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The Power of Participatory Action Research to Hearing the Voices of Children with Disabilities in Conflict Situations. A Case Study from Palestine.

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Introduction

Until recently, children and young people were not regarded as having the competency or capacity to engage in research because of their lack of maturity. They were regarded as passive subjects, lacking the capacity to speak meaningfully about their experiences or to speak with insight on issues affecting them. Research was done on them, rather than with them. However, as children are recognised as rights holders, then they are not just able to participate in research but are also entitled to do so.

In conflict situations, the marginalisation of children is especially acute. In this chapter, we write from the perspective of marginalised voices of disabled children and their teachers in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank. Their voices are marginalised on account of the intersections of disability, age, socio-economic status and the complicating and oppressive forces of occupation and annexation. Palestinians have lived under intensive Israeli occupation for over eighty years, suffering extensive human rights violations that include the illegal annexation of Palestinian territories. The United Nations, the European Union, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, B'Tselem (MacKenzie et al, 2019, 2020a; Owaineh, 2023), have all condemned the occupation and annexation.

We present research which sought to hear the voices of children with disabilities in Bethlehem, Hebron and their surroundings[1]. The research questions were focused on the extent to which the children felt they belonged in their centre, school or community; whether they were included in the design of their curriculum; and what they felt was important to their education. Eight focus groups with children and young people using a variety of participatory research methods were used to elicit their views on inclusion. Participatory methods were particularly useful for children who preferred to communicate non-verbally. The children directed the focus groups by choosing the materials and methods that would best support them to speak about their experiences. The key findings were that children experience violence and aggression both within and out with the centres; that children's view of self is that they are not 'normal while some children do not feel they belong in their community; and that they are not involved their education.

We will first contextualise the research to present an overview of the main policies and strategies on education in Palestine. We will next describe the research design and explain how participatory methods can, if executed in the spirit of emancipation, liberation and egalitarianism, reach out to and listen to marginalised voices, even in conflict situations where oppression, violence and annexation are the norm.

Policies of Inclusion in Palestine for People with Disabilities

According to Al Masri (2021, p.6), Palestine is notable for the fact that only 50% of Palestinian people live in their occupied homeland, while 50% are in forced diaspora, most of them as refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Further, of the five million Palestinians living in the occupied territories, 42% are registered refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works

[1] Full details of the research design and findings, including analysis can be found in MacKenzie et al 2019, 2020a and 2020b.

Agncy (UNWRA) having fled their villages and towns by Israeli forces in the 1948 Palestinian war (700,000 were forced to feel. Benny, 2001). In 2019, Palestinian refugees made up 42% of the Palestinian population in the State of Palestine: 26% of them in the West Bank and 66% in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2019).

As a consequence of living under Israeli military occupation and in refugee camps, Palestine has three educational sectors and three types of schools: public schools run by Ministry of Education on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the United Nation Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) which runs schools in the refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the private sector which is organised by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs and other local charity organisations).

Despite the effects of occupation and annexation of land, the Palestinian Authority has adopted numerous policies, strategies, plans and policies on education for people with disabilities, all of which testify to the importance of quality, inclusive education for all. These include the *UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All* in 1994; the *Policy for Safe and Equitable Access to Quality Education in 2012*; the *Education Development Strategic Plan, 2014-2019: A Learning Nation*; and in 2017, the *Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2017-2022* (MacKenzie et al, 2019; MacKenzie et al, 2020a). We will discuss two of these strategies to in order to show why realising equitable, just and inclusive education in Palestine is so difficult.

Education's Development Strategy Plan (2014 to 2019)

The MoEHE's (2013) *Education's Development Strategy Plan* (2014 to 2019) restated the government's commitment to inclusive education, which has been the general policy of the education sector since 1997. The Strategy Plan, which includes specific goals relating to students with special education needs, identifies the need for a more detailed and comprehensive policy on inclusive education for children with disabilities. The majority of

children with disabilities (CWDs) who access the formal public education system are those with physical, rather than cognitive, disabilities. In reality, this means that only those children with mild to moderate physical disabilities attend mainstream schools (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 2015). In 2012/13, only 0.83% of students with special needs and disabilities were included in secondary schools (MoEHE 2014, p.107). The target for 2017/18 was 1.08%. Only five categories of disability were represented in the Ministry's 2014-19 Education Plan: visual, hearing, mobility, speech and mild mental. In 2013/14, 5702 students with those disabilities were in public schools, approximately, 0.96% of the total number of students in public schools in the West Bank (MoEHE, 2014, p.76).

The Ministry also sought to provide educational methods and supportive tools for individuals with 'obvious' disabilities (hearing aids, wheelchairs, and Braille books, for example), but acknowledges that there is still a lack of equipment for students with 'less obvious' disabilities. In addition, the lack of diagnostic tools to accurately identify the specific disability, such as moderate and severe 'mental difficulties', Autism, and learning difficulties, mean that teachers use criteria that do not consider individual differences and capacities. While there are secondary school tests for students with disabilities, they are limited to visual, hearing, and mobility disabilities (MoEHE, 2014, p.77).

The MoEHE recorded a number of challenges to its education strategy. For example, the actual disability rate exceeds the official figures. The prevalence of disability, particularly for girls and women, is underreported since some families do not register children with disabilities for social reasons, such as shame and stigma. A unified definition of disability and strategy to support individuals with disabilities does not exist. Neither is there a unified database where the official authorities (Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education and Higher Education) and the Union of Disabled Persons can register cases of disability for analytical, comparative and policy purposes.

A further key challenge is the lack of a coherent and integrated disability policy across all institutions. Policy is driven by national need rather than funding availability, resulting in many weaknesses in the Ministry's approach to disability. For example, equity with respect to the distribution of funding and services across the country is lacking. Many disability services have poor sustainability because of short-term project cycles that lead to their termination when the funding is over. There is no clear and specific referral system addressing all types of disabilities between governmental and private institutions; and safe and reliable transportation, along with predictable financial support is lacking, which often leads to high dropout rates (MoEHE 2014, p.79).

The *Education Sector Strategic Plan* (ESSP) (MoEHE 2017) was devised in response to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, *A Quality Education*. The ESSP is premised on a vision of a 'Palestinian society that possesses values, knowledge, science and technology and is able to employ that knowledge for liberation as well as development' (p.7). Target 4.5, SDG 4, seeks to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for marginalised and vulnerable groups, including disabled people, by 2030 (p.20). The ESSP adopted three sectoral goals:

> Sector Goal 1: Ensuring safe, inclusive, and equitable access to quality education at all levels of the system, particularly for disabled people.
>
> Sector Goal (2): Developing a student-centred teaching and learning pedagogy and environment.
>
> Sector Goal (3): Enhance Accountability and Results-Based Leadership, Governance and Management. (MoEHE 2017)

However, fulfilling these goals is practically impossible. Even with the existing laws and policies, disability remains a low priority for decision-makers and often disability programmes are devised as short-term interventions with heavy reliance on external funding, a fact the

Ministry of Education and Higher Education itself notes. An added and protracted complication is that, although the population is one of the most literate in the world, the education system is in disrepair and failing, primarily due to the effects of the Israeli occupation. The Ministry acknowledges that '[b]uilding and operating an education system under militarily occupation and without full political, territorial, and physical freedom is a major challenge' (MoEHE 2014, p.2).

Despite the progress on how disability is viewed, the laws in favour of people with disabilities, and the aspirations of the State, people with disabilities in Palestine are among the most socio-economically deprived and marginalised people among a highly oppressed and subjugated people (Owaineh, 2023). The goals for inclusion are also impossible to achieve because Israeli authorities have 'dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated, and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity' (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The intent is to maintain military control in perpetuity (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Living Under Perpetual Siege

The effects of the occupation in the lives of all Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip are extensive, enduring and brutal. Decades of occupation that shows no sign of ending have had a deleterious impact on every aspect of life, including on realising effective, equitable, quality education for all children and young people (CYP). Palestinian CYP have been, and continue to be, adversely affected by the presence of Israeli occupation forces, aggressive settler communities and security checkpoints since the 1967 six-day war between Israel and Arab States. Despite a long-term peace process (it is questionable if there is a peace-process), Palestine and Israel have failed to conclude a peace agreement. Preventing such an agreement is the lack of mutual recognition, skewed water rights in favour of Israel, lack of security and freedom of movement for Palestinians, the illegal development of Israeli

settlements on unilaterally annexed land, and Israeli control of occupied East Jerusalem from which Israeli Arabs are threatened with expulsion. The intentional domination of the Palestinians by Israel, along with the systematic oppression of, discrimination and inhumane acts against the Palestinians amounts to the crime of apartheid according to Human Rights Watch (2021) and Amnesty International (2022).

This situation will likely worsen now that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has entered into a coalition government with ultra-orthodox religious parties and ultra nationalist parties, the most religious and hardline government in Israel's history. On assuming power in December 2022, the new government declared that 'the Jewish people have an exclusive and unquestionable right to all areas of the land of Israel', including the occupied West Bank on which the government promises to 'advance and develop' settlements (Knell and Gritten, 2022).

As the Palestinian Authority does not have direct control over schools in Area C[2], Jerusalem and South Hebron, it cannot protect children or schools from attacks by Israeli settlers and soldiers. Further, because Israel controls the external borders, it also controls the collection and transfer of customs duties for Palestine, as well as the internal movement of goods and people. There are hundreds of checkpoints through which Palestinians must go, a Separation Wall[3], and more than 500,000 Israeli settlers spread throughout the West Bank. Area C, which makes up more than 60% of the West Bank, is under exclusive Israeli civil and security control. Israel illegally annexed East Jerusalem to its territory in 1967, entirely cutting

[2] Area C is an administrative division of the West Bank. It was created under the Oslo Accord II which divided the West Bank into three Areas: Area A is controlled exclusively by Palestine; Area B is administered by Palestine and Israel, while Israel has full civic and security control over Area C.

[3] This is formally known as the Israeli West Bank barrier. The Separation Wall was built by Israel to prevent terrorism. The Palestinians regard it as a separation or apartheid wall. Eighty five percent of the wall is erected on Palestinian lands, effectively (and deliberately) cutting Palestinians off from their land and resources, and resulting in the fragmentation of territory. The International Court of Justice ruled in 2004 that the separation barrier is illegal and violates human rights. B'Tselem (2017). https://www.btselem.org/topic/separation_barrier

it off from the West Bank without official Palestinian representation. According to B'tselem (2019), Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem are treated by the Israeli authorities as 'unwanted immigrants' and has sought to 'systematically to drive them out of the area'.

Unsurprisingly, the education system in Palestine is exposed to 'political, financial, physical constraints and [is] vulnerable to many variables that cannot be controlled' (SIDA 2014). As a result, the school infrastructure is poor, there are not enough trained teachers, and access to schooling in marginalised areas is difficult. The capacity of both the Ministry and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) to accommodate the education needs of all students, including students with disabilities and refugees, is limited. The effective inclusion of students with disabilities requires improvements in 'physical accessibility, the training of teachers to better support students with disabilities in mainstream classes, and appropriate teaching aids' (SIDA 2014, p.3).

The Research Design

The research question

The research presented in this chapter was designed to hear the voices of children with disabilities in Palestine. The key research question was: How do children with disabilities experience educational inclusion in Palestine?

The aim of the research was to explore how children and young adults with disabilities and experience, if at all, inclusion in educational and vocational training centres in Palestine run by an NGO. Children with disabilities (CWDs) are one of the most marginalised and excluded groups in any society, but in Palestine their situation is dire because of the levels of cultural stigma associated with disability and the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As discussed above, the conflict has devastated Palestine's infrastructure, fractured the economy,

fragmented the integrity of the territories of Palestine, and overwhelmed service providers (UNICEF, 2018). Poverty is, unsurprisingly, widespread. The conflict has contributed to many of the barriers preventing the rights of children to a quality education, such as the lack of schools, schools in a poor state of repair, attacks and the threat of attacks on schools, teachers and students, along with the ubiquitous psychosocial impacts of conflict (UNICEF, 2018)

The methods of data collection

We conducted field work in Palestine in April 2019, visiting eight educational and vocational centres in Bethlehem, Hebron and the South-West Bank. The centres were located in both rural and urban settings. A variety of participatory research methods were used to collect data on the educational experiences of CYP in these settings.

Emoji soft toys. Many children are familiar with the use of emojis on their mobile phones and in the media. CYP were asked to choose an emoji face to express their feelings about their education. ***A doll's house play set*** gave CYP scope to answer our questions through play with small world toys that represented people, furniture and items that would be used in school. ***Photo elicitation*** provided the children and young people with an opportunity to show their thoughts, feelings and experiences in school or training through the pictures they took. We asked for short explanations for their choice of picture. ***A mobile phone*** to text message answers. This method allowed CYP who had difficulty with their speech to type their answer onto a mobile phone. Other CYP chose this method for reasons of privacy as their teachers could not read their responses. The typed text message was photographed by one of the researchers and deleted by the young person. ***A picture of a circle of people and outlines of people***. This activity was specifically designed for a question that explored the CYP's opinions about how strongly they felt they belonged to their community.

Emotion cards. The emotion cards provided CYP with a range of faces and words that described each emotion. CYP were asked to choose an emotion word and/or face to express their feelings about their education. They were also able to use the emotion cards to support their verbal answers to our questions. ***Thumbs up/thumbs down cards*** them with a picture of a common hand gesture that expresses pleasure/displeasure and 'yes/no'. They were able to use these cards to answer closed questions prior to providing a verbal description. ***Diamond ranking*** provides a framework to order issues (friendship, school, learning) that were most and least important to the CYP.

Participatory focus groups were small (an average of four children) to ensure that the voices of all CYP were heard and could be supported to use the resources, particularly those children who preferred to communicate in non-verbal ways (using pictures or their mobile phone, for example). The CYP directed the focus group by choosing the materials that would best support the inclusion of their voices.

While the questions varied, as one would expect in semi-structured and participatory focus groups, they were based on the following structure:

Why the children attended the centre

How the children felt about the centres, their education and their teachers

The extent to which the children felt that they belonged to the centre and community

Whether their voices were included in the design of their education.

Thirty-two service users consisting of 24 children and eight adolescents – 24 boys and eight girls and women between the ages of five and 25. The interviews were conducted in Arabic by one of the researchers who is Palestinian. The interviews were transcribed in Arabic and translated into English by a Palestinian translator.

Hearing young people's voices: The UNCRC and participatory action research

The UNCRC, particularly Articles 12 and 13, is recognised by childhood researchers (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012) as articulating the right of children to be heard and included in research. The convention can be interpreted to mean that children have a right to be properly researched, to be participants in research, using methods that make it easy for them to express their opinions, views and experiences, and for these to be listened to sincerely. Adults who work with children have a concomitant duty to 'ensure that their right to express views and influence their own lives is respected' (Lundy and McEvoy 2012, p.130).

Article 12 of the convention asserts that children and young people have the 'right to express their views freely and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity' (UNCRC, 1990). The implementation of Article 12 should be interpreted and applied in accordance with children's other rights, including the right to be supported and guided by adults (Article 5), and the right to seek, receive and impart information (Articles 13 and 17) of the convention. Articles 13 and 17 are regarded as 'crucial pre-requisites for the effective exercise of the right to be heard' (UNCRC 2009, p.20). The convention emphasises that compliance with Article 12 requires that children are provided with an enabling environment and 'access to information in formats appropriate to their age and capacities on all issues of concern to them' (p.20).

Participatory action research (PAR) seeks to be inclusive, collaborative, or user-led, and aims at engaging in research *with* rather than *on* people (Schubotz, 2019). Researchers who adopt PAR aim to ameliorate the situations of the marginalised, disadvantaged or oppressed groups in any society. Critically, PAR seeks to develop emancipatory practices by 'engaging local and community knowledge systems through participatory practices' (Schubotz 2019, p.99). Information provided by co-researchers or participants can provide knowledge and insights that would otherwise remain inaccessible or invisible to academic researchers. PAR also seeks to comply with the highest ethical and democratic requirements because it regards

participants as autonomous agents in research (Stern 2019). It is also an approach that can help overcome relations of domination and subordination by promoting grassroots and community-based learning (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013).

The Findings of the Research

Among the key findings were that:

- Children and young people too often experience violence and aggression in school and in the community;
- Children and young people do not feel they belong in their community and that they are not normal;
- Children do not feel they have a say over their education.

Violence and aggression

Many of the young people recognised that violence and aggression within school and their communities impacted upon both their mood and educational experiences. Some young people had experienced physical violence and verbal abuse from persons in positions of authority, which impacted on how they viewed their teachers and overall happiness. Other young people commented on the behaviour of other students within their classes and how the teacher's behaviour management approach did not adequately deal with disruptive behaviour:

> Young person: I'm serious, there are marks from being hit hard.
>
> Interviewer: By whom?
>
> Young person: By the teacher. She uses an iron ruler.
>
> Young person: The teachers outside, they hit really hard, and it hurts a lot.
>
> Interviewer: How? Point [to an emoji]. How does Mr [name of the teacher] make you

feel? No one can see what you choose.

Young person: Every time he sees me, he starts getting furious with me … even when I'm tidying up, he starts to get angry with me.

Interviewer: When they punish you what do they do?

Child: They keep screaming and I remain silent.

The CYP's education was not only impacted by violence and aggression in school. The current situation in Palestine also means that children are regularly exposed to aggressive, violent and even deadly behaviours both within and outside of their communities. Visits from Israeli soldiers to family homes have a negative impact on their mental health. Fear and anxiety impact detrimentally on their education and hinders their full participation. In one class the interviewer asked the children if they were happy. All but one chorused 'yes':.

Interviewer: Are you happy today?

[All]: Yes.

Interviewer: You don't seem very happy, [name of the child]. Why?

Teacher: [name of the child] is unhappy because the army comes to their neighbourhood. They were there yesterday.

Interviewer: Is that correct, A? The army were around yesterday?

Child: Yes.

Violence and aggression very obviously signify a lack of respect for the dignity of the person and a disregard for their right not to be demeaned.

Sense of self and of belonging in a school community

Many of the CYP across the schools and centres were aware that they were different to children who attended mainstream school. They understood that they had to attend a 'special' school or centre because they were not 'normal'. This view appears to be perpetrated by wider societal views on disability and can undermine a person's sense of self.

When the children were asked to show us where they belonged within their educational community (designated by a picture showing a circle of people), only one child placed the figure in the centre. The children could not explain why other than that their disability marked them out as being different and as therefore not accepted by their communities:

> Interviewer: Where do you want to put it (the cut-out figure)? This picture is about the people around you and where you see yourself …do you see yourself in the centre? Or outside the centre?
>
> Child: I put myself outside.
>
> Interviewer: Do you see yourself outside or with people?
>
> Child: No, not with people.

Children attending some of the centres were not sure why they were there rather than in mainstream schools. Neither the centre staff nor their family had discussed their choice of educational placement with them, as this young person related:

> Young person: My mother sent me. I had nothing to do with it. I don't know anything about the centre or why I'm here. My mother won't even tell me.

Influence over the curriculum content

While the majority of CYP had very little influence over their choice of educational placement, or what they could learn, a small number of children reported that they had some opportunities to tell the teacher what they wanted to learn. One teacher, who sat in one of the focus groups, did not think it was appropriate to ask the children for their opinion on their education:

Teacher: Every morning, I discuss their daily programme with them, but I don't think it is feasible to ask them about every single aspect of their learning process. I prefer to to surprise them.

Many of the CYP reported that they were not challenged. Their teachers did not expect much of them, so their lessons were boring and repetitive. The autistic children we spoke to and observed found their environments over- or under-stimulating because of noise, inappropriate lighting, being confined to a chair or small space, being made to repeat tasks that did not enhance their learning, and restrictions on pursuing their interests. For older children with Down Syndrome who were taught in the same class as young autistic children, their provision was wholly inadequate and their socio-educative needs were critically unmet.

Learning from Marginalised Voices

We learned that children could provide intelligent and astute insights into their lived experiences, which are not mediated by adults' understanding. The research also reveals that children and young people with disabilities can learn if creative approaches to teaching and learning are adopted; and that focusing on learners' actual capacities and aspirations, rather than on content when planning teaching activities, is vital to their inclusion and education. A key marker of collaboration with people from marginalised communities is devising approaches that permit their direct engagement in research and which accords them status as knowers of their own experiences.

It is important to state, however, that the young children in particular could give only restricted answers. Even when they had emojis, pictures, or the opportunity to draw, they frequently touched and examined the items, replaced them, picked up another, and replaced it. With prompting they would choose an emoji that represented their feelings. However, it

became clear that they sometimes did not know what the emoji represented because their explanation did not match the picture. It was our impression that because the children were not accustomed to expressing their views and had not used these kinds of resources before, that they were intrigued by the colourful items, and were more interested in their examinations, than answering the questions posed.

Working with the CYP also gave us disturbing insights into the micro impacts of occupation on the daily lives of Palestinians. On one occasion, for example, we had to take a 30-minute detour because one of the village entrances was closed by the military. No explanation was offered. This is a daily occurrence for Palestinians living under siege. The closures can be arbitrary and lead to violent confrontations, even with children.

Conclusion: The Implications of PAR Future Research in Inclusion

Participatory methods work best when researchers have the opportunity to develop relationships with communities and their members, and thereby gain their trust. It was to our advantage that many of the CYP knew the interviewer (he had visited the schools many times in his capacity as an outreach worker for his NGO) and liked and trusted him. Had we had time, we would have formed a young people's advisory group, but our timescale was ten-days in Palestine. We could not, therefore, actively involve the participants in an authentically inclusive and collaborative approach (Schubotz, 2019) since deep engagement with PAR requires time. Instead, we had time only to use diverse methods what we hoped would engage the CYP with disabilities and bring out their experiences and knowledge.

Creative methodologies such as PAR should not rely only on academic researchers but should involve the research participants from the communities or organisations that are the focus of the research to conceptualise their living experiences in terms that are meaningful to

them. To remain true to the emancipatory, egalitarian and democratic principles of PAR, the needs of the research participants should guide the research design, create maximum opportunities for participants to take part in data collection, reflect on the data, and decide on actions to create change (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Schubotz, 2019; Owaineh, 2023). Fals-Borda (1995) captures what researchers committed to liberatory, inclusive and collaborative research should do:

> Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. Do not trust elitist versions of history and science that respond to dominant interests but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs and arts for action by and with the research organisations. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals. (Fals-Borda,1995, cited in Chevalier and Buckles 2013, p.27)

Research should seek to transform lives and subvert systems of oppression. If we are to achieve this, then we must hear from, and listen to, marginalised voices using approaches that are not extractive and do not objectify participants as mere informants. Authentic collaboration with people from marginalised communities must include incorporating community-based needs, knowledge and action learning into inquiry/research plans. Authentic collaboration permits ownership of, and contribution to knowledge production, including contextually sensitive interventions. And in a context where what is owned can be destroyed or appropriated at whim

and without penalty, such an approach can confer dignity and respect, and restore the very humanity of the systemically oppressed.

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