

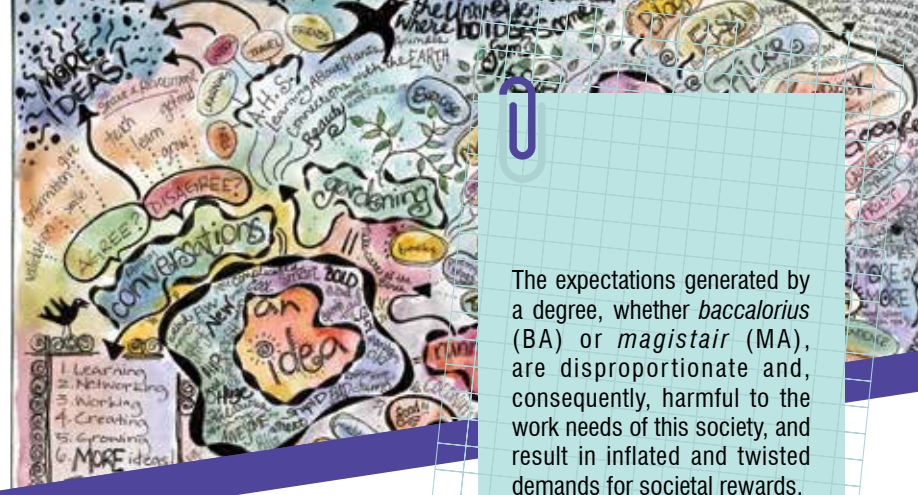
Rethinking Palestinian Education

By Khalil Nakhleh



This article is a deliberate attempt to provoke our thinking on Palestinian education by articulating a series of critical questions/reflections about the act of educating and, in particular, educating our past and present generations. I will pose the questions that I have always wanted to raise, but couldn't or wouldn't, during my thirty-some years of assisting in the "development" of Palestinian education.

As some have claimed in earlier writings, the act of education is, by its nature, a "subversive" act, if it is done properly; i.e., if it insists on the



The expectations generated by a degree, whether *baccalوريوس* (BA) or *ماجستير* (MA), are disproportionate and, consequently, harmful to the work needs of this society, and result in inflated and twisted demands for societal rewards.

need to question, to doubt, and to think critically. The act of education should be a liberating act of the mind. This is an uncomfortable and challenging process of mental growth and nurturing. I place this exercise of "rethinking" within this tradition.

Here, at this juncture, I am taking mental stock of our education: not a mechanical, quantitative assessment of what has been achieved (or not

achieved); this is being done almost regularly with the beginning of each school year, and in the numerous reports by the Ministry of Education and "funders" alike. But in this exercise, I am delving into deeper strategic thought about what is being inculcated, in terms of *vision and cultural and*



national values, in the minds of our recurrent generations as they have lived, suffered, and struggled for the last century under foreign occupation, oppression, and dispossession. Can we continue to operate on the assumption that traditional educational approaches are the most effective to transform our state?

A seminal question must be posed at the outset: What is our “vision” of education? **Do we have a vision that is comprehensive, collective, liberation-prone, and people-based**, that empowers and instills confidence and strength in our recurrent generations so that they become empowered to struggle creatively, not only for their livelihood but also for a homeland liberated from oppression and exploitation? I maintain that though we do not have such a vision, we should. Our vision of education should encompass basic elements premised primarily on the conviction that un-liberated minds can never liberate occupied homelands; and, in this equation, a “liberated mind” is a prerequisite for “liberated homelands.”

To nurture “liberated minds” is to nurture critically the sum total of our innate abilities that are proud of our traditions and values, and that cannot tolerate oppression of any kind, level, or source. To nurture

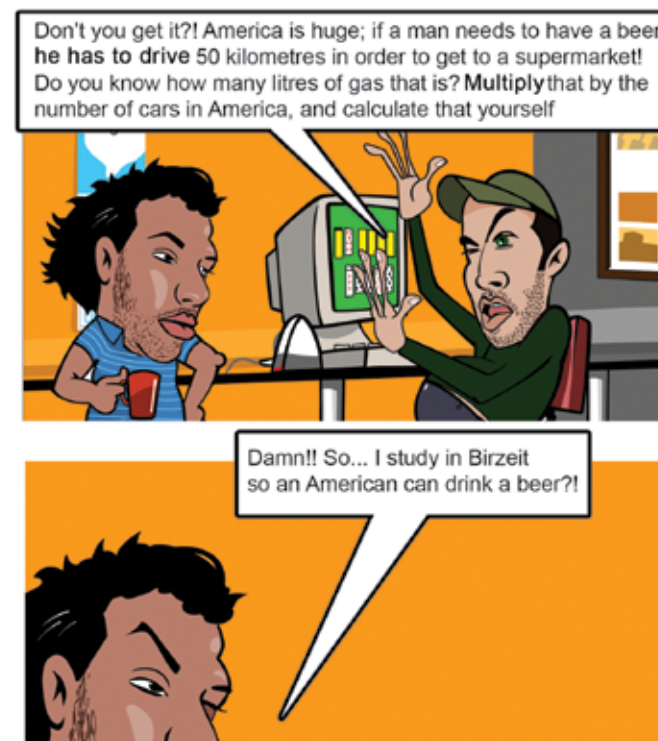
“liberated minds” means to create thinking minds that insist on resisting any form of oppression imposed at home, at school, at the workplace, or at the national political level. To nurture “liberated minds” is an un-ending collective act of thinking and rethinking, whose actors cannot be limited to the physical space of the school, the university, etc., but encompass by necessity the home and the public space. It is a collective process of inculcation in which instructors, students, parents, intellectuals, moral advocates, ethicists, etc., get involved in the same loop. This process will certainly not succeed without instilling and rewarding the ability to think independently. Deep down, I must admit, this is an act of affirming mental rebellion!

This discussion leads us to pose another related question: Should we promote a “degree-driven” education? It is not a terribly new thing to claim that our educational system, following the prevalent trend in the Western world, is a degree-driven system; but what is new should be the realisation that this is not how education was classified historically, and that a separation always existed between the knowledge, competencies, skills, values, etc., that one learned, or was exposed to, and the end result of the process – the

terminal phase – or the degree (piece of cardboard) one holds. Today we identify (and define) individuals in terms of the end degree of each phase of schooling: we speak of *tawjihi* graduates, or *baccalorius*, or *magistair*, or *dactor* – often and frequently, without giving any hint about the content of what that individual learned, or what type of knowledge he/she acquired, or what new human characteristics were added to his/her personality, etc. In other words, we do not show any concern about whether this graduate has become an independent analytical thinker, rational and, dare I say, a better human being, more compassionate, more caring, more just, more honest, etc. Otherwise, how can one explain that after spending three to four years at a university, the bulk of our graduates cannot recall what they learned, or why, or in what context, etc. They only remember that they fulfilled all the requirements in order to graduate with a particular degree, which then becomes

their gateway to a *wathifeh* (a job). This is the only way to explain the system’s (i.e., the parents’ and administrators’) insistence on clinging to the *tawjihi* despite the well-founded criticisms of its educational shortcomings. Such a system has succeeded in instilling in its “learners,” with the encouragement and reward of the parents and the society, that *tawjihi* is an obligatory gateway that leads from the end of the first phase to the beginning of another “degree-oriented” phase.

The expectations generated by a degree, whether *baccalorius* (BA) or *magistair* (MA), are disproportionate and, consequently, harmful to the work needs of this society, and result in inflated and twisted demands for societal rewards. Statements such as, “Because of my degree I should be a ‘director,’” are often reiterated. I have frequently encountered this attitude. Because of the degree, there is an attitude of arrogance in refusing



to perform certain jobs, or tasks, on the assumption that they are beneath that level of “study.” On this basis, I maintain that the bulk of BA- and MA-degree holders, which our universities and colleges churn out annually, are dangerous to our societal development. In a way, they contribute to what has now become known as the process of “dumbing” our population.

To comprehend this engulfing process, we need to reflect on what is emerging as the “commoditisation” of our education.

Since the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism, we abided by, and identified with, the Western approach of reducing education to a commodity, something that can be purchased (priced) or sold. This, of course, raises questions about “cost,” on the one hand, and “resources,” on the other. What aspect of education is being “priced,” and according to whose resource level, and why? What are we paying for? A certain degree level? Skill? Training? Knowledge? Competence? A creative, liberated mind? An effective agent of control? A down payment for a profitable investment project four or six years hence?

To reflect on the above questions, one has to be candid and honest, and acknowledge that most of our people, particularly the poor and the marginalised, are viewed and treated by our political and economic oppressors

as “surplus humanity”! Meaning that they are undeserving of basic human life and can be targeted for elimination, physically or psychologically. Thus, our poor do not figure in this neoliberal capitalist equation. Why should we tolerate it? We should not, and we should gear our education to reverse it. Those who abide by the “commoditisation” approach end up buying, or stealing, or acquiring degrees, often through the tutelage of foreign governments, or through their transnational “aid” organisations, to become agents from within the society for legitimising the entire neoliberal approach of our educational system, through the lucrative positions with which they are rewarded.

People-based education should not be commoditised; it is a collective human act that entices and draws young minds to use the knowledge they acquire – creatively, independently, humanely, and justly – on the path toward liberated minds.

Dr. Khalil Nakhleh is a Palestinian independent researcher and writer. Since 1984, he has been engaged in the development of Palestinian education. Until his voluntary retirement in 2010, he was a technical consultant with the Ministry of Higher Education for a World Bank project on strategic development and self-assessment of Palestinian higher education institutions. His latest book is Professor Israel Shahak: An Unwavering Humanist Critic of Jewish-Zionist-Israeli Hypocrisy (2014).



Special thanks for Amer Shomali and for Filistin Ashabab for permission to use the caricatures in this issue.

Amer Shomali is a Palestinian practitioner using art, digital media, films and comics as tools to explore and interact with the sociopolitical scene in Palestine focusing on the creation and the use of the Palestinian revolution iconography. He holds a master's degree in animation from the Arts University Bournemouth in the United Kingdom and a bachelor's degree in architecture from Birzeit University, Palestine. He was born in Kuwait in 1981, and is currently based in Ramallah, Palestine.