THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOLS ON SHAPING PALESTINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RAMALLAH

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Abstract

This paper presents the main findings and conclusions gather throughout a PhD dissertation under the supervision of Varna Free University on the influence of schools over the identity of Palestinian high school students in Ramallah. The research on Palestinian high school students dealt with the subject of the influence of the school over the identity of the students. In order to do so we adventured into two Palestinians schools in Ramallah: the private Friends school of the Quakers denomination and a Palestinian public school. The research findings supported the assumption of differences in the identities of the students in both schools. However, it is important to take this conclusion with caution due the substantial differences in the socio – economic backgrounds of both populations.

Keywords – *Israel/Palestine, Palestinian identity, National identity, Ramallah, Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

Introduction

The identities of students are fluid social constructs that change from one context to another. School structures play a central role over the possibility's students have in order to manifest their identities which may be in either opposition or in harmony with academic engagement (Locke Davidson, 1996).

Students rely on various aspects of their identity within different social contexts, depending on external feedback by peers or school personnel and this

construct might either support or deter behavior and attitudes required for academic engagement and performance (Idem).

This paper presents the main findings and conclusions gather throughout a PhD dissertation under the supervision of Varna Free University on the influence of schools over the identity of Palestinian high school students in Ramallah.

The influence of the school on the shaping of identity

It might be claimed that the general difference between person and person as human beings is reduced to their identity. The identity is the cognitive sentimental condition in which the person lives (and as a consequence of this condition) he belongs and identifies himself with a certain group with cultural, national, religious, social, ethnic, linguistic and native ascription (Riekie, Adridge and Afari, 2017; Altal, 2007).

The personal identity is defined as the ensemble of characteristics, behaviors, perceptions and values of the individual. The identity is not congenital but the product of the dynamic and constant process. The questions of consolidation and design of identity became relevant since the 19th century, receiving new significance and the attention of many researchers and theoreticians of diverse disciplines have dealt with it ever since.

The first researchers to study identity were Frayer (1958) and Erikson. It could be argued that they were the ones coining the concept of identity as key element in the psychological development.

The sociological occupation with the question of identity followed the psychological one, being Mead (1934) and Fitzgerald (1974) the first to deal with the subject, from the sociological perspective.

Regardless the psychological and sociological perspectives, the answers regarding identity remain partial and most of them view the identity as something given that might be "touched" or molded in reality.

The issue of identity and its formation began receiving a more central place in research and the academic discourse after the end of cold war (1989) and the beginning of the globalization era (Luyckx, et. al., 2008).

This new reality provoked the disintegration of the old frames and the creation of new ones, the formation of new countries following the decay of the soviet block and the consolidation of the European Union (idem).

Today the political aspect of liberty over the identity and the influences of cultures and the fast changes occurring on our day to day life have a definite impact over the consolidation of the identity. The language of shaper of identity, the lack of absolute truths or law under which to act, and the feeling of uncertainty of the identity do not receive neither contemporary nor sufficient attention, regardless the fact that they are actually the limits of identity discourse (אופיר, 1996; קשטי, 1995; Calhoun, 1994; Chambers, 1994; Grossberg, 1996).

Since the identity is no longer fixed and therefore there is no point in asking who you are, but how did you get to become who you are and how can someone remain being who you are, in spite of the fast changes (Fischer – Rosenthal, 1996).

The institutions of the educational system are considered one of the main social sites within which (and through which) the social, political, sentimental, and national acclimatization or the integration of the identity (ies) of the individual are shaped.

According to (Almanof,)1991 in a research conducted in Egypt and Kuwait regarding the political development of the identity among students reached the conclusion that the school has the main influence in strengthening the national identity through the curriculum related to the homeland.

The same conclusions are reached by many of the researchers that conducted research studies in the West (Niemi, 1998) and others who claimed that schools are extremely important venues in order to strengthen national identity.

Niemi and others proved in their research studies dealing with education to citizenship in American high schools that the reason students acquire national identity is caused by several factors and recommend teachers to emphasize them while teaching and transmitting values related to nationality (Cohen-Malayev, Schachter and Rich, 2014).

From that research we learn that the differences in the students' knowledge regarding nationality are influenced by gender, ethnicity, type of school and other factors related to the individual, the household and obviously the school. The researchers proved that instruction and the learning process contributes to the acquisition and strengthening of national identity.

In another research (Finkel) on tolerance was claimed that the American government emphasizes the values of belonging, loyalty, solidarity, democracy and acceptance of the other in the curriculum on nationality.

The learning of those values at school influences positively the strengthening of the national identity, the acceptance of the other and the assimilation of values of coexistence.

Similar results were reached through a comparative research on the strengthening of national identity in Britain and France (Starky).

In this research the author claimed that regardless the differences in the values emphasizes in both countries, through the education to nationality, both countries agreed on the importance of the consciousness of the citizens vis-à-vis their rights and obligations and the positive actions taken by the citizens in the benefit of the state.

Components of Palestinian identity

If we assume that identity is related to a certain territory, then the Palestinian concept is problematic since there is no single definition of the territory. The territory called Palestine went through many changes (Hugirat.2005).

The Palestinian national identity is complicated not only because of its history but because the contemporary geopolitical implications: constant changing [and maneuvering] of borders [and border crossings] which have contribute to the development of a fragmented national identity (Khalidi, 1997).

Nowadays, the Palestinian national identity is at an ambiguous stage because of its components do not exist in one exclusive geographical sphere. By the contrary, its components are scattered across Palestine and include people living in the West Bank, the Gaza strip and East Jerusalem, as well as expatriates living all around the globe (Habashi, 2008).

"Palestinian history demonstrates many expressions of national identity across time. Palestinian national identity developed not only from an interpretation of the historical and contemporary experiences, but also from the proximate existence of the State of Israel that impacted the creation of Palestinian national identity"(Hugirat. 2005).

It would not be accurate to claim that Palestinian national identity developed exclusively as a consequence of the construction of the "*other*", the Palestinian identity developed within the frame of the universal notion of nationalism throughout the 20th century.

The *self* and the other within the Palestinian national identity

Broadly speaking the *other* for Palestinians refers to the Jewish people, the Zionists, the Israeli army and the state of Israel in general. The *other* might be divided into four different sub-groups:

1) the oppressor other

2) the scattered other

3) the allying other

4) the religious other.

The articulation of the oppressor is constructed based on the interpretation and understanding of historical discourses. According to Andersen (1991) particular set(s) of historical memories play a cardinal role in the formation of national identity; but memories are conditional upon the geopolitical discourse.

Rajaram (2004) claims that national identity depiction is not predetermined neither by place, political ideology nor time and therefore some nuances might present themselves.

"The political identity of the oppressor other was associated with acts of aggression…Military economical and socio-psychological oppressive forms were predominant in the description of the oppressor other" (Habashi, 2008 p. 17).

The scattered other in Palestinian national identity refers to the dispersal of the Jews across the globe in relation to Palestinian soil. This idea supports Tuathail (2000) claim that national identity is no longer constructed in relation local politics exclusively but it is relative to global discourses.

The allying other representation is "characterized by conditions in which the other is not alienated from the self but rather is affirmed and integrated as a positive dimension (Idem, pp. 19-20).

The *self* is not merely a reflection of the *other* but a complement of its articulation in the process of constructing national identity.

The *self*-encompass six sub-groups:

1) the historical refugee self
2) ennobled self
3) the traitor self
4) religious self
5) resistance self
6) geographic self.

These dimensions interact creating nuances of the self. Since the religious and the geographical self are rather self-explanatory, they will not be described here.

The historical refugee self focuses on representations of the Palestinian people before and after the creation of the state of Israel. The ennobled self is defined in terms of the reasons for being proud of being Palestinian, and therefore related to language, religion and common cultural experiences. Andersen (1991) concludes that giving shared meaning in belonging, practice and history enhances the continuity of the community.

The traitor is related to the fragmented self and that fragmentation is more prevalent in contemporary Palestinian identity. The fragmentation of the self also serves in contrasting the self within the geopolitical reality.

The concept relates to the participation of Palestinians in helping Israelis with their national initiatives. The concept began to be used already during the days of the British mandate. Nowadays the concept refers to the cooperation of Palestinians with Israeli intelligence agencies, acting against the interests and national aspirations of the Palestinian people.

The resistance self demonstrates the assertiveness of the Palestinian people to be free across time, the resistance of occupation and the strategies relates to those activities.

Methodology

During a research field work for a dissertation on the influences of the school over the identities of high school students in Ramallah, we interviewed about 400 eleventh and twelve grade students of a public school and the Friends (Quaker) private school in Ramallah. The research was based on a questionnaire which included mainly close questions with a few open-ended questions.

Main findings and conclusions of the research on the identity of Palestinian high school students

The research on Palestinian high school students dealt with the subject of the influence of the school over the identity of the students. In order to do so we adventured into two Palestinians schools in Ramallah: the private Friends school of the Quakers denomination and a Palestinian public school. The research field of this PhD dissertation was interesting particularly since the Palestinian society finds itself highly politically charged, due a lack of solution to the Palestinian – Israeli conflict.

Since the Quaker's educational guiding principles call for the equality of all human beings, the love of the enemy, solving political conflicts only through nonviolent means, giving women equality of rights, obligations and opportunities, forming a sense of a community of obligation and responsibility while finding the good and positive characteristics in others, we tended to believe there would be substantial differences within the identities of the students at both schools.

According to the answers of the students we can reach the conclusion that the Friends school is indeed successful in equipping the next generation with the values and principles of the Quakers ideology. Although none of the students talked about loving the enemy, many raised the issue of liberating Palestine through non-violent resistance. Notwithstanding, it would be worthwhile to mention that we did find one case of a female student that defined herself by her desire and enjoyment she finds in learning Hebrew.

The issues of gender equality and the special place and attention women receive were reflected in the responses of many female students who put women's issues very high on their agenda, emphasizing they would like to defend and advocate women's rights when they are older.

It was also common for female students at Friends to raise the issue of been more capable of developing relationships with boys thanks to the school's mixed character. None of the male students at Friends raised either one of those issues.

The issue of been able to find the good and positive characteristics within the others was also raised in the student's responses. This was reflected by the desire of the students to meet other cultures, travel abroad and by the students' tendency of defining themselves as tolerant of others. In this aspect the Friends school climate is of aid, especially due to its heterogeneous character according to the religion of the students. The open and tolerant atmosphere in the school allowed the students to freely define themselves in more open terms, and for many of them, the school opened for them not only the possibility of freedom of religion but also of freedom from religion.

The issues of community building, social trust and solidarity were not raised only by the students of Friends but by the students of the public school as well.

However, one might say that the students at each school view the society around them from a different perspective due to marked differences in the socio – economic background of the students.

The students at Friends view society and the community around them from the perspective of the privileged who are aware and sensitive of the needs of the others thanks to the involvement in volunteer work through the school programs.

The students at both schools refer slightly different to the issue of nationalism. To the surprise of the writer, the students at Friends were more tenacious in expressing nationalistic feelings. Therefore, one might be inclined to argue that the Friends school, as opposed to other Quaker schools, did encourage nationalistic feelings and did not intend to depress the students' nationalistic aspirations, although without any doubt it did managed to canalize the students' interests to other channels.

As it has been argued about Quaker school environments, within the Friends school in Ramallah, frequent relationships between Arabs of Christian and Muslim backgrounds were very common.

Once having sized the successful ability of the Friends school in transmitting its ideology, finding resonance within the students' attitudes and perceptions, we now turn the attention in describing the differences in the formation of the identities of the students at both schools.

Conclusion - The research findings

The research findings supported the assumption of differences in the identities of the students in both schools. However, it is important to take this conclusion with caution due the substantial differences in the socio – economic backgrounds of both populations. Apparently, the students at Friends come from a stronger socio –economic background, which translates into having parents with higher education levels, being more urban and having lower numbers of family members residing in the same household. It might be reasonable to believe that at least part of difference in the identity is a by-product of these socio – economic differences.

The analysis of ideological factors (importance of being Palestinian, Arab, Muslim / Christian and Western and Eastern culture disclose differences by gender, place of residence, and religion. Generally speaking, we learnt that males, Muslims and being a student at the public school increase the chances of considering religion to be a very import identity component. While the students at the public school are more concern about religion, the students of Friends consider the homeland to have more impact on them than religion. As well, we found that while the public-school students consider their Arab identity to be a core component of who they are, the students at Friends consider their Western culture identity to be paramount of who they are.

The impact of school variables was found to be more inconclusive than the influence of ideological factors. Broadly speaking we found that the vast majority of the students are very appreciative of the school climate in which they study and feel very proud of being part of their respective schools.

About half of the students don't see themselves as being different from all other students at their schools. It was surprising to find out that for the vast majority of the students, teachers – who should have the broadest direct contact with the students – are not consider by the students of being of much influence on who the students become.

There were substantial differences in the way's students at both schools perceive the school has an overall impact on them or the Palestinian society. The students at Friends consider the school to be a very strong social agent with substantial influence over who they are and the Palestinian society at large. Some of these students even associate the strength of the school influence and equate it with that of the family. Opposed to that point of view, very few students at the public school claimed the school doesn't have any sort of influence due the low level of education and the incompetency of the teaching staff.

Regarding the type of influence the school has over them, the Friend's students emphasized the social, political and religious influence of the school, while the students at the public school were more concerned about the impact the school might have over their possibilities of entering university, acquiring a profession and been able to find decent ways of earn a life. The difference in the students' perceptions about the influence of the school might be again attributed to the substantial gaps in socio – economic background of the students. A weaker socio – economic background as in the case of the public-school students, make them more concern about the need to change their immediate realities and overcome the

obstacles to have a better future. The students at Friends, in the other hand, enjoy better todays which allows them to dream about less "mundane" worries.

The responses of the students when asked to define their identities disclose only very few references to the historical refugee self (raising the subject of the occupation and its impact over the Palestinian society), but many references to the ennobled proud Palestinian self.

We didn't find any cases in which the students referred to themselves or to others in terms of the traitor self, while some defined themselves as paramount to the resistance self. Many of the students used either the religious or the geographical self-dimensions to define who they are.

We cannot emphasize enough though that nearly half of the respondents chose to define themselves according to terms which I define as the mundane, simplistic, natural or immediate self. By this I refer to the definition of the identity self in terms of what their dreams are, the things they like, their physical characteristics, their achievements or the things they do in their daily lives without necessarily using the regular ethno-national-religious terminology.

Policy recommendations

One of the main findings of the research is the feeling of the students at Friends that describe the school climate of their school as a peaceful and open atmosphere. This feeling according to many of them and especially in the eyes of the female students is a product of the mixed character of the student population in the school. The simple fact that male and female students study together allows them to become more tolerant and peaceful with one another. This also facilitates and increases the student's ability to see the "other", to be sensitive to differences and celebrate diversity. This increased ability impacts the society at large by making it a more tolerant and accepting society.

Another important policy recommendation is regarding the issue of the relationship between openness and the preservation of a particular identity.

The research findings presented here support the notion of a positive influence of open and tolerant school policies in order to strengthen ethno-religious and national identities. Encouraging openness, exposure, cosmopolitanism and openness to other cultures might not necessarily will bring to a loss of a particular (ethnocentric) identity but might actually increase it.

In this aspect, we learn that getting to know the other aid the student to appreciate better his or her own culture. Goes without saying that exposure to the other is facilitated as the environment of the student becomes more heterogeneous.

School officials should pay more attention to the role of the teachers and the perceived importance of teachers as role models for the students. From the research findings it seems that the place of the teachers as role models for the students has eroded and it is seen a less important than the role of other school variables such as the school director, the curriculum and the school pedagogy. Yet, since the teachers are actually those who are supposed to spend the longest time in direct interactions with the students, the interactions between students and teachers should receive more attention.

A diverse (heterogeneous) environment is a richer environment which contributes to the individual and his or her abilities to reach to others and to themselves. The richness in diversity should be celebrated and not uncovered or feared. Diversity should be encouraged and managed effectively.

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