

Navigating curricula choices for Palestine refugees

Jo Kelcey

Curriculum choices matter greatly in countries that host large numbers of refugees for increasingly long periods of time.

The question of what refugees learn is often absent from discussions of the importance of education. This oversight is significant. Curricula choices and the textbooks that convey these choices reflect a vision of society: who is included, who is not and how they are represented.

There are longstanding disputes over the curricula taught to Palestine refugees¹ who learn in schools run by the UN. Following Palestinian displacement in 1948, public, private and volunteer-run schools accommodated Palestinians in their places of exile. In some cases, existing schools expanded their capacity to include refugee students; in others, new schools for the refugees were created. The piecemeal emergence of schools and inadequate funding for education meant that providers relied heavily on existing education resources, including host-state curricula and textbooks. When the UN Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) took over the schools in May 1950 it was more expedient, cost-efficient and politically viable to continue using these resources than to create new ones. Furthermore, the use of host-state curricula at primary level meant that students could more easily continue their studies in host-state secondary schools. Finally, alignment with host states' curricula facilitated the certification and accreditation of learning outcomes by these states.

The importance of the refugees' right of return led the UN and Arab States' representatives to "strongly recommend" that the geography and history of Palestine be taught not only in UNRWA schools but also in government and private schools that accepted Palestinian children.² In the ensuing years, however, UNRWA has faced numerous challenges implementing these policies.

One of the most notable challenges occurred in 1967 immediately following

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Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Within weeks, Israeli authorities attempted to change the curricula used in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, claiming that the curricula promoted hatred and incited violence. UNESCO was called on to conduct a review of the textbooks used in UNRWA schools in order to assess their appropriateness. The decision-making process was tortuous. On the one hand, the review commission recognised the importance of freely discussing history, as well as the right of displaced persons to express dismay or despair. On the other hand, the commission was concerned that refugee students should be exposed to more than just frustration, despair and revenge.

At the conclusion of the review, the commission recommended that a minority of books should be discontinued, others edited, and the remainder continue to be used as they were. The Arab governments and Israel were recalcitrant, however. The Syrian government, for example, refused to cooperate with the commission, arguing that a review of their textbooks was a violation of Syrian sovereignty. Initially cooperative, Jordan and Egypt later rejected criticism of their textbooks for much the same reasons. Israel also disagreed with the findings, claiming the review was too lenient and unilaterally banned textbooks they deemed inappropriate.

The impact of these disagreements on students was significant. In Gaza, UNRWA students started the 1967–68 academic year with almost no textbooks while those in the West Bank were deprived of a third of their required textbooks as a result of the Israeli ban. Shortages and delays in receiving teaching materials also affected schools in Jordan and Syria. To address this, UNRWA, at its own expense, produced millions of pages of teaching notes based on the textbooks but excluding the passages of text that the commission had deemed problematic. Arab governments considered this a form of censorship, however, and banned UNRWA from distributing the teaching notes.

Disagreements continue to shroud UNRWA's curricula policies. The introduction of a Palestinian curriculum in the early

2000s and its implementation in UNRWA schools reignited accusations from Israel and prominent Western donors that the refugees learn hatred and violence in their schools, in spite of findings to the contrary.³ In 2017 the Palestinian Authority accused UNRWA of censorship and threatened to suspend ties with the Agency. Most recently, in 2018 the US government – UNRWA's biggest funder – withdrew its funding, reiterating Israeli claims that UNRWA schools promote anti-Semitism, claims that are denied by the Agency. Although others have stepped in to offset some of the shortfall (at least temporarily), this latest crisis continues to jeopardise the education of over half a million Palestinian refugees.

Throughout all this, refugees' perspectives on the education they receive have been marginalised. And it should be remembered that refugee children learn what they live. For Palestinians, like many other refugee populations, this means ongoing and persistent violations of their rights. Those sharing responsibility for refugee education – whether host states, multilateral organisations or donor nations – should remember that when education content ignores these realities, schools become less relevant and education outcomes may be compromised, to the detriment of all.

Jo Kelcey jo.kelcey@nyu.edu

Doctoral candidate, New York University
www.nyu.edu

1. UNRWA was created in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. After fleeing or being expelled, over 900,000 Palestinians sought refuge in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, while others were displaced to the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. While there have been other waves of displacement, only those displaced in 1948 and their descendants are considered 'Palestine refugees' and thus fall under UNRWA's mandate. The term 'Palestine refugees' is used here as this article is predominantly about UNRWA. See FMR issue 26 (2006) 'Palestinian displacement: a case apart?' www.fmreview.org/palestine

2. UNESCO (1952) 'Report of the working party convened by UNESCO to make recommendations on the possible development of the UNRWA-UNESCO Education Programme for Palestine Refugees in the Near East' <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001785/178569eb.pdf>

3. Brown N (2001) 'Democracy, history and the contest over the Palestinian curriculum', prepared for the Adam Institute http://llp.iugaza.edu.ps/Files_Uploads/635063694488064181.pdf