

An Educator's Reflections

By Ramzi Rihan



our children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

If he [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."

Gibran Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1923)

Much has been written, and is still being written, about education, but these three quotes from Gibran succinctly summarise all that needs to be said about it. His style sounds unfamiliar to us; it is the language of deep concern and firm conviction rather than the pseudo-scientific jargon that is widespread these days.

We can claim that our children are indeed ours; and this is true. But every child is a new life who shares many features with all humanity and indeed all life. But every child is also a unique being with his/her own personality, urges, and thoughts. It has become commonplace to assert this obvious truth, but it is rarely reflected in our dealings with children. Children are frequently treated as objects that should embody our own expectations rather than as they are in reality, namely, centres of consciousness and volition.

From early infancy through adulthood, we need to understand and accept the differentness and independence of the "other." This attitude has to start at home, be propagated through school, and endure in

our relations with other adults and peers. This attitude is of paramount importance in the teaching process and has become more crucial than ever with the emergence of "youth culture." Young adults have become a recognised social group that has its own norms and aspirations. One may claim that a "children's culture" has also recently emerged. Many influences now affect young people outside the scope of family and school. These include social media, peers, and ideological groups that try to recruit – or brainwash – young people. Home and school have to adapt to this rapidly changing reality. Children have to be guided and convinced, not simply ordered around. The first thing that they have to be convinced of is that they must be willing partners in the learning/teaching process; but this requires that teachers welcome them as active partners. This approach is still lacking in many of our teachers. Inculcating this attitude is the highest priority of the educational system.

This brings us to the second quotation from Gibran. Teachers who simply transmit their knowledge to their students are indulging in sterile reproduction – with the obvious contradiction of this oxymoron. For education to be life-giving, it has to

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draw out the learner and help him/her to grow. Indeed, the word *education* is from the Latin, meaning to draw out or bring up. It is not surprising that the same applies to the Arabic word *tarbiyah*, which is the noun derived from the verb *raba*, which means to grow. Hence true education brings out the potential of the learner and excites enthusiasm. Of course, teachers are expected to know more than learners. But teachers have to see beyond their knowledge and delve into the minds and hearts of the learners to motivate, guide, and support them in the search for their path to knowledge, understanding, and appreciation. This requires that teachers have a selfless attitude, which is hard to acquire and difficult to maintain. This lack of selflessness is the biggest hurdle to good teaching. Teacher training programmes usually concentrate on a sufficient degree of knowledge of the discipline and routine pedagogical methods; they do not have the courage to penetrate and mould the depths of the aspiring teacher as a human being.

The third quotation from Gibran is an eternal truth that has acquired additional

urgency in recent times. Knowledge of the material world – both physical and biological – was dogmatic in ancient times. But expanding evidence has forced science to accept ever-evolving theories and explanations. The social sciences and humanities have followed similar trends. However, many people in their daily lives still adhere to dogmatic views of reality that preclude true understanding and proper action in the face of many challenges. Education has to overturn this rigidity and guide learners to accept fluidity and multiplicity without abandoning fundamental principles, and at the same time appreciate the difference between what is fundamental and what is derived. This is all the more necessary in an interconnected world in which many cultures meet.

The above considerations have been stated in general and abstract terms, but they apply with added force to the Palestinian situation. Palestine shoulders many burdens: a legacy from the past with partial relevance and many outmoded practices and traditions, a cultural onslaught from the outside world with some useful influences (and many useless or even harmful ones), and a vicious attack on its very survival. Conflicting ideologies wage battle against each other in a society that is searching for its true identity. Everyday concerns have become paramount in an ongoing situation of political turmoil and economic uncertainty.

Among society's many urgent concerns, education has been relegated to a low position on the list of priorities, with quantitative expansion as the only aim of the leadership. National expenditure on education is low. Education is a long-term investment that yields its fruits decades later. This needs an educational leadership that aspires to the future while working in the present. A recurrent criticism of the Palestinian education system is the emphasis on exams that measure

memorisation of disconnected facts acquired through rote learning. Technological innovations have, as an unintended consequence, reduced the appreciation of the value of good teaching. Curricula are out-dated and need thorough renovation. Hence Palestinian education has abandoned its primary role as an instrument for national development. It has instead turned into a national burden with low returns.

A radical shift in the Palestinian educational system has to become a top social priority. Enrolment at all levels of education has reached acceptable rates, although a balanced increase in these rates is always desirable. Attention should now be directed towards the nature of the educational process itself. Pedagogy has to be re-defined as a human interaction. Curricula must include the development of critical thinking and analytic skills. The acquisition of information is only the first step in education and not its ultimate aim. More importantly, education should seek to arouse the joy of learning and turn it from a stultifying obligation into an invigorating activity. Such changes are the necessary requirements for Palestinian education to contribute to social advancement, cultural enrichment, economic growth, and political success.

Is the educational leadership willing to transform Palestinian education from an illusory shadow into a living process? Does it have the vision to guide this transformation? Or do we need new leadership with sincere dedication, unflinching determination, and deep understanding in order to achieve this aim? The future of Palestine hangs in the balance.

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