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Practices of Palestinian School Teachers in the Bethlehem District: case studies of teachers' practical knowledge, principles and values in contexts of oppression

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Background

Recently there has been increased interest in researching teachers' practical knowledge due to its significant contribution to understanding teaching and learning in schools as well as the challenges that teachers face during their daily interaction with children. It is assumed that such an understanding is a useful source of insight for informing the design of effective professional development programmes that respond to these challenges and needs. However, understanding teachers' practical knowledge cannot be detached from the wider social, political and historical contexts that influence teachers' practices and values.

Research Questions

Aimed at understanding how Palestinian teachers reflect on their daily practices, this study focuses mainly on: 1) the knowledge, values and principles which underpin their classroom teaching, 2) the factors that teachers consider influential on the development of their teaching practices and values.

Methods

This is a non-interventionist study conducted in the Bethlehem district with eleven school teachers. I selected teachers as key informants who were working with pupils at the elementary stage (Years 1-4) at schools in four school authorities: Government, UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), Private/Islamic and Private/Christian schools. The eleven teachers were selected on the basis of their readiness to participate in my research and their teaching experience (minimum three years).

The data collection process was based on a strategy of conducting several kinds of interview with each teacher. I started with a general interview to collect data on the broader teaching principles, values, perspectives and role conceptions that shaped their teaching across a range of contexts. I then observed the teaching of a curriculum unit (approximately four to six lessons on different days), conducted post-lesson interview in which I asked teachers to reflect and comment on the teaching practices, strategies and underlying thinking that they used during observed classroom lessons. At the end of the fieldwork, I conducted an in-depth interview with each teacher during which I investigated in more depth teachers' beliefs and concerns about teaching and learning, their views on the school's and the Ministry's policies and professional development programmes, and whether they perceived these policies and programmes as meeting their own needs and as being harmonious with their own views on teaching and learning.

Frame

The analytical framework was based on two levels of interpretation. At first, I coded, categorised and analyzed the data according to the principles of grounded theory. Working in this mode of analysis, I analysed differences and similarities in the themes and categories inductively developed from teachers' accounts, and conceptualised relationships among them. Later, I conducted a separate analysis adopting a more deductive process using some principles of the critical theory in trying to understand how the political oppression that the Palestinian society has witnessed in the last few decades has influenced teachers' adherence to specific values and practices.

Research findings

This study revealed a number of concerns and issues in common with teachers elsewhere in the world, (such as time pressure, administrative duties and the difficulties teachers face in responding to all children's needs). However, there were some distinctive results that relate to the particular political-social context of teachers working in Bethlehem.

A key theme running through the accounts of all eleven teachers was their clear sense of purpose and responsibility for cultivating among their pupils patriotism and commitment to Palestinian freedom and statehood. However, in most of their accounts there was evidence of a contradiction between these purposes and the way they discussed their practices, which were dominated by concerns about delivery of the curriculum and maintaining standards of good behaviour (that may be regarded as relatively oppressive in some aspects). This contradiction was due to several factors, mainly their restricted training programme, as well as the intervention of external funding agencies in the design of the textbooks and the topics of professional development. Accordingly, some teachers felt alienated from these topics and opted to adhere to traditional teaching practices.

The research also shed light on teachers' strategies for reconciling their values and principles with their respective policy environments. Three coping strategies were in evidence among the eleven teachers of this study. Teachers who adopted a 'compliant' stance followed the Authority expectations. Others adopted a kind of 'two-track compromise' stance, epitomised by teachers who taught in accordance with their values and beliefs, but who 'acted' compliantly before representatives from the Authority. Of the eleven teachers, one adopted the 'rebellious' stance, and only in specific circumstances when her refusal to comply by adopting specific practices did not threaten her career.

This study hopes to contribute to the development of initiatives aimed at the professional development of teachers in contexts of conflict and oppression. The transformation from 'technical' to 'creative' and 'critical' teaching requires a special approach that focuses firstly on teachers' values and ability to play an active role in that process of transformation. Successful transformation involves teachers coming to awareness of aspects of their identity and practice that give expression to norms of oppression they have themselves internalised through their own experiences in contexts of oppression. Without critical reflection teachers risk continuing as agents of oppression.