

Education or Brainwashing?

Inculcating youngsters with national myths is a key way for societies to control their populations – as is clear in how Israel defines acceptable history – in defiance of educational ideals, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Education is one of those words that has a positive connotation for almost everyone – usually generating a warm and fuzzy feeling that suggests a richer and brighter future. But that is just an idealization of the concept. As I have stated before, as far as the state is concerned, education has two major purposes: to fulfill the vocational needs of the economy and the political need for ideologically loyal citizens. It is in the pursuit of this last goal that education can reveal a darker side.

Here are a few stories concerning the interface between education and political ideology. I take them from the annals of Israeli/Zionist education, but one can certainly find other examples worldwide.

Story One: David Sarna Galdi is an American Jew who attended Jewish schools in New York City, went to Jewish summer camps, attended synagogue regularly, and vacationed often in Israel with his parents. In his own words he had “a quintessential Zionist Jewish-American upbringing,” and as a result, “I never heard one word about the [Israeli] occupation [of Palestinian territory], or even the actual word, ‘occupation.’” Only after immigrating to Israel did he “become aware of the occupation and all its ramifications.”

The Israeli occupation is 50 years old and ongoing. Can Galdi’s story really be true? It certainly can be true if you grow up within a closed information environment – an environment where elements of non-local reality are simply left out of the educational process. That seems to be the case when it comes to Zionist Jewish-American education.

Story Two: Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel, which this year was on April 24, is a time for remembering the Holocaust and learning its historical lessons. Yet there are two ways of approaching those lessons – one is universal and the other particular.

Most of Israel’s educational system has chosen to forgo the universal message of the need to promote human rights and stand up against oppression wherever it is practiced. Instead the particularistic message Israeli schoolchildren have always received is that the Jews are eternal victims. Indeed, “Israel and its

strong army are the only things preventing another genocide by non-Jews.”

Emphasis on Consensus

Very few Israeli educators have dared break with this official point of view. However, those few who have describe a systematic “misuse of the Holocaust [that is] pathological and intended to generate fear and hatred” as an element of “extreme nationalism.”

Again the key to such a process of indoctrination embedded within the educational system is the maintenance of a closed information environment. As one Israeli educator, who has grown uneasy with the propagandistic nature of his nation’s schooling, puts it, “increasingly they [the students] receive no alternative messages in school.”

Story Three: Finally, let us take a comparative look at two reports on Israel’s educational system. One is a 2009 Palestinian report (PR) entitled “Palestinian History and Identity in Israeli Schools.” The other is a 2012 report (IS) produced by the Institute for Israeli Studies at the University of Maryland and is entitled, “Education in Israel: The Challenges Ahead.” What strikes the reader of these reports is how much *they agree* on the nature of specific problems having to do with the education of minority groups in Israel.

Here are a few of the problems both reports highlight:

(1) Both the IS and the PR reports agree that the Israeli educational system is at once a segregated and highly centralized affair controlled by the Israeli government’s Ministry of Education. As a consequence, according to the IS report, “Arab schools are significantly underfunded compared to Jewish schools,” and this is reflected in an unfavorable “differential student-teacher ratios in Arab schools” (IS report, p. 12). The PR adds the following information: “Public education for Palestinians [one quarter of all students in Israel] is administered by the Department for Arab Education, which is a special administrative entity within the Ministry of Education and under its direct control. The Department for Arab Education has no autonomous decision making authority” (PR, p. 1).

(2) As described in the IS report, because curriculum in Arab-Israeli schools is controlled by the Ministry of Education, sensitive subjects such as Palestinian history are censored (not allowed to be “openly discussed”). The PR elaborates: Israeli textbooks are highly selective in their “choice of facts and explanations, ignoring contradictory arguments, especially facts connected to Arab-Palestinian history.” Ultimately, “they erase modern Palestinian history” (PR, p. 1). Arab-Israeli students are forced, at least superficially, to absorb

a Zionist interpretation of history because without being able to repeat it on their graduation exam they cannot successfully finish high school. Palestinian students do, of course, know their own version of history, which they get from numerous non-school sources.

However, the Israeli Jewish students also are deprived. They are systematically kept away from this same Palestinian narrative – one ardently believed in by over 20 percent of their nation’s population. Under these circumstances, as the IS report points out, “national cohesion” is hard to build.

The IS report recommends “strengthening within the schools the democratic and pluralistic view embodied in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, focusing on building shared values and acceptance of diversity. To strengthen communal understanding and build a stronger common identity” (IS, p. 21).

Unfortunately, these recommendations are impossible to implement, and I suspect that the authors know that this is so. In the case of Israel, education has been subordinated to ideology to such an extent that it cannot promote diversity, shared values and a common identity with non-Jews. Thus, given the Zionist ethic as practiced by Israelis and their diaspora supporters, the Palestinian identity and values are anathema and represent threats. Thus, IS recommendations become the equivalent of taking poison.

Ideology Bests the Ideal

Any ideology represents a closed information environment. By definition it narrows reality down to a limited number of perspectives. Ideology also invites hubris, rationalized by nationality or religion and their accompanying peculiar take on history. It becomes the goal of an ideologically managed educational system to promote political loyalty and the hubris it seems to justify. The current terminology for this condition is “exceptionalism.”

All of this is a far cry from the way education is idealized:

According to Aristotle, “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” Thanks to the Zionist educational system both in Israel and the diaspora, there are many otherwise educated Jews who cannot even entertain the thought of shared values and common identity with Palestinians.

According to Malcolm X, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.” However, those being educated are usually passive and someone else has prepared what they will learn, and therefore has prepared their future.

According to Martin Luther King, Jr., “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.” In an ideal situation that may be true, but in practice it runs against the historical political mission of post-industrial educational systems.

Finally, one might consider this observation by Albert Einstein: “Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.” This is a welcome insight, yet the problem is that relatively few people forget the political and cultural imperatives of their education. Those who do, including Einstein himself, are often considered by their fellows as “social mistakes.”

Now we know why it is so hard for Israelis to embrace the imperatives of peace, or for the rest of us to go beyond our present era of nation-states be they democratic or otherwise. Our self-destructive stubbornness is a function of a successful, ideologically managed education.

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