

Peace Education for Iraq's Population

Khawlah Khanekah, Salahaddin University, Iraq

The European Conference on Education 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Iraqi education has long suffered from an out-dated curriculum, poorly qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms and lack of exposure to recent developments, but above all from an environment not conducive to preparing children to be peace-loving global citizens. Bearing in mind the diversity of ethnicities, religions, minorities and languages that live in Iraq, what kind of educational policy should the authorities follow in order to have as an outcome adults who are inclined to peace and who have the right kind of skills to be creative and peaceful citizens of their communities, of Iraq and of the international community? The paper scrutinizes current education programmes and assesses their general validity and whether they are favourable towards the outcomes that have been envisaged for them. Furthermore, the paper proposes a totally different approach in handling education for a population as diverse as the communities of Iraq. Iraq's diversity is so broad as to encompass people who do not understand each other's languages, sects and religions, and it also include alienated or marginalized minorities. What kind of education would make all Iraqi children acquire a feeling of belonging to it as equal citizens? We want children who have learned to play together and to sing together to speak each other's languages and simply have fun together and become the tolerant, peaceful citizens of tomorrow. This paper seeks to offer a view intrinsic to a person who has 'lived the whole story' and has had a first-hand experience of the realities of the diversity of Iraqi communities.

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

A brief historical backgrounder on Iraq

Iraq is not quite a new state: it was established by the British after the First World War, upon their defeat of the Ottoman Empire and gaining control of the area. The population of Iraq, although Arab in the majority, was never homogeneous ethnically or otherwise. In the south and centre the divide is sharply made on a basis of religious identity rather than nationality, namely Shi'ite versus Sunni – with minorities of Christians and Mandaean, who use different forms of Aramaic in their religious life, and who in fear of their lives have now fled their homes in the south and centre to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The north has a majority of Kurds, whose territory includes a mosaic of nationalities, sects and faiths. Besides the Turkmen who are also either Sunni or Shi'ite, there are Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Armenians (all Christians, belonging to different churches) in addition to other minorities such as the Yezidis and Yarsans or Kakayis, whose religions contain elements older than Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

Iraq had lived in turmoil, instability and conflict during most of its existence. After very many wars and economic privations, and a horrific level of violence committed against its population by previous regimes, it has experienced a turbulent era in the last decade that has made Iraq one of the most hostile areas for children to live in.

For decades, the successive autocratic regimes that ruled Iraq had no interest in building creative citizens who would seek individuality and a free style of thought – rather the focus was on a submissive youth, brainwashed to be instrumental to the goals of the ruling political parties. This attitude reached its peak during the rule of the Ba'ath party headed by Saddam Hussein, when educational curricula mobilized children for war and militancy right from early childhood. Children at kindergarten were taught to combat the enemy through the first nursery rhyme they learned. It is therefore a challenge to reorient the children and youth of Iraq towards building peace. Furthermore, attempting to create a peace education in Iraq in the context of the current intensifying hostility and armed conflict is not an easy matter – nevertheless it is an urgent necessity.

Engagement in peace-building requires a long-term vision owned and driven by the government in collaboration with the international community, along with a planned national strategy that has the approval of all stakeholders.

The Role of the Education in Building Citizenship

Dr Phil: “We’re all products of our learning history.” (Dr Phil’s Facebook Timeline, 1 July 2014)

Education is the bedrock for peace building, as it is the provider of basic knowledge for all and it stands in some relationship with every other sector in the community. Views on education have changed recently: instead of being focused on information, thinking on education now often focuses on ‘formation’ of the future citizens of individual countries and of the larger world.

Only when ministers of education realize that their responsibility includes preparing future generations to not only know how to read and write, but also to be thoughtful, responsible members of their communities, who will

graduate not to make money but to make a difference, will we rest knowing that we have contributed to creating a Culture of Peace. (Salomon and Cairns 2010:343)

It was in 1992 that the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, announced the 'Agenda for Peace'; soon the use of the term 'peace-building' became familiar in dealing with post-conflict communities. According to a UNESCO source, education should be associated with social justice and sustainable human development. (UNESCO Peace-building, 1992.)

We need to look at what kind of education is being provided to Iraqi children and youth and how the concept of citizenship has been implicated throughout the curriculum. Generally speaking, schools in Iraq lack attention to the child's emotional, social, moral and humanistic development on account of focusing mostly on the child's cognitive knowledge. The major shortcomings in the education system in Iraq could be summarized in the in the following points:

1. Lack of awareness on the part of decision-makers of the value of defining an appropriate vision for the Ministry of Education;
2. Outdated curriculum – its last comprehensive update was in the early 1980s;
3. Poorly trained teachers;
4. Insufficiency of coordination between school and the community (PTA);
5. Shortage of suitable school buildings and overcrowded classrooms;
6. Short schooling hours, as most school buildings are shared by two or three schools;
7. Rigid pedagogical modules, with no electives as each and every student learns the same textbooks by heart and is promoted to the next stage on the basis of having learnt by heart the prescribed textbooks;
8. Lack of sport, music and art classes, hence students miss out on any team-building spirit in schools, and generally scarce extracurricular activities;
9. Lack of life/survival skills programme;
10. Curriculum is not relevant to the contemporary needs of young citizen, neither does it prepare them for the job market;
11. Old-fashioned and poorly designed language classes, hence children, youth and adults are poor communicators in their native and the foreign languages; likewise, no time allocated for creative writing, speeches or oratory classes; the majority are not articulate and cannot use language to express their thoughts clearly and adequately.

The above were all valid points and challenges for those who want to address them, but more important for this paper is how the identity of young citizens is defined and implied throughout the schooling years and the curriculum, and how this is factoring in the absence of peace amongst Iraqis.

We can summarize the attitude of the education system towards building the concept of citizenship during three main periods of Iraq's history.

The first period is during the early years of the establishment of Iraq and throughout the rule of the Monarchy (1921-1958), when the concept of citizenship was summed up by the rights that the citizens had and the duties they were obliged to the state or the king. Such concepts were included in teaching modules called 'National Education', which focused on teaching the administrative structure of the government

and indicated the role of Iraq amongst other Arab nations and explained the role of the individual, the family, the tribe, the village and the city.

The second period was a prolonged phase of upheaval. The period that followed the fall of the Monarchy in 1958 and marked the establishment of the Iraq Republic until 2003 is said to be the most critical in Iraq's history as regards the concept of citizenship. New concepts were introduced into the previous 'National Education' textbooks, which introduced 'Arab Unity', 'the struggle of the people against colonialism', 'aspects of Arab Nationalism' and eventually, and intensively after 1979 'the principles of Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party' and the dogmas of 'Arab Unity, Liberty and Socialism' (Abdulla et al 1979) – a triangular motto that became the most visible slogan, one that you could not fail to see in every classroom throughout the country, and it was also the first to be seen on the signs of every state building, office, school, and public organization. Yet this slogan was confusing for the majority of children and adults alike. However this sloganeering was not the end; trends began to shift heavily towards war and militarism. Citizenship status became increasingly gauged on one's degree of preparedness to glorify war and hatred towards all other nationalities and ethnicities in Iraq and the neighbouring countries. Gradually Iraq became a country that suppressed the existence of all but one religion, one nationality and one sect and everyone else was an enemy. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds of the Shi'ite faith were expelled from Iraq. During the national census that took place regularly every ten years, there was no entry for nationalities other than Arabic and Kurdish, while all Christians would be entered into the census forms as Arabs (based on the idea that all were Semites). School-curriculum textbooks of 'Arab Nationalism and Socialism' would explain that all Semites were Arabs who had migrated from the Arabian Peninsula. In this regard, even Armenians were entered as Arabs! There was extensive uprooting of Sunni Kurds from certain cities and towns in the north, replacing them with Arabs from the south and centre of Iraq. This marginalization of the majority of Iraqi ethnicities became the norm: just one, Sunni Arab, component of Iraqi society came to be considered as comprising wholesome, 'ideal' citizens.

This was likewise a period when civil ideals were increasingly replaced by military ones, and independent civil society forcibly transformed into one political party for all, embodying multifarious contradictions – calling for adherence to traditions at one stage, and for abandoning tradition at other times: '... our patriotism would appear through our contribution in building the future through performing the national service – joining the army – ... and joining the "national campaigns" led by the Party and the Revolution' (Abdul-Ridha et al 1984: 19); while at another stage it was mentioned that '... the political leadership stressed raising citizens on the principles of nationalism and socialism away from the backward traditions' (Abdul-Ridha et al 1984).

On the eruption of Iraq-Iran war in 1980 the concept of citizenship was modified to express the need of the state for army recruits; therefore, the duties of citizens towards their country were defined to be, 'love of your country and sacrifice for it, doing your national service, and finally committing yourself to national and patriotic demands' (Abdul-Ridha et al 1984: 28)

It was during these eight years of war with Iran during in 1980-1988 that the seeds of war, hatred and violence were deeply planted in the mentality of Iraqis, and this was

reflected in the study programmes of school children to a substantial degree: some 75% of a text book on national education for twelve-year-old students were devoted to Iraqi army institutions, the military recruiting system, the role of the army in society, Iraqi revolutions of 1941, 1958, 1963 and then the coups d'état of 1968 that brought the Baathist regime into power. It further included chapters on other parallel intelligence and security forces and concluded that citizenship was based on the individual's contribution to the war (Abdul-Ridha et al 1984: 19). In subsequent years, all the curricula, especially that of civic education (which changed its title into 'Arab Nationalism and Socialism Education') would focus on the mind-set of the one and only political party, the Arab Ba'ath Party, and the cult of its leader.

The third period is the one after the fall of the regime in 2003 until the present. Initially there were high hopes in Iraq for the education system to emerge as a healing path, one that would lead Iraqis on a path of reconciliation, forgiveness and living together in peace. However, the outcome has been a disappointment: whatever changes the education system has witnessed since then have been superficially conducted and consisted initially of removing references and pictures that were symbols of the old regime followed by an intensive infiltration of religious beliefs, logo and stories in every textbook that one can imagine. Even mathematics textbooks will contain references to religious books – and such is the case with all other textbooks; this has shown clear bias to one of the Islamic sects over the others, while totally ignoring other ethnicities and religious beliefs.

Towards Peace Education

A policy issue

Two factors intrinsic to the situation have played their part in maintaining divisions amongst the components of Iraqi society. One is that the state denies the existence of divisions, even when the warring factions are in action against each other! The second is that the Ministry of Education and its decision-makers are ignorant of the significance of existing peace-building initiatives for Iraqi society. A number of voices called for national reconciliation programmes, to be introduced in post-2003 Iraq; however, these voices were met with refusal on the grounds that there was no need for such national reconciliation – there was no division amongst Iraqis and no conflict to deal with! This misleading concept of peace being 'absence of war' was and still is dominant in the minds of Iraqis. (Adams, D. (2009).) Surely a society that has suffered so much extreme violence in so many of the last decades would need to think of more profound strategies to bring about peace: without doubt the currently dominant outcome of violence and hatred in the life of Iraqis has been in the making for too long. Therefore, it seems likely that the remedy would also need to be a long-term plan, one that would see short-term fruits in raising issues and awareness and bringing to surface what has always been 'under the table', and a long-term result in enabling the state to settle on defining a vision for the Ministry of Education, which would have to be subsumed in a philosophy of peace education, with a strategy and a plan of action and surely with an all-out reform of education.

What role could education play in bringing together future generations of Iraq, and how?

What is in dire need in Iraq is establishing an education system that would lay the foundation for future generations to have the knowledge, attitude, values and the skills

to resolve differences peacefully, and who could accept diversity and consider it as a point of strength to possess a society enriched with various cultures, religions and languages.

Iraq has not lost the opportunity to teach peace to its new generations and teach them to understand each other's stories and mind-sets, compromise and learn to live together and have a peaceful coexistence. There have been a number of approaches to reconstruct peace in post-conflict societies through integrated education, critical multicultural education, or human rights education. (McGlynn et al (2009:274).) Iraq should be thinking of initiatives of peace, reconciliation and coexistence like those that took place in Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Peace does not come with our DNA. To reach peace we need to teach peace, a phrase well penned by Prof. Betty Reardon, South Africa's former minister of education (Castro and Nario-Galace (2008: 9).)

The Way Forward

The major issue facing Iraq in its path towards a peace education lies in eliminating structural violence at the level of the community, the family and the household – the areas in which the laws and the way they are enacted have failed to punish violence. (Augustin, Barbara 2014.)

There is violence in Iraq, and it seems that schools and the education programmes could assume a preventative approach for future generations to live in peace.

This paper calls for an all-out education reform that would demand acknowledgement of the failings and the weaknesses of the current education system. The state needs to have a new definition for who Iraqis are, what their shared history is about, how each and every individual's ethnicity and religion can be considered equally, how each of the languages spoken by Iraqis are valid and should be the vehicle of education for its community. The past practices of totally denying Iraq's indigenous diversity and acknowledging only one language and only one religion did Iraq's inhabitant a lot of harm, and it is about time that Iraqis learn at least through their education that there is more than one language, more than one ethnicity, more than one religious belief, and that each and every one of these ethnicities, languages and religious beliefs are valid ones and that members of any community is as Iraqi as those of any other, whether they had become Iraqis since the beginning of history or in the last few centuries or decades, and that it does not do anybody anyone any harm to learn about each other and accept each other. Empirical studies show that people from early age need to have a narrative of their past, and their definition of who they are depends on such associations as they make based on the narratives that have been conveyed to them. The curriculum provides students with narratives of the past and visions for the future. (Paulson, 2011.)

Marginalizing the minorities and avoiding any mention of them in the formal education has not been helpful in constructing a peaceful society. I can refer to a well-known journalist who recently stated that he first learnt about Yezidis' existence when he met the first Yezidi woman to become a member of parliament in Iraq in 2010. Likewise, the majority of the population do not know about the Sabaeans (or Mandaean), the Shabaks, or the Kakayi or Yarsani communities who have been

living in Iraq for thousands of years. Frequently I hear Iraqis saying ‘He speaks Christian’ as though Christianity was a nationality with its own language. Generally Iraqis will only learn about the national diversity of nationalities and religious beliefs and practices, when they happen to have a neighbour or a colleague who has this or that affiliation. Surely, it would be more appropriate and more politically correct for the Iraqis to learn about Iraq as it is, without ignoring the ‘others’ that are not the majority! Ignoring the ‘others’ by never including them in any of the general-knowledge textbooks in schools had caused a lot of psychological problems for those children who do not belong to the majority nationality or share the religious beliefs of the current government. Children have been made to feel inferior when they could not speak Arabic fluently in areas where the native language was Kurdish, Turkmen, Assyrian, etc., and this has been a factor for some in dropping out of school.

However, when the appropriate educational mind-set is not practiced, even introducing education in the different native languages of Iraq did not go as smoothly as could be expected and may have caused other forms of discrimination, as was definitely the case in areas in Iraq that are now called ‘disputed territories’. The Iraqi constitutions of 2005 (Article 22 of the Constitution) provides for the following: ‘Education is a crucial factor for progress. It is a right secured by the State. It is obligatory in the elementary stage. The state undertakes to fight illiteracy, provides free education for all...’, and in 2006 the Ministry of Education issued a Memorandum of Understanding to the effect that areas that have more than 25% of the population belonging to a minority community, the government will be obliged to provide mother-tongue language instruction. The implementation of this memorandum, far from making peace, has failed to foster peace-building and at times has caused a potential conflict. Shanks (2014: 5)

Issues to do with the diversity of the population are altogether more apparent in the northern Iraqi provinces referred to as ‘disputed territories’. A classic example is Kirkuk, where there are Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs and Assyrians and each claims the right of education in their native language. While in the past all were ignored and were assimilated through the education system, with one set of unified textbooks and teaching practices focusing on adhering to the Ba’ath ideology, they are now allowed to have education in their native language. However, the central government has not allocated funds for them to implement preparation of an up-to-date curriculum in their native languages or for the translation of textbooks, nor has it taken care of preparing teaching staff able to teach in the minority languages. Hence there is a disparity in the opportunities: some, like the Kurds in Kirkuk, could get assistance from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but the same arrangement has not been possible for the Turkmen or the Assyrians. Shanks (2014). All the same, we now have a separatist kind of education, in that each minority has its segregated schools, and this does not help with the cohesion of a society already divided. It is of course in the way of realizing minorities’ right to education in their native tongues that they have been allowed to have schools where education is conducted in their mother tongue rather than in the majority language, but it is also helping further to isolate communities from each other.

What is worth attempting in the way of making schools mediums of peace-building is to have a broad education programmes in all schools throughout Iraq, regardless of the affiliation or the language of the school community; schools that would

incorporate the history, the geography and the cultures of all the components of Iraq's ethnicities and religious beliefs. Schools that would also offer the options of learning one or another of the minority languages. Imagine if a child in the south of Iraq whose native language is Arabic and whose religion is Islam were to have the option of learning any of Kurdish, Turkmen or Assyrian! Would not this child's familiarity help in making him feel familiar and at home with the whole community that speaks this minority language? Imagine if children in Iraq were to be taught briefly about the various religious beliefs that are indigenous to Iraq's population; would not this help the child in having respect for others beliefs? It would be more appropriate than calling people with different beliefs 'infidel', as is the case with some religious extremists nowadays. These are gaps in the general knowledge on offer in schools in Iraq; education for peace-building should cater for overcoming these gaps. There is a clear legitimate case for the formal education system to provide in its school programmes a reference to the national and local histories of all Iraqis, and to provide a common narrative that would have the consent of all Iraq's ethnic and religious components.

Lack of team-building practices within schools, such as sport and art activities, has also contributed in denying the children of Iraq a context for establishing common forums among them. This is true on the level of all localities, and it is a major gap in the education system in Iraq. With the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war and the consequent underfunding for the education sector, sport, art and music gradually disappeared from schools.

References

- Adams, D. The History of the Culture of War. Createspace (Amazon). 2009. 206 pages, [online version](#), [pdf version](#)
- Augustin, Barbara. 2014. "An Examination of Peacefulness in Iraqi Kurdistan Through the Lense of Religious Conversations". In *Finding Peace in Iraq* edited by Talia Hagerty and, Thomas Hills, 56-74. 2nd edition, Khani Press, Duhok
- Abdulla, Y.H., Nisai, F.A., et al, (1979) ' National Education for Grade Six Primary Schools' Baghdad, Iraq. Al-Intisar Printing House
- Barkey, H.J. 2009 *Preventing Conflict Over Kurdistan*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Jabir Abdul-Ridha, J., Ali-Abid, H. et al, 1984, Thirds edition, Baghdad, "National Education for Grade Six Primary Schools". 2008. Web.
- Jamal, R. "Educational Reform in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq." *Reliefweb*. 19 Au
- Navarro-Castro, L. & Nario-Galace, J. 2010 *Peace Education: A Pathway to a Culture of Peace* Quezon City, Philippines: Center for Peace Education (<http://www.peace-ed-campaign.org/Peace%20Education-Castro-Galace.pdf>)
- McGlynn, C. et al (ed) 2009. *Peace Education in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies: comparative perspectives*, e-book, Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Page, James S. (2008) *Co-ordinating Peace Research and Education in Australia : A Report from the Canberra Forum of 2 May, 2008*. International Review of Education, 55(2-3). pp. 303-306
- Page, James. 2005. Professionalising Peace Research in Australia: Some Suggestions for the Future. *Social Alternatives*. 24(3): 62-64.
- Paulson, J. (ed.) 2011, *Education, Conflict and Development*, Symposium Books Ltd. Oxford
- Salomon, G. and Cairns, E. (ed.) 2010. *Handbook on Peace Education*, Psychology Press, New York
- Shanks, K. " Identity and Peace building: Education and Peace in the Disputed Territories of Iraq", a paper presented at the Symposium on Peace Education, University of Duhok, Iraq, held in the period 15-17 May 2014
www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf