qato, 2018). This political activism of teachers and students embodies human rights praxis. This is what Jalal, a director of an education NGO, told me when I asked him his opinion regarding the events that were taking place and the confrontation between the teachers and the PA: "No textbook will ever teach students what rights mean. Only taking matters into their hands and opposing the oppressor. Their teachers today demonstrated that beautifully." (March 2016) The students who participated in the demonstrations with their teachers had similar understanding on human rights praxis and the disjuncture with HRE presented in schools, Salma a student from Ramallah told me: "We do not need HRE in school to realize we are oppressed, we do not need incitement to know we are occupied, oppressed and so we resist." (May 2016).

The imposed and depoliticized model of HRE, the daily violations of the Occupation and the increasingly oppressive PA policies and practices – in addition to the challenging socio-economic realities – result in an environment in which is not conducive to human rights and HRE. On the macro-level, students and teachers develop serious cynicism and disbelief in the global human rights regime. On the school level, due to this cynicism, HRE that is included in the civics curriculum is made redundant. While Palestinian students have the skill to use language through which they can name the violations and discrimination they endure (Osler & Starkey, 2010), their experience leads them to perceive this universal human rights language as foreign, unless it is linked to their daily lives and the struggles they face. This universal human rights language is alienating because it is not situated, it is disembodied, allegedly neutral, and objective. Yet, this language is deemed superior and worth imposing to modernize, while the knowledges, experiences and language of the students and their teachers are considered anecdotal, 'particularistic' and inferior (Doxtater, 2004; Grosfoguel, 2006; Mignolo, 2011).

In an interview with Nidal, a student from the school in south of Nablus, he

told me:

Ya miss.... Human rights are great [Ala Aini o Rassi], but when it comes to Palestine, they mean nothing.... You hear me.... Nothing. It does not matter what methods we use to resist, we will always be dehumanized and called terrorists. (April 2014)

The discussion above illustrates how HRE in PA schools in the Occupied West Bank has failed to link human rights to the struggle of the people or frame them within people's praxis, consequently rendering HRE meaningless and useless in dismantling structures of domination and oppression. HRE in this case is unable to create alternatives and ways to build a space where students and teachers can make meaningful changes to their lives. In the absence of viable alternatives, they opted to take to the streets as direct confrontation with the oppressor, in this case the PA, in order to weaken the structure(s) of oppression. Through demonstrating critical consciousness and human rights praxis, Palestinian teachers used a pedagogy that is truly liberating. By taking to the streets, they broke free from the curricula and rigid pedagogies that over the years remained distant from them and their students. On 23 February 2016, the oppressed became their own example in the struggle for their redemption (Freire, 1993 [1970]).

### **Peace Education: the dirty phrase**

HRE and PE in various scholarly work are interconnected, either through their core conceptual and theoretical basis or through their implementation (Bajaj, 2014; Reardon, 1997; Shuayb, 2015). PE as a field, emerged after World War I and II as educators sought to *prevent* future wars by teaching for peace. Civics education is an umbrella or a vehicle through which HRE, PE and other fields of values education fall (Osler, A. & Starkey, 2010). PE was mentioned in passing during my interviews. When I asked teachers to elaborate on the possibility of including PE in their practice in the classroom or school, the reaction to my question was different than the one I received when I asked about HRE. It went beyond

the shrug of the shoulder and the cynical answers. My question was either completely dismissed or in some instances received with negativity and discomfort.

Participants confirmed that PE is linked to normalization with the occupier; normalization of settler colonialism on their land and acceptance of their state of dispossession. The term “peace” for Palestinians is linked to a failed peace agreement, which led to the Palestinian capitulation (Said, 1993). A popular Palestinian perspective, often repeated in interviews, was that peace can only happen with decolonization, i.e. the end of the Israeli occupation to Palestinian and Arab lands, the recognition of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination (Mi’Ari, 1999) and the fulfilment of the right of return to Palestine refugees.

Yousef, a MOE official told me:

As long as the Israeli occupation continues to look for excuses to smoke screen its brutality against our people, and to deny the Palestinians’ self- determination, freedom, and human rights in violation of international law, the conflict will continue. Palestinians need peace more than any other nation on earth, but peace must be based on mutual respect and justice for all. (March, 2014)

This was confirmed by Firas, a deputy head teacher in the South of Nablus boys’ school who said:

The biggest and main challenge is the Israeli occupation, their tanks, jeeps, soldiers and settlers are shooting in the streets outside the school as well as attacking the school while teachers are trying to promote human rights and peace in the classroom...The Israeli occupation breeds more hatred and violence than any schoolbook can...what can a school book teach about peace when all this violence is happening around us? (April 2014)

These two quotes indicate the frustration experienced by educators, particularly when they are asked to teach about peace and human rights in spaces that should be safe educational spaces but are instead targets for the Israeli Occupation and its colonial settlers. Hence, when I asked about PE I felt that the question was unacceptable and offensive. According to my research participants, particularly teachers, PE in the case of Palestinians conveys further surrender and humiliation, yet another indicator of the permeation of coloniality into HRE and related approaches like PE.

### **Decolonizing, Reconceptualizing and Reclaiming**

The human rights regime is embedded within a specific cultural and historical framework involving the foregrounding of Western colonial knowledges (Baxi, 2007; Mutua, 2002; Spivak, 2004). For this regime to be viable and universal, according to Sen (2004), depends on its ability to survive open critical scrutiny in public reasoning. Stammers (2009) states that meaningful human rights are inspired by and support long-term human rights praxis and peoples' struggles against oppression, power and privilege. Introducing HRE within an international human rights regime that was framed and rigidly codified by and in the Global North as state centric ignores three important aspects: i) the need to acknowledge and work through human suffering; ii) the need for political engagement and risk, mainly the risk of criticality and scrutiny; iii) and the need to empower the disenfranchised and marginalized through redistribution and recognition (Schick, 2006). Additionally, just like with other values education subjects such as PE, the majority of HRE scholarship is being produced in the West with their descriptive and analytical intentions focused on the so-called developing world (Abdi, 2015). Bhabha (1999) questions whether the global human rights discourse, framed in legal terms, can be a tool with which colonialism can be overcome. By extension the question applies to HRE and whether it can serve to overcome colonialism and other forms of oppression.

With the proliferation of HRE, there was an increased institutionalization of the field. This allowed for higher levels of

standardization and omissions of experiences, struggles and space for criticality. As mentioned earlier in this article, HRE has a history that recognizes people's struggles against colonialism, racial discrimination and apartheid. This conceptualization of HRE was stated in the UNESCO 1974 Recommendation for example. However, these key aspects were omitted in recent UN documents such as the UNDHRET (2011) which is now a foundational document for HRE work globally. Another omission is of indigenous knowledge (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999; Denzin et al., 2008) which is built on peoples' experiences of resistance against oppression and struggles for freedom and emancipation. According to Baxi (2007), the modern conception of human rights was based on mechanisms of exclusion (omission) and thus a major task of human rights narratology is to give language to histories of human pain and suffering; learning from the subaltern (Spivak, 2004). These omissions hinder the ability of HRE to offer a critical, contextualized and bottom-up alternative to the mainstream institutionalized Western, so-called universal, knowledge that is prevalent. HRE is therefore rendered a colonial endeavor, particularly if its sole aim becomes, like in the case of Palestine, to tame struggles for freedom and self-determination or substitute a culture that is deemed by the universal human rights regime as violent and in need of rectifying. A decolonized conceptualization of HRE needs to embrace the ethics of recognition, rather than omission.

I observed a lesson entitled: "Child rights are human rights" for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in a school in the north of the Occupied West Bank. The right to education was stressed in this lesson with the only examples given in the textbook for depriving children of this right were child labor and the lack of school facilities for children with disabilities. After the class, students told me that they are required by the Israeli military to go by themselves and apply for a permit that allows them to cross a gate guarded by Israeli soldiers that separates their homes from the school. This caused psychological stress, extreme fear and a loss of a sense of safety, exposing them to interrogation by the Israeli army. I was told that some girls dropped out of school because their parents were scared to send the girls to the military compound to get their permits. These issues were not

mentioned in the textbook, or discussed in the classroom during the child rights lesson. This omission of experiences not only normalizes the violations and makes the lesson irrelevant to the students, but also normalizes the presence of the Occupation army, the gates and the military, i.e. contributes to the normalization of colonization. The reality under which Palestinians live – decades of settler colonialism, denial of the right of return and authoritarian governments in both the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip – represents a challenge to the application of international law and turns human rights into a punctured narrative, with questionable legitimacy and limited applicability. This is necessarily reflected in HRE.

To decolonize HRE, indigenous knowledges, experiences and lexicon need to be acknowledged and considered as the basis for HRE. There is no standardized definition for indigenous knowledge. Semali and Kincheloe (2002) state that indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic way in which residents of an area come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organize folk knowledge, cultural beliefs and history to enhance their lives. Whether we call it indigenous, local, marginalized or popular culture, as Freire referred to it (Morrow, 2008), Palestinians create their own ways of knowing and interacting with their surroundings. The MOE sidelined this knowledge and created an exclusionary educational institution based on a Eurocentric knowledge system (Battiste, 2005). The MOE neglected to acknowledge the numerous indigenous initiatives to create a Palestinian education system. Therefore, the post-MOE education system and philosophy was created without recognition of the accumulated experiences of Palestinians, rendering its approach to HRE irrelevant.

In an interview, Amal, an academic and a women's rights activist, reflected on her frustration with the process of curriculum design with the MOE. She said:

When we were putting together the civics curricula, we were lost. It is our first time to create such a curriculum in Palestine. The first of its kind in the whole region perhaps. We had to research and look for experiences from other

countries, sometimes these experiences did not relate to us, they did not look like us [ma btishbahna], when we asked to refer to Palestinian experiences, our request was denied and deemed irrelevant. (April 2014)

By ignoring the pre-MOE education experiences and the values embedded in these experiences – for example the contextualization of human rights within the struggle against colonialism – a new value system and consciousness was created through the official curriculum. This value system was market-oriented, with a decontextualized outlook on politics, culture and society. This led to the invalidation of knowledge systems rooted in anti-colonial national liberation, thereby disenfranchising them (Dana 2015). Another example was given by Samia, a head teacher from Hebron, she told me:

In school, the girls do mock elections; they focus on the technicalities of the process rather than the context, as if elections are the only manifestation of democracy! School books completely disregard Palestinian democratic experiences during the different historical phases... trade unions, women's movement and so on. Why don't they teach that in school, isn't that more relevant? Our indigenous knowledge and experience is being glazed over with an imposed agenda and a pseudo statist vision.

She continued:

I encourage the students to ask their parents, neighbors and other people in the community to tell them about their experiences before the PA. What democratic instruments and processes existed at that time. Then they come and share that in class to compare and imagine a better future based on our own knowledge and experience. (April 2014)

The above quote exemplifies how head teachers and students utilized contextualized HRE to imagine a future beyond the confines of textbooks,

the PA's statist vision and the Occupation. The head teacher and the students moved beyond the essentialist and universalist notions of human rights. They adopted an anti-essentialist approach by critiquing the monolithic (institutional) portrayal of human rights and by taking their own experiences, and the history and knowledge of their community, into account. The head teacher and the students created an anti-essentialist HRE pedagogy by drawing on various ideas and multiple perspectives on human rights, rather than approaching it from a one-sided universalized perspective. In this school, the head teacher and the students were able to break the colonization and subordination of their imagination, their ways of being and conceptualizing what is considered possible for them (Imani, 2008).

### **HRE the Global and the Occupied**

Formal schooling is by definition political; the educational system is at the center of crucial struggles over the meaning of democracy and over the definitions of legitimate authority and culture (Apple, 2003). Hence, linking human rights and HRE to politics is inevitable. Contemporary international law, including human rights, is a system created by states. History has shown that states seek the enforcement of international laws when it suits their interests (Munayyer, 2015). The ability to use human rights as a counter-hegemonic tool for righting injustices and obtaining emancipation and self-determination is not linear and needs to be problematized (Perugini & Gordon, 2015).

For HRE to be emancipatory, several considerations need to be taken into account. The case of Palestine highlights the need for a de-colonial HRE. Civics textbooks in terms of content, social, cultural and political orientation are difficult to change as they are tied to external powers, such as donor bodies, the will of the Occupier and the existence of an authoritarian regime. Within such a challenging context, there is a substantial role for critical educators and researchers to advance strategies for the project of decolonizing human rights (Barreto, 2012); and so that HRE, in turn, can also become decolonizing (Yang, 2015). If decolonization

is going to truly become more than a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), I suggest four precepts:

- When designing HRE programs, the focus should be shifted away from the universal – local dichotomy. Alternatively, a continuous dialogue should take place on how internationalized human rights, rooted in peoples' struggles, can be the basis of HRE.
- HRE should build upon the experiences of young people, particularly in contexts where young people are part of long-standing political, social and cultural struggles. Their experiences should be considered as a source and insight rather than behavior that needs rectifying.
- Within HRE, the struggles of the people should not be romanticized or considered as having moral superiority. On the contrary, moral absolutism should be avoided when it comes to peoples' struggles as much as it should be avoided when framing HRE within international human rights standards.
- Rooting HRE within particular contexts and linking it to peoples' struggles and daily experiences does not necessarily translate into the need to search for alternative types of knowledges. It means that there is a need to unearth pre-existing knowledges that have been ignored or sidelined by dominant power structures. By doing so, localized experiences can be de-territorialized and the vernacular of the struggle of the people and the tools they use for emancipation can be considered legitimate rather than simply legal.

These precepts call for moving from problematizing HRE, through the reclaiming of local experiences and struggles, to the design of new forms of HRE that engage students and teachers in a collective search for ways to dismantle the structures of oppression. Some examples from schools, like the school in Hebron, showed that head teachers, teachers and students can create their own critical spaces and formulate independent understandings and praxis within the confines of the school. In some instances, they are able to transform the rigid curricula by utilizing creative and relevant pedagogies. However, the school itself is an institution of oppression where

bullying, corporal punishment, surveillance and other manifestations of violent practices exist. To reach critical, inclusive and de-colonial praxis there is a need to create alternative structures to schools as they stand today.

With the shrinking role of the PA due to the uncertainties of the political context, Palestinians may be able to form inclusive community-based and community-led programs of critical HRE. These programs should include Palestinians inside Palestine and those in the diaspora. These programs can build on previous Palestinian experiences as well as experiences of other nations and groups where education was utilized as a tool to struggle for justice, equality, and decolonization. Through the creation of this model, credibility, sustainability, ownership and participation will facilitate the popularization of human rights consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

This article shows that universalist-declarationist and standardized approaches to HRE ultimately subjugate its emancipatory potential. By institutionalizing and depoliticizing human rights struggle(s), and foreclosing space for critique and questioning, HRE is rendered a tool for political and hegemonic domination. In the Palestinian context, this situation led to HRE that is perceived with cynicism and ridicule, and that had turned into a harmful tool of domination in the hands of those in power. Within a settler-colonial context, Palestinian educators and students who were interviewed rejected the concept of PE, which is closely related and sometime conflated with HRE. The term PE itself exemplified to them the surrender and taming of their struggle. To reclaim HRE using a de-colonial lens, HRE theorists and practitioners need to revert to sources of knowledge embedded within people's experiences, and that link human rights with the vernacular of the people. They need to adopt a bottom-up approach and allow for criticality, which is necessary to enable the re-appropriation and re-conceptualization of HRE by those who are on the forefront of the struggles against injustice. Under these conditions, HRE

becomes a true strategy to build a culture of human rights that can dismantle structures of oppression. HRE should not be conceptualized and implemented in an assumed vacuum, but rather in real-life contexts with powerful factors such as political and economic agendas, religion, social and cultural norms that shape its aims and impact. There is a need to rethink HRE in theory and practice, shifting its current reality to one that contributes to building critical consciousness. This shift will not emerge without resistance, and it's our responsibility as critical educators and researchers to take on this battle.

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