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### Toward a New Way of Learning – Promoting Inquiry and Reflection in Palestinian Early Childhood Teacher Education

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## **Toward a New Way of Learning — Promoting Inquiry and Reflection in Palestinian Early Childhood Teacher Education**

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*The article describes the integration of inquiry, reflective practice, and child-centered teaching approaches in preservice teacher education at the early childhood level. The article reviews relevant literature on the forms and functions of inquiry and reflection as a form of professional development and teacher learning and also describes the current state of Palestinian teacher education and early childhood teaching and learning. The article then describes the preservice program at Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, the West Bank (Palestine) for students pursuing a BA in early childhood education and highlights the program's emphasis on child-centered, discovery-based teaching and learning. To illustrate how the Al-Quds program emphasizes reflection and inquiry at the preservice level, the article presents examples of the student teachers' projects, perspectives, and experiences in implementing an inquiry-based approach to teaching. Taken as whole, the article helps crystallize key issues and advances in teacher education in the West Bank (Palestine) and contributes to the growing awareness in teacher education at the global level of the professional and research benefits of cross-cultural and cross-border dialogue and exchange*

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we present our work on an educational change initiative for preservice early childhood education (ECE) students attending the Abu Dis campus of Al-Quds University in the West Bank (Palestine). Our project has focused on the integration of teacher inquiry, reflection, and child-centered teaching in the teacher education program's coursework and field placements. The preservice teachers are BA-level students earning their degree and credential in early childhood education (ECE) and who student teach in local kindergartens, which are the equivalent of U.S. preschools for 3- to 5-year-old children. Under the guidance of a Palestinian teacher educator (first author), the preservice teachers were introduced to teaching methods new to Palestinian teacher education and early childhood schools (kindergartens) for promoting transformative education based on inquiry, reflection, and child-centered learning. The challenges and resources involved in our work at the Abu Dis campus of Al-Quds University Bank is representative of other preservice programs in the West Bank, and the local publicly funded Palestinian kindergartens where the preservice candidates student teach also feature the forms of teacher-centered, rote learning found in other public kindergartens in the West Bank.

In collaboration with a U.S.-based teacher educator (second author), our research also examines the cross-cultural and international implications of our work for other teacher education institutions at the global level interested in child-centered and inquiry-based models of teaching and learning. Further, As shown by recent research on educational change in international early childhood contexts (see, e.g., Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009), cross-cultural research in the field of early childhood education provides K–12 teacher educators with a research, practice, and policy foundation for improving the training of teachers for working with older children and families. Our research focus, then, on reflective practice and transformative preservice education has important ramifications not only for K–12 teacher education in Palestine but elsewhere globally where teacher education programs and schools face the challenge of moving away from overly didactic and rote teaching that neither engages teachers as lifelong learners nor children as inquisitive, curious, and high-achieving learners.

## INQUIRY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER EDUCATION

Inquiry and reflection has a fairly long history in early childhood education as an effective and popular form of local, grass-roots professional development and growth. Given that the high number of ECE teachers and paraprofessionals who do not attend preservice teacher education programs

to receive a degree or credential as do their K–12 counterparts, site-based and individual ECE initiatives to implement reflection and inquiry play an important informal role in ECE teacher growth and professionalization. The most influential work in the United States on inquiry and reflection in ECE settings has examined children's play and imagination (Paley, 1981, 2005), language development (Ballenger, 1999, 2009), child-centered learning (Helm & Katz, 2010), collaborative inquiry (Abramson, 2010; Mardell et al., 2009), use of inquiry protocols (Carini, 2001; Carini, Himley, Christine, & Espinosa, 2009; Himley with Carini, 2000; Kastle, 2012), and the value of teacher narratives for teacher observation and reflection (Meier & Henderson, 2007).

Internationally, the most well-known and influential framework for teacher reflection and inquiry comes from the Reggio Emilia schools of Northern Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011). The Reggio approach advocates a deep level of teacher thinking about student learning and a sophisticated level of teacher documentation and reflection on educational change. Through its teacher and professional growth networks, the Reggio approach to inquiry and reflection has been introduced across Europe, North America, and parts of Asia and the Middle East.

At the teacher-education level in the United States and in certain areas globally, reflective practice and inquiry has been advocated as a powerful conceptual framework and a set of tools for strengthening teachers' understanding of child development, educational reform, and effective instruction (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Beyer, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Jay & Johnson, 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Currently, the most pressing areas for integrating reflection and inquiry in teacher education highlights the promotion of a deeper integration of instructional content and educational theory (Ghiso, 2012; Rust, 2010), the development of long-term mentoring relationships with university instructors (Duncan-Andrade, 2011), an emphasis on teacher reflection for strengthening teacher identity and self-knowledge (Korthagen, 2010), and the reformulation of traditional student-teaching field experiences so as not to replicate traditional models of teaching and learning (Zeichner, 2010). We are in need, though, of increasing our understanding of reflective practice in teacher education contexts at the global level in a range of cultural and educational contexts. As we pursue this agenda, as we do in this article, we can begin to see those points of contact (philosophical, cultural, programmatic, pedagogical, evaluative) to foster new forms of inspirational and transformative teaching as teachers and children begin to unlock themselves from the cycle of overly rote, recitative forms of education. In addition, the new U.S. Common Core State Standards Initiative (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] and the Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], n.d.) and efforts in Finland (see, e.g., Sahlberg, 2011) and elsewhere globally are now focusing at a policy level on problem solving, creativity, and collaboration in PreK–12 schools. The goal is to instill the skills and knowledge needed for students to compete in the global economy as well as to understand other

cultures and worldviews and to become global citizens and actors. Teacher education, then, must keep pace with these current initiatives and promote an agenda that places reflection, inquiry, and teacher agency and motivation at the center of teacher education program goals, coursework, field placements, assessments, and mentoring.

## CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Palestinian early childhood education at the level of local kindergartens and institutions of higher education are increasingly interested in promoting teacher reflection and inquiry. To initiate a new trajectory for Palestinian teacher education, we must first understand how inquiry and reflection at the teacher-education level can be connected with a new image of the child, an expanded view of the teacher's role, a pedagogical linkage with children's interests and life experiences, and experiential and play-based learning that allows for self-discovery and problem solving. Taken together, we have attempted to integrate these critical opportunities under the umbrella of "new learning" that we hope will someday typify Palestinian kindergartens and preservice early childhood teacher education.

### The Image of the Child

The most influential reinventing of the image of the child comes from Reggio Emilia educators (Edwards et al., 2011) and their interpreters worldwide. Children in the Reggio approach are seen as central movers and actors in the unfolding drama of their own education and are seen as highly competent and capable learners, teachers, symbols users, and symbol interpreters, and artists. The framework and curriculum are ambitious and sophisticated, emphasizing the high expectations that teachers must have for promoting the "hundred languages of children." Even in the infant and toddler years, children are seen as highly capable of making sophisticated discoveries and interpretations of written and artistic symbols and for using the art of conversation to communicate their discoveries and interests with child peers, teachers, and families.

### The Role of the Teacher

The new learning framework has also helped elevate and inspire a new vision for the role of the early childhood teacher. Teachers teach young children best when teachers do not see themselves as the sole source of knowledge and information. Rather, teachers are supporters of children's discovery- and play-based learning and act as highly observant and talented

scaffolders of children's developmental learning and growth. In Reggio terminology, teachers offer children "provocations" and carefully and sensitively nudge children along as they problem solve and collaborate in long-term projects that unfold over weeks and months and even years.

### Children's Interests

The new learning umbrella for Palestine also emphasizes placing children's interests at the center of the curriculum and the social and intellectual life of the classroom. In this process, teachers both directly ask children what they are interested in learning about and experiencing and guide and shape the curriculum, activities, and materials toward introducing and exposing children to new knowledge and experiences. This process seeks to capitalize on children's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) in this newly global and technological world and to help children draw on local and contextualized knowledge for directly and explicitly expanding their conceptual and skill-based knowledge. From a U.S. educational and cultural perspective, this process moves forward from engaged social and intellectual involvement based on the idea of developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2010), or what it is reasonable to expect children to learn and do at any given developmental moment.

### Children's Play

The ultimate hallmark of progressive child-centered curriculum is children's play and an integration of an expanded role for the teacher, a more involved image of the child, and pedagogy based on children's interests (Bergen & Fromberg, 1998; Copple & Bredekamp, 2010; Saracho, 2011). In high-quality play-based programs and curriculum, children learn most deeply — culturally, physically, linguistically, socially, and cognitively — when they have daily access to real opportunities for extended play with peers and on their own. Children learn through both self-selected play and also materials and activities established and guided by teachers. A play-based philosophy and approach values children's sense of discovery, experimentation, revisiting, negotiating, and interacting with others and objects in novel and engaging ways.

## PALESTINIAN PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

### Current Situation

The 1994 Oslo Accords helped create the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) and the beginnings of an infrastructure for

preservice- and inservice-training teachers for Pre–12 schools in Palestine. Although the two *intifadahs* in 1987 and 2000 gave rise to community schools that featured greater teacher autonomy, community involvement, and student-centered learning (Khalil Mahshi, personal communication, 2006), Palestinian Preschool–12 education continues to face serious human and structural challenges due to the longstanding regional conflict, trauma and violence, poverty, lack of adequate resources, and lack of professional development opportunities to deepen teacher knowledge and instructional expertise (Ministry of Education and Higher Education [MoEHE], 2007; Nicolai, 2007).

Pre–12 professional development is a particular area of concern at the Ministry, teacher education, and Pre–12 levels (Al-Ramahi & Davies, 2002; Khaldi & Wahbeh, 2000; Wahbeh, 2003, 2011). While there are newly formed BA-level preservice and MA-level teacher education programs, they are still in the nascent stage of implementing the new centralized curriculum and are challenged by critics who advocate a new era of Pre–12 teaching in Palestine to be characterized by democratic classrooms and constructivist teaching, increased student and teacher agency, and student-centered curriculum (Wahbeh, 2003, 2011). Of particular urgency is for teachers to learn how to develop their own material and effective teaching methods (Khaldi & Wahbeh, 2000; Wahbeh, 2011) and practice less didactic and rote teaching (Al-Ramahi & Davies, 2002).

The inclusion of inquiry and reflection in teacher education at both the preservice and inservice levels, while very new, has shown some early potential for promoting a new level of reflection for moving beyond traditional rote and teacher-directed learning (Wahbeh, 2003, 2011). Reflection and child-centered education both hold enormous promise for influencing and strengthening preservice education in Palestine. At this moment, reflective practice remains a novel way of thinking and teaching both at the teacher-education level and also in early childhood settings in local schools. The potential for the promotion of teacher reflection in Palestine is further hampered by the lack of early childhood professional organizations for ECE teachers and teacher educators. In the United States, for instance, ECE teachers-to-be and professionals have access to a wealth of professional growth support through regional, state, and national ECE organizations, networks, and professional associations.

### Palestinian Early Childhood Education

Palestinian early childhood education is directed by the Palestinian Ministry of Education, which is at the nascent stage of creating a national strategic plan and curriculum for Palestinians kindergartens. Work on the plan is based on the belief that children are the most valuable assets in Palestinian society and they should enjoy all their rights and be assured of all their

individual and collective needs through a safe, stimulating, and accessible environment that helps them realize their potential. The plan reflects the interests of all actors and institutions working in the early childhood sector in Palestine, including ministries, national institutions, universities, and international organizations, in scaling up child care and protection of children's rights in line with the resolutions and recommendations of international, regional, and national conventions, conferences, and forums related to children. This effort also comes in part from the pursuit of the first goal of the Education For All (EFA) initiative, as adopted at the Dakar Conference in 2000, which argued for "expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children" (UNESCO, 2000, para. 2). The strategic plan is also consistent with MOEHE policies, particularly Education for All, that focuses on gender equity, poverty reduction, special needs education, overall quality, linkage with socioeconomic development, private sector involvement, improvement of partnerships, and decentralization.

#### PRESERVICE-TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

The MOEHE has several policy recommendations for the preservice education of kindergarten student teachers:

1. Emphasis on teaching practice rather than theory so preservice teachers can learn how to teach, to manage the learning environment, and to support children with special needs;
2. Introduction of "new" teaching methods for preservice teachers on discovery- and play-based learning, project-based learning, and learning through investigation and inquiry;
3. Emphasis on reflection and self-study to promote learning processes rather than products;
4. University teacher educators to apply and model the new learning approach in teacher education courses and field experiences;
5. University teacher educators to support and work with local kindergartens in their efforts to improve student achievement and learning.

#### PHILOSOPHY OF REFLECTION-BASED EDUCATION: AL-QUDS UNIVERSITY

Al-Quds University serves approximately 8,500 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate students at several campuses in the West Bank, and each campus has its own Colleges of Educational Sciences. The university has working partnerships with a number of universities, associations, and donors



internationally. Kindergarten teachers simultaneously obtain their teaching credential and their BA degree. Preservice students seeking a credential for elementary-level teaching take certain courses alongside the kindergarten preservice students. Preservice early childhood education at Al-Quds University at the Abu Dis campus draws students from the large hilltop town of approximately 10,000 as well as from the small nearby villages. The Abu Dis ECE teacher education program has recently revamped its coursework and teaching placements to emphasize teacher reflection, inquiry-based teaching and learning, and curriculum and instruction based on children's interests. Reflection and child-centered teaching are cornerstones of the program's philosophy, readings, assignments, and class discussions

For their first 3 years of BA study, ECE students take courses in Arabic and English and education courses in educational theory and practice with a focus on drama, art, games, child-centered teaching, and reflective practice. In their fourth year, they enroll in a practicum course and teach in a local Abu Dis kindergarten 3 days a week for a full semester. They first observe, then participate partially, and then engage in full participation in their teaching. The preservice students prepare, teach and reflect on their child-centered activities with several key goals in mind:

- To use a reflective cycle in planning and teaching their activities;
- To integrate elements of child-centered and discovery-based activities;
- To introduce the idea of children expressing their own learning interests and desires;
- To use graphic organizers such as sun maps to record the children's brainstorming of possible topics and subjects to study and learn about;
- To implement child-centered discussion, active learning, new physical arrangements of tables and chairs, and, in general, a closer social and intellectual relationship between the student teachers and the children;
- To introduce more hands-on activities encouraging children to move physically and to construct objects and products through art-based activities;
- To introduce the use of technology (such as laptops) for information, background knowledge, and visuals;
- To introduce stories and high-quality children's literature.

### Emerging Findings — An Initial Movement Toward Reflective Teaching

The selected data that we present in this article stem from the first author's work with a cohort of 8 preservice early childhood students who designed child-centered curriculum and activities under the direction of the first author. Student reflections on this process were collected via informal interviews

with the article's second author on his visit to the Abu Dis campus. The students—7 women and 1 man—are all in their early twenties and have lived their whole lives in Abu Dis and the surrounding villages. They are products of the local schools and are committed to making kindergarten teaching their lifelong careers and helping to transform Palestinian education as a new generation of kindergarten teachers knowledgeable in reflection, inquiry, and child-centered learning.

## PROJECTS

The Al-Quds University teacher education program at Abu Dis focuses on helping student teachers reconceptualize and reenvision the role of the teacher, the place of play and children's interests in the curriculum, and the educational and social value of collaboration and problem solving in the classroom. This is a novel way of looking at education and teacher education for Palestinian preservice students both at the early childhood and primary-to-high-school levels. The preservice students' early work focuses on course readings and assignments intended to help students understand how traditional Palestinian teaching can become more child centered and to learn practical ways to involve children in creating the curriculum and following children's interests. Given the lack of child-centered materials and resources in the local kindergartens, the preservice teachers prepare their own activities and materials as part of their coursework under the guidance of the first author. This is a key element to the emerging success of the program as students learn firsthand the challenges and joys of creating their own reading, math, and science materials — often their own children's literature books that replicate published books — and to think through the process of making the materials inviting and developmentally appropriate for the children. Ironically, given the highly commercial aspect of learning to teach in U.S. teacher education programs, where preservice teachers are presented with an overwhelming wealth of readymade published materials and resources, U.S. student teachers rarely have the opportunity to experience and learn from the process of creating their own materials to match children's developmental and cultural interests and experiences. The Al-Quds program has found that this process takes time and the student teachers need extended opportunities to collaborate and share their materials with each other and their instructors, and so the program devotes ample time in coursework and assignments for the students to conceptualize, to create, and to reflect on their curriculum products. The next stage is the use of these materials in their student-teaching placements in local kindergartens, which necessitates not only tinkering with the materials in light of children's interactions and learning but also the creation of new materials and resources based on the children's emerging interests and collaborative learning.

During their student-teaching practicum placements in local kindergartens, the student teachers participate in a several week cycle of inquiry-based teaching and learning based upon several key elements of reflection and child-centered teaching:

1. Students ask the children about their needs, interests, and what they would like to learn;
2. Students draw a brainstorm “sun map” and entitle the project that the children have chosen;
3. Students talk with the children about their experiences and prior knowledge about the project;
4. Students read more about the project topics on their own and maintain a reflective journal of their teaching/inquiry journey;
5. Students plan out possible activities for the project and share the plan with the children;
6. Students create their own original educational games, educational materials, videos, stories, and dramatic plays;
7. Students work with children on several activities over the course of the project and, according to our new learning approach, provide children with opportunities to learn through play, problem-solving, and small-group interactions.

Sample topics for recent projects included planets, butterflies, bees, birds, animals, sea animals, transportation, and the seasons. It is particularly noteworthy the degree to which the children are interested in science- and social-studies-related topics, which are subject areas that the children do not normally study nor are exposed to in any project-based ways. Further, given the lack of science resources and materials in the kindergartens and in the communities in the West Bank (e.g., there are no museums in the West Bank for the children to visit as a field trip), the student teachers were challenged to be creative in creating materials and activities to further the children’s interest and curiosity about the natural world. The use of the Internet, for instance, and the student teachers’ familiarity and ease using technology (such as using their laptops with small groups of children) was instrumental in providing the children with selected scientific information and visuals.

In one initial sun map for an animal project, the children wanted to learn about animal sounds, diet and food, language, importance of animals, and the moral issue of not killing animals. Over the course of several weeks, the student teacher engaged the children in a variety of play-based and investigative activities:

- Stories and discussion about animal traits;
- Imaginative play conversations between children and animals;
- Observing animals and talking about animal characteristics;
- Drawing animals;

- Reading scientific books about animals;
- Matching animal pictures;
- Animal puzzles;
- Animal vocabulary (e.g., number, size);
- Drama and skits about animals;
- Learning about animal diet, houses, small animals;
- Using puzzle pieces to reenact an animal story.

This in-depth learning process of the student teachers creating curriculum both on-the-spot with the kindergarten children in the classrooms and also in their university student-teaching practicum course challenged the preservice teachers to teach and learn in ways that often ran counter to their own educational and cultural upbringing. Our “new way of learning” required the student teachers to read, to research, to think, to reflect, and to look deeply inside themselves and to monitor their own growth as beginning teachers. We argue that this set of new educational and cultural challenges, and the supportive structure of the practicum course’s emphasis on inquiry and reflection, fostered important new dispositions and skills for the student teachers (see Table 1).

### REFLECTING ON CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING—EMBARKING ON A NEW KIND OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL JOURNEY

In postpracticum discussions with both the first and second authors, the 8 student teachers reflected on the challenges and value of their course-work and their practicum work in light of the program’s new emphasis on

**TABLE 1.** Practicum Benefits — Key Themes and Categories

Theme	Categories
Developing early childhood education foundations	Implementing theories; Developing high-quality learning based on projects, discovery learning, and learning from direct experience
Developing reflective thinking	Self-awareness; Self-criticism; Reflective journals; Self-study; Teachers’ role
Affecting educational beliefs	Building a new image of themselves; Developing new beliefs about children’s capabilities
Developing effective student-teaching practices	Working as a team; Planing and implementing long-term projects; Using and researching educational resources such as informational books, encyclopedias, and Internet sources

inquiry- and child-centered teaching. As the student teachers spoke within a small-group setting, they displayed a quiet sense of confidence in their accomplishments and in their newfound knowledge about the power of inquiry, reflection, and child-centered teaching.

Asking the children about their interests and what they wanted to study provoked a new kind of teacher-child relationship as Sabti, the only male student teacher in the cohort discovered:

In the beginning, the interaction with the children was not easy, but I used several new ways of teaching. I started by asking the children about their knowledge of butterflies, what they would like to know and I then wanted to lead a conversation with the children. At first, they started to ask me personal questions! “Do you have home like me?” “Do you have car? (If you don’t have one, we can take you to any place you want in our car.)” “What do you eat?” “Who is your mam and dad?” I soon discovered that children are intelligent and imaginative; they drew the home of a butterfly and a butterfly driving a car. I taught everything about butterflies from the size of the butterflies to the colors to the life cycle of the butterfly. The children and I dramatized behaviors of butterflies, such as a butterfly moving from flower to flower moving toward the honey, which we learned from a film. It was the first time that the children had done a play. I learned that teaching children is not easy and I must be a creative teacher for the children to learn. (personal interview, March 20, 2012)

Male kindergarten teachers are extremely rare in Palestinian kindergartens, and Sabti recounted that the children sometimes called him “Uncle” and he also tried out some of the activities in his village with young children before using them in the kindergarten classroom. These connections indicate that traditional cultural values of kinship and the role of elders helped Sabti establish collaborative and engaging learning and social relationships with the kindergarten children, and that Sabti’s toolkit of child-centered teaching and reflection strategies helped him negotiate new ways of teaching and engaging the children.

Aleh, a second student teacher, also reflected on the experience of teaching in a new child-centered way and noted her internal emotional reactions to changing the teacher’s role in Palestinian kindergartens:

I see traditional teaching as when the children learn the Arabic alphabet and the teacher says “please repeat” without acting it out with the children. At first I felt afraid to teach in a new way, and I asked myself how I could implement what my instructor (first author) has taught us. But after a short time, I asked the head teacher if I could start a project and she allowed me, and I started to work with children. As we started our project, I then began to enjoy it and I felt happy. I asked the children

what they wanted to know and to learn. I saw the happiness on their faces. It was the first time that adults had asked them what they wanted to do. All the children wanted me to ask them, and I told them one at a time. A few children told me about animals and many told me about transportation and cars and trains and airports. We brainstormed a sun map that became an integrated curriculum based on transportation with connections to language, religion, literacy, math. We eventually covered all of these areas in 3–4 weeks. I brought in cars and trucks and a moving train and I told the children a story about transportation. They also drew and dictated about which parts of transportation they like. The head teacher was pleased with what the children did; she could not believe it. The children sang a song about street lights, an educational song; the teacher could not believe they could sing. They made a train from cartons, all created by the children. (personal interview, March 20, 2012)

Aleh's reflections indicate the internal, emotional process for preservice teachers in Palestinian kindergartens to embark on a new framework of conceptualizing and implementing child-centered teaching that runs counter to their own childhoods and experiences, as well as those of their head teachers and the children. Yet, we note the value of Aleh's solid grounding both theoretically and pedagogically from her preservice program for providing her a solid foundation for moving forward past initial doubts and frustrations about a new way of learning. In the process, too, the image of the teacher (from center of knowledge to scaffolder and co-learner) and the image of the child are both transformed, as Aleh (and the other student teachers) see their own and the children's newfound capabilities in this new way of teaching.

Duaa, a third teacher in the cohort, also found the children eager for a new kind of learning, and she gained confidence and skill along with the children:

The children wanted to learn about birds. I made a sun map about their interests, and I asked them questions and the children asked questions: What do birds eat? Where do they live? In bird houses? What do the eggs look like and what are their sizes? What sounds do birds make? How do they grow and what do their bodies look like? Are adult and child birds similar or different? Are butterflies the same as birds? Do they fly the same? In my reflective journal, I wrote down their ideas and questions and I also brought my laptop to show pictures of birds. All of the children wanted to work with me. They want to know more about birds and to see everything I brought in. We learned songs about birds, and the children drew and dictated about birds. I also continued to record the children's questions about birds as the project moved forward. (personal interview, March 20, 2012)

The use of technology, primarily graphics and videos on their laptops, by Duaa and the other student teachers provided a familiar instructional tool for

the student teachers and also for promoting child-centered learning. Since the student teachers were more comfortable and knowledgeable about using technology than the head teachers, the use of the laptops provided the student teachers with a level of comfort and knowledge that helped in their transition toward implementing a new kind of teaching stance. The laptops were also easily transported to facilitate small-group viewing and discussions with the children.

### CLOSING THOUGHTS —TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE ECE TEACHING IN PALESTINE

The movement away from teacher-directed teaching and toward new child-centered approaches that feature reflection and inquiry is in its nascent stage for both Palestinian kindergartens and teacher-education institutions. The current work at the Abu Dis campus of Al-Quds University shows real promise for reconceptualizing the role of the teacher and incorporating discovery-based learning, play, children's interests, and inquiry and reflection at the preservice level with strong early links to student-teaching practica in local kindergartens.

#### Local Kindergarten Teachers

The head teachers were surprised at what the children learned; the teachers held a longstanding belief that they must directly instruct the children since most of the children lack prior knowledge about the world and daily experiences. The head teachers, like many others in ECE and K–12 education in both traditional and Western societies, have been trained to see themselves as the center of the curriculum and to give students knowledge through subject matter rather than considering children's interests and co-creating the curriculum. Shifting the views of the head teachers about children's competency and how children learn best made implementing the student teachers' projects a challenge. At one school, though, the head teacher and the administrator decided to change their curriculum and instructional approaches. They are interested in moving toward a new kind of Palestinian teaching based on affording children opportunities for talking, thinking, playing, and reflecting. This indicates a potential future educational and cultural shift in vision and practice.

#### Student Teachers

The 8 student teachers experienced the most dramatic internal shift regarding the role of the teacher and how and why knowledge is "transmitted" and learned by young children. As noted by Sabti, Aleh, and Duaa, whose

experiences were representative of the other 5 teachers in the cohort, the student teachers experienced a process of nervousness and doubt and fear as pioneers in implementing a new child-centered approach. The additional challenge, in a traditional society that emphasizes the wisdom of elders, of young student teachers changing the curriculum in the classrooms of older experienced head teachers added another cultural layer to the process of transforming traditional forms of teaching. The student teachers, relying on their toolkit of new learning and reflection strategies, could move forward with their projects due to the happiness and joy and excitement that they witnessed as the children discussed their interests, played, talked, acted, and constructed objects.

### Palestinian Preservice Education

The first author's coursework, practicum design, and practicum supervision provided the student teachers with a solid grounding in relevant theory and practice for designing, implementing, and reflecting on the worthiness of child-centered and active learning in the local kindergartens. Preparing the student teachers well for their new educational journey relied to an extent on the student teachers' *almost Kierkegaardian leap of faith* that educational change could and would happen. Their preservice coursework and supervision during their practica helped ensure that the student teachers saw *incremental evidence* that the new approaches to teaching were working for themselves, the children, and also the head teachers.

### Next Steps

Next steps in the process of transforming Palestinian preservice-teacher education and linking these changes with local kindergartens depend on a complex array of factors and issues. First, more teaching materials and resources are needed for implementing the new way of learning. Second, the fruition of a central early childhood curriculum, set of policies, and assessment measures will provide teacher education programs with a valuable common blueprint. This central curriculum will also unify and connect institutions of higher education with local kindergartens. Third, Palestinian teacher educators and kindergarten teachers will benefit from increased participation in local and international early childhood professional associations, conferences, and organizations that provide resources for transforming educational philosophies, policies, and practices. Fourth, the role of reflection and inquiry — ideas largely coming from “Western” educational research and thinking — show tremendous potential as a foundational vehicle for educational change. Palestinian teacher educators, student teachers, and head teachers will now have to move forward to create their own, homegrown versions of the particular forms and functions of inquiry and reflection that make sense and benefit their particular contexts.



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