



Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)

**Basic School and Social Capital:
Case Studies in the Occupied
Palestinian Territory**

**Jamil Hilal
Hassan Ladadweh
Muhsen Abu Ramadan**

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The Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)

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- ♦ Providing a forum for free, open and democratic public debate among all stakeholders on the socio-economic policy-making process.
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Foreword

Recently Economists have drawn great interest to the concept of social capital and its relationship with sustainable development. This concept implicitly acknowledges that individuals and institutions exert time and effort for the benefit of the society, and not only for their own benefit. Economists have developed a hypothesis that the degree of the social capital influence is one of the important factors that enhance the economic effectiveness and efficiency. In this regard, they have focused on the role of trust between the members of the community in reducing the costs of production and trade, as well as the role of informal networks and social ties and engaging in voluntary work, in supporting the good governance practices and reducing social welfare costs, maintenance of security and order.

Many studies around the world have addressed the concept of social capital in terms of description, measurement, and analysis, in an attempt to transform it into an operational concept that can be applied for policy purposes. It is normal that the first step on this road is the measurement of social capital, not only to identify its transformation over time, but also to make comparisons between different social groups and different geographical regions in the same country or with other countries.

In this context, MAS began a research program, which addresses the concept of social capital and its different aspects in the Palestinian Territories. In 2006, the first study of this program sought to identify the concept of social capital and its relevance to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The study stimulated a great deal of discussion at workshops. This has pushed us at Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) to measure social capital in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 2007 through building a unified indicator of social capital in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was based on the answers obtained from the research sample on the 26 carefully designed questions of the survey. This study has created a fertile ground for further analysis on the implications of social capital in the Palestinian territories. In 2009, two studies have been conducted in this regard. The first study built two indicators of social capital: the bonding and the bridging social capital. The former reflects the power of family relationships (tribalism), while the later reflects the status of citizenship among members of society. The second study examined the effects of bonding social capital on food security in the West Bank.

This study we are presenting to the reader examines the relationship between school and social capital, and is the third study carried out under this program. It is based on field survey for a number of public and private schools and schools administered by UNRWA. Many of the study findings were highly important to the promotion of social capital, and on the basis of these results several recommendations were drafted to strengthen this role.

In the occasion of releasing this study, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development for supporting this program and for their generous support to MAS research program in general. We also thank the academia and commentators and discussants of the study and the experts who participated in the focus groups and workshops for their participation which enriched the research. Also we would like to thank the research team for their efforts and perseverance in preparing this research, which provides a genuine analysis and constructive conclusions and recommendations for developing the school's role in the development of social capital.

Dr. Samir Abdullah
Director General

Executive Summary

This exploratory research study aims to examine the role of primary schools (the obligatory level) in creating and enhancing social capital. It is essential to emphasize the exploratory nature of this study, as it deals with an issue that has not been previously touched upon. It is exploratory also because it deals with a limited number of schools, even if it is a diversified group in terms of geography (city, village, and refugee camp), supervision authorities (public, private, and UNRWA), and gender (male, female, mixed). This study required interviews with direct stakeholders in school and several different individuals involved in the educational process (school principals, teachers, parents, students, officials, and pedagogical experts in ministries and civil organizations). In addition, this study made use of four background papers prepared by specialized researchers, dealing with different aspects of the educational process and their determinants. Moreover, a number of related reports, documents, and studies were all reviewed, combined with MAS's interest in the issue of social capital. The exploratory trait of this research and its reliance on case studies does not mean that researched schools are isolated and unique from the circumstances of other schools. Its results should not be ignored under the excuse that they represent specific cases and don't point to general phenomena.

The research is based on the hypothesis that schools are not merely a place to teach, and are not only meant to provide students with educational-cultural capital (regardless of the quality of this capital). Instead, due to their spread all over the West Bank and Gaza, they are qualified institutions which contribute to creating social capital in addition to educational-cultural capital. This empowering social capital is embodied in phenomena manifested at different levels, including: a growing level of social solidarity, spread of voluntary work, importance of public health and environment, low crime level (thrift, violence), high level of political involvement (elections, protests), interest in culture, holding to values of liberation, democracy, social justice and equality, strong collective resistance to occupation, and high capability to face catastrophes and emergencies.

Maintaining a very high level of student enrollment in primary schools is quite possibly the supreme achievement of the Palestinian Authority (PA) since 1994. The most challenging task then becomes transforming this large number of schools (as they are pedagogical, social, and national

institutions) to moral, cultural, educational-generating institutions (as they are the main tool that provide knowledge and culture to children and youth) which contribute to producing collective empowering social capital (for youth, women, children, workers, and local community organizations) in their local communities.

The most significant observation of this research study concerns the low level of awareness about the empowering capabilities available for schools in the social, cultural, and educational fields. There is some understanding of these capabilities in some places, but it remains limited and isolated from effective tools and programs. Consequently, we think that the main motivator for any policies that aim to enable schools to contribute in creating empowering social capital must stem from this observation.

There is a fear among those in charge of schools – for reasons that we clarified in detail in the last 3 chapters – to enable the transformation of schools into institutions that generate conscious social change, i.e. generating empowering social capital. Some of the reasons are related to the internal structure of schools, others are related to the nature of the relationship between schools and the entities in charge of them, while others are related to the absence of a clear vision about the responsibilities of schools towards their local communities. The research highlights the phenomenon of the “disappointed” teacher, who lacks incentives and tends to approach his role as an educator with the mentality of an employee. The study also highlights the trend among students to view school as an obligatory duty (some described it as a prison), as schools do not generally present a friendly environment that is able to convince students that it exists to provide them with the qualifications and capabilities to face different and daily challenges, risks, and difficulties.

The research team discovered that the relationship between the student and the teacher in the public and UNRWA schools studied tends to be filled with tension. This is especially true in male schools and can sometimes reach the level of physical violence. This peculiarity was less apparent in both the female and the private mixed schools studied, which tended to be more democratic and based on mutual respect. The research team noticed that the students generally have no feeling of loyalty towards their respective school (in public and UNRWA schools), and the teachers often do overlook the moral mission of a teachers profession. Also, the principals in public and UNRWA schools seem to be guards of the pedagogical system that has been centrally approved, without participating in its creation. Principals also tend to avoid taking any initiative because

they fear the blame, criticism and punishment associated with the possibility of failure. In private schools, there was an overwhelming sense of loyalty, especially among students. there was a strong feeling of differentiation between them and other schools in terms of dress code, attitude, and general tendencies.

The research team also found out that the relationship between schools and surrounding communities is limited and restricted. This restrictive relationship might manifest itself in different ways in villages and refugee camps. The already existing relations were mostly initiated by educational organizations that implemented specific programs in cooperation with supervisory bodies. Schools receive funds from individuals and civil society organizations, as well as from the private sector, most of which is invested in improving infrastructure. In the case of already existing relationships, the effect of the relationship ends as the program ends (with some exceptions), while in the case of infrastructure improvements, material conditions of education are affected without having any significant effect on the social role of schools.

The state of isolation (even if it appeared relative for some) that schools experience in terms of their relationships with local communities became evident through a number of indicators, including: the structural weakness of parents' councils in public and UNRWA schools that lack authority to monitor and interfere when necessary, the charitable and elitist understanding of the relationship between school and local community, and the absence of a clear vision in understanding the school's responsibilities towards the surrounding community. The state of isolation is also apparent in the strong centralization that controls the role of the principal and the staff inside and outside the school, resulting as well in the staff dependency on external initiatives. We also noticed this isolation in the limited number and quality of extracurricular activities.

It is possible that the problem is not the absence of general pedagogical trends in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) and the education department in the UNRWA, as these trends do exist. The problem could be that these general trends are not translated into tangible actions and measures. Additionally, these trends lack a vision about the role of schools in creating social capital, which can serve the aim of building a society that exemplifies values and morals of liberation, equality, social justice and solidarity. This kind of vision requires detailed plans that would take into consideration the peculiarity of each school in its relationship with the surrounding community (refugee camp, village,

and city) along with its contradictions, problems, and aspirations. It must also take into consideration the nature of the supervisory body in addition to understanding all of its other conditions and peculiarities. This kind of detailed plan requires the actual participation of parents' councils, representatives of the civil society organizations and formal bodies (municipality or village council, culture, health, local governance, and education directorates).

In addition to the above mentioned findings, the research study pointed out some suggestions at the end of the last three chapters of the study that are headlined here:

- ✧ Despite talks by the MoEHE and UNRWA education department officials about the openness of interaction between schools and local communities, in practice, there is still a disconnection. It seems that part of the hesitation to interact is due to the fear of tribal and political interactions. This hesitation can also be a result of the centralized Palestinian educational system, which is comfortable with the isolation of schools from their local communities. This is apparent in the structure and authority of parents and school councils that centrally determine to establish relations with civil society organizations and set extra-curricular activities by the MoEHE and the education directorate in the UNRWA without opening the way for student initiatives¹. The importance of parents' councils stems from their central role in connecting schools with local communities, and also their importance in institutionalizing interaction between schools and social surroundings. Moreover, the quality and aspects of measures, procedures and concepts that enable those councils to take their supervisory role in relation with school and staff should be considered.
- ✧ Based on the above mentioned suggestion, a need emerges to rethink the position of the principal as the head of the parents' council, which means delegating more authority to the council beyond collecting charity and organizing parties. It also means providing the council full independence to discuss the school situation and its academic performance and to interfere in helping the administration of the school in solving problems. In the same context, it becomes useful to reconsider the mandate period of the council and possibly increase it to a minimum of two years in order to enable the members to accumulate enough experience and to deepen their understanding of problems,

¹ Hamdan, Intisar, "the relationship between school and local community", background paper submitted to MAS, July 2010.

adequately enough to be able to contribute in finding solutions. There is nothing about widening the authority of the parent councils that the MoEHE should fear; instead, it must be seen as a helpful participation tool on many levels. The experience of the researched private schools, where the parents' council is active and has wide authorities, proves those fears wrong.

- ✧ The MoEHE already admitted the necessity to review the curriculum. This curriculum faced the criticism of lacking a philosophical, knowledgeable, and social vision along with a lack of knowledgeable content. Some went further and said: “what is present in the curriculum are not only bad texts, but most are harmful texts, introduced through pedagogical connotations directed to abstracted shallow-minded students; they do not require to do anything more than copy, arrange, and repeat, because it does not recognize them as active individuals, and does not speak to the human beings in them. This makes it nothing more than a material for the exam to the students”². An active contribution by schools in producing empowering social capital requires a curriculum that does not deal with homeland, life, and socio-moral issues in an abstract way, but in their historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts and through connecting them with political, civil, social, and human rights aspirations. There were also notes about the typical images of males and females in the curriculum, despite changes introduced during the 1990s. Review and inspection must also include the practices of those responsible for delivering the curriculum. It might be the case that the curriculum itself does not discriminate between males and females, but practice may reveal discrimination in teaching many activities from the pedagogy curriculum. Discrimination may also come from male students, teachers and parents.
- ✧ Extra-curricular activities are supposed to have many functions, including: discovering and developing talented students, informing students about different aspects of life and culture in their society and its geographical and historical locations and developing school relations and interactions with their local communities. This requires clarifying and unifying the concept of extra-curricular activities and their priorities, and investing in developing the cultural knowledge capital of students. This means introducing extra-curricular activities

² Rimawi, Malek, background paper on Palestinian curricula submitted to MAS, July 2010.

within the ministry's educational curriculum and not depending on the availability of funding through NGOs.

The most important issue in developing the role of schools in producing social capital is related to employing extra-curricular activities to enhance and deepen the relations of the students with their community and culture and to develop voluntary work values. Thus, it needs to be made sure that students are involved in planning these activities after clarifying these objectives. One of the entry-points to developing the relationship between schools and local communities is parents' participation in planning those activities and supporting them. In the same context, it is useful to examine how to connect in-class activities with extra-curricular activities. Civil and national pedagogy subjects have many activities that are related to introducing Palestinian scenes and institutions, so the activity must take place there and not in class³.

- ✧ There are some phenomenons that need treatment within the resources already available, which will enable schools to prioritize their social role. One of them is the issue of crowded class rooms, especially in public and UNRWA schools, which are currently in a more serious condition in the Gaza Strip due to the blockade imposed by Israel and the last war in 2008-2009 that severely damaged many schools.

Also, the internal Palestinian political conflict negatively affected the educational process along with the relationship between educational institutions and civil society organizations. An example of this is the UNRWA decision to implement summer camps without coordinating with specialized civil society organizations. It also needs to be noted that extra-curricular activities in the Gaza Strip carried a political dimension in favor of the political power in control of Gaza. Political division also strengthened centralization and bureaucracy. We also observed a furthering of the relationship between schools and culture, health, and local governance ministries, due to the dominance of one political party over all those ministries and institutions. This forces us to seek an end to the political division on the basis of partnership and national responsibility; meanwhile, it is necessary that political parties reach an agreement and sign a convention that guarantees political

³ Khadash, Abd-alsalam, "extra curriculum activities in Primary schools in the West Bank", background paper submitted to MAS, June 2010

neutrality among the educational institutions⁴. However the need to protect primary education from politicization that generates a “depriving situation” should not be achieved at the expense of either isolating the educational process from the national context or the need to tie it with national liberation conditions or building a democratic society as stated in the declaration of independence.

Schools in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have the potential to empower their relations with their counterparts in the rest of the world that can contribute in putting pressure on Israel to end its blockade and occupation as it violates the right to education for Palestinian students, along with the other violations of Palestinian rights. We can also find a connection between schools in the West Bank, schools in the Gaza Strip, civil society organizations and universities in both areas to double the efforts to end the political division and its negative impact on education and on the social role of schools and universities. There is also a need to restore the relations between UNRWA and civil society organizations for the sake of developing schools relations with the local community.

- ✧ One of the positive phenomenon that is worth mentioning is the critical voices from within the pedagogical institutions that warn about the problems faced by the educational system and do not hesitate to propose suggestions to solve them. However, until now, those voices have avoided treating the problem of isolating schools from the local community, and didn't pay enough attention to the continuous strong centralization phenomena that characterizes the educational system (public and UNRWA). Until now, nobody has provided a vision that is able to transform schools– in all its components: students, teachers, administration, and parents' councils- into an institution that is active in the social and cultural fields, on the basis that school is a pedagogical, national, and social institution. We rarely see discussion of the evaluation system (exams) followed in all schools, which is a system based on memory testing, which assumes that understanding and memorizing by heart are synonyms, and which is not sensitive to the “violence” embodied in the excessive number of exams that a child should take.
- ✧ It is useful to remember that the wide spectrum of resources that different families can provide to their children is similar to the wide

⁴ Abu Ramadan, Muhsen, “Education in Gaza Strip: its current conditions and contribution to social capital”, background paper submitted to MAS, May 2010

spectrum of resources that different schools can provide to their students, depending on their supervision authority (public, private, and UNRWA) and on their teachers' experiences and educational history. Family is one of the few institutions that provides influential relations to help generate either empowering social capital (if those relations were based on equality and solidarity) or "depriving" of social capital (if those relations are authoritative and suppressive). This is also true for children's relations in school. However, it is not enough to only mention resources available for schools when talking about social capital; it is also vital to take into consideration relationships between family, school, and the local community. That is why it is important to involve civil society organizations in children's activities.

- ✧ The prevailing atmosphere in most school, (Public, UNRWA, and a number of private schools) lacks mutual trust and respect between the student and the teacher. It could even be argued that it is an atmosphere of alienation (to some extent, depending on the profession and the school). The teacher's attempt to impose his authority over the student leads to a more straining relationship between them. Also, the teacher's inability to teach non-curriculum material in order to develop the students intellectual, analytical, and critical capabilities, increases the tension in the relationship, and oftentimes leads to a mutual state of frustration.

In order to contribute to transforming the school into a productive institution by producing enabling cultural and social capital, we need to do the following:

1. Perpetually invest in teachers through organizing target-designed courses in order to qualify them and make them well-versed in their professions. This will open the door for opportunities to renovate knowledge and awareness of what constitutes a relation of trust with the student, and the feeling of belonging to the profession and to the school along with better interactions with the surrounding community.
2. Take measures to improve the social status of teachers and the teaching profession without limiting the factors resulting in the decline of the teacher's status to merely low salaries, or by simplifying this subject by talking about shifts in the culture of the community. Improving the status of the teacher requires changing the regulations and procedures that deal with the teacher as an employee and not an educator.

3. Introduce radical changes in the teacher-student relationship, in both public and UNRWA schools, towards a relationship based on mutual respect. This means changing the common conception that this relationship is based on the authority held by the teacher to teach by dictating to the students, while the duty of the student is to listen and memorize. This concept has created a tension-filled environment (specifically in male public schools and UNRWA schools) between the student and the teacher, as well as an environment which alienates both students and teachers.
 4. Reconsider the rules and regulations that limit the teacher's role to educating, and replace them with more democratic and flexible regulations founded on decentralization. The relationship between the principal and the teacher in governmental and UNRWA schools is determined by a hierarchical system where the teacher performs his job enchained by bureaucratic procedures. Rules and useless administrative procedures needs to be changed. It also seems that there is a need to formulate a system of incentives and accountability for each of the professional managers and teachers.
- ✧ In public and UNRWA schools in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, there is an absence of effective elected students' representation. Student involvement in programming extracurricular activities is also absent. Some pedagogical experts advice to transform the classroom from "a restrictive engineering" or "a space for authority" that "controls bodies and tames discourse" into "a research lab, a theater, a village or forest space, or a production studio; a platform for various changes". They call to transform the role of the teacher from an executor of policies and agendas into an actor engaged in his work as an initiative self, in his profession as a dynamic process, and in the society as "an existing project opened on all possibilities"⁵.

In the same context, the question of dividing classrooms (which means reducing the number of students in each class) and reducing the number of lessons for each teacher needs to be addressed in order to enable teachers to take into consideration the individual differences between students and thus to take care of the difficulties they face.⁶

⁵ See: Rimawi, Malik "The Experiences Of Teachers And The Centrality Of Writing", Educational Visions, Al Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development, Ramallah, Palestinian Issue 31 - January 2010.

⁶ Interview with a representative from Tamer Institute (May 2010).

- ✧ The Palestinian society needs an education law that outlines and maintains the rights of students and that is fair for teachers, in order to preserve the whole educational process from the authoritative and conservative tendency (under the pretext of defending religion or traditions) which isolates individuals from their Arab progressive heritage as well as from the rest of the world. The law should also preserve the educational process from the liberal tendency that is isolated from the social context and that tends to alienate the student from his society, as well as detaches him from liberation, equality, and social justice values.
- ✧ Again we emphasize the need to formulate a general vision and a local Palestinian plan that aims to integrate schools to their social surroundings through widening their relations network, and through institutionalizing connections between schools on a local or a regional level.

In light of this, establishing a national reference that is assigned the task of developing a strategy to unify the basic services that must be offered for children (health, education, culture, and social care, etc.) requires the participation of many ministries and institutions. This national reference must rely on a liberal and social vision of the role of the school as an active actor in the desired process of social change in Palestine.

- ✧ With regards to the integration of schools into their local communities, we studied some suggestions:
 1. Formulating a pedagogical philosophy for the Palestinian education system, away from the tendency to satisfy parties with contradicting visions and ideologies, depending on Palestinian conceptions and political, cultural heritage, and the reality of colonial occupation. “Until now we have no pedagogical philosophy to rely on; we improvise, and the outcomes of the educational system are not satisfactory, the ministry vision is not clear, setting criteria to choose teachers and principals maybe of great usefulness here”⁷.
 2. Formulating a cultural plan based on media that aims to change the perception of schools as closed institutions, and to explain the benefits of opening schools to the local community and integrating

⁷ a discussion at the Center for Teacher Creativity with the Research Team (May 2010)

them in the process of social change through joint plans with local community organizations. It should be clear that schools cannot play their enlightenment role if this role is not connected to a social philosophy that adopts values of liberation, social justice and equality.

3. Rushing the implementation of the Ministry of Education's plans to de-centralize the educational institutions and to expand the authority of the principals.
4. Approving mechanisms to generalize the results of educational initiatives that happen annually in schools.

Setting criteria to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of school relations with local community organizations and their social roles.