Fear in the Palestinian classroom: pedagogy, authoritarianism and transformation

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The need to address the negative effects of fear

> *No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as*
>
> *fear [Burke cited in Watkins 2013, p. 28].*

This article explores some Palestinian children's comments and drawings to gain insights into classroom fear in light of its potential influence on learning. Few authors have better depicted this passion – fear - as experienced by young children in the classroom than John Holt. In his seminal book 'How children fail' (1964), he described how children's capacity for learning was greatly under-nurtured because they sat tensely in fear in classrooms: they feared punishment, feared looking foolish, feared feeling foolish, and feared disappointing adults with particular expectations of them. Based on his many years of observation, Holt speculated that their need to grab at answers defensively led them to focus more on winning positive feedback than on grappling with learning in any creative or critical way.

Moore's (2013) research study in a UK classroom observed similar fearful behaviours and described children's disappointment at the lack of authentic relationship they could therefore have with their teachers. Fear thus seemed to promote an 'individual retreat to privacy' (Lemke, Thorup & Hvidbak, 2011, p. 113) whereby pupils repressed their creative or critical voices under a 'veil of compliance', as was suggested in Fisher's (2011) detailed study in primary classrooms. On the other hand, as Jackson's (2010) interview data from secondary students indicated, a further expectation led to yet more fear: the fear of being

perceived to be afraid. Young people have come to understand that to be truly successful one must be able to 'handle pressure' and not display fear.

By fear, we mean states including anxiety, nervousness, worry, feeling pressured, dreading things, being uncomfortably tense and panicking. Despite the research mentioned above, which illustrated how pupils' classroom fear might block or damage children's learning; and despite most teachers' own debilitating experiences of fear in their childhood classrooms; the influence of fear on learning is rarely considered a priority in teachers' training and professional development, some of which may continue to promote an authoritarian pedagogy, including autocratic approaches to teaching and learning. As educators, some of us act as though classroom fear either did not exist or did not matter and yet some of us unwittingly rely on it as part of an authoritarian approach to teaching. Moore (2013) has argued, in relation to fear among other emotions:

> We should endeavour to recognize the existence and significance of emotionality in sites of formal teaching and learning (most notably, 'the classroom') and to understand it better, in order to become better at how we, as adults, work with our young charges as - with our complicity - they evolve as learners and as people.

Fear is not then just a hazard in the lessons where it occurs: it could have longer term influences on how children approach learning and even life more broadly. We suggest that it could inhibit the creativity, criticality and social competence that many adults value for human flourishing (Meighan & Harber, 2007; Fielding, 2007).

Authoritarian and transformational pedagogy

The few research studies cited above as well as our own experiences (as classroom teachers, classroom researchers and as parents) led us to suspect that fear was a common

experience among pupils. We also hypothesised that there was a link between fear and authoritarian pedagogy. By 'authoritarian' pedagogy, we accorded with Meighan and Harber (2007) in defining it as a discipline system with a 'dependence relationship in which one person is dominant and another or others dependent' (p. 238). Its opposite was a transformational approach where order was constructed by all participants who benefited as they worked together to construct a new order.

We recognised that coercion characterised all forms of authoritarian classrooms where the teacher sought to impose his/her order on dependent pupils. This was the case in more traditionally autocratic classrooms as well as more 'child-centred' classrooms where the teacher still made the decisions. Our assumption was that where there was authoritarian pedagogy, there would be coercion as the teacher asserted his/her order *over* the pupils; and that where there was coercion, there would be fear. In Holt's (1964, p. 175) view:

> The idea of painless, non-threatening coercion is an illusion. Fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its inescapable consequence.

Meighan and Harber (2007) have cautioned that different versions of authoritarianism reveal an underlying coercion in more or less subtle ways which in some versions may mask its presence. Thus, a teacher who tells the pupil that s/he is very disappointed in them rather than physically beating them, may not induce any less fear than the physically punitive teacher because s/he may still be using coercion to assert order *over* the child. A mixture of approaches to pedagogy and also to authoritarianism was particularly likely in the situation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools where we did our research, because teachers there were explicitly being supported to make shifts from more authoritarian to more transformational pedagogies.

Meighan and Harber (2007) differentiated between six forms of authoritarianism, each of which allowed progressively more tranformational means for establishing order in classroom learning and depended less on coercion and more on democracy. Their spectrum of authoritarianism included, in order of coercive intensity: autocratic; parental; charismatic; organisational; expert; and consultative. Teachers could exercise an authoritarian approach in any or all of these senses at any one time. With the *autocratic* form, the link with fear was straightforward:

> Order is imposed through fear, which may be either physical or psychological. The images related to this form are those of a dictator, commanding office or ringmaster (p. 238).

However, with the parental form of authoritarianism, order was obtained through deference from pupils; and the related images were of father, mother, priest, village elder or policeman. In this case, fear could occur frequently but its cause and focus driven more by fear of disappointing the revered teacher than being punished by them. The charismatically authoritarian teacher relies on personal magnetism, public performance skills or emotional persuasion in a similar way to that of the Pied Piper: whose sweet, coercive music attracted children to their fate. In organisational authoritarianism, fear could be generated by an inflexibility of organisational structure; while the expert authoritarian teacher relied on his/her superior knowledge to silence opposition. The consultant authoritarian, finally, confirmed his/her legitimacy by drawing on feedback from pupils and it was this feedback that gave him/her the authority to impose order over others. While this form sounds more democratic than the others, its possible abuse lies in the teacher's exclusive choice about which feedback to attend to and which to ignore. In all

forms of authoritarianism, because coercion is present and is a necessary foundation, fear is the essential companion.

One alternative to authoritarian pedagogy is transformational pedagogy whose focus is on appropriate effective and democratic social action during and as a result of learning (Mezirow, 1991). Its emphasis on exploring and improving unequal power relations in social situations means that coercion does not feature within this approach. Jack Mezirow coined the phrase 'transformative learning' (1991 drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, 1972 and Carl Rogers, 1977), a term which focused on adults' learning but is otherwise similar to the term 'transfromational learning' used here. The practices essential to this approach are: first, critical reflection; and second, participating fully and freely in dialectical discourse to validate reflective judgements.

Breaks with the authoritarian past are most likely when the people who enact them have experienced transformational learning themselves. A prime site in which young people might experience such transformation is at school. In other words, in order to change school learning and potentially also society in meaningful ways, people might experience important changes in perspective during their education. Such an experience is likely to be restricted in classrooms based on coercion and fear. Classrooms would need to be free from fear for critical reflection to be full and honest; and to allow pupils to participate fully and freely in dialectical discourse. Mezirow described how at its best, transformative learning transformed people's understanding of themselves and their locations; their relationships with others and the natural world; their understanding of the relations of power in structures of class, race and gender; visions for alternative approaches to living; and finally transformed one's sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace.

A shift towards transformational pedagogies in Palestine

As authors, we come from two different countries, Palestine and UK. In this article, our focus is specifically on Palestine, as a territory in crisis where schools have a potential role to play in encouraging social action towards more just and democratic ways, as suggested by the United Nations (see below). This role is especially vital in schools catering for the many Palestinian refugees. Gross (2013) has described the Palestinian people today, including Palestinian refugees, as tending towards a 'nomo-centric' understanding of their world in which the individual is 'captured, dependent and subdued by his [sic] environment'. This description of the passive and dominated individual is in stark contrast to one who envisions alternative, more equitable approaches to living and is developing a sense of possibilities for social justice and peace. Gross suggested that the sense of being passively dominated was partly a response to being occupied politically by an American-backed Israel, who came to be seen an embodiment of both occupation and westernisation. This response led some Palestinians to embrace traditions from the Islamic past and it may be this traditionalism that is partly reflected in the authoritarian nature of the primary classroom in many Palestinian schools (Wahbeh, 2003).

However, addressing explicitly the Palestinian tendency towards maintaining the *status quo* in a precarious situation, the UNRWA has promoted reform in Palestinian refugee classrooms to support them in making the break with the past and therefore becoming 'fit for the 21st century'. UNRWA was set up in 1948 to provide for refugee Palestinians, including the education of their children. Since 2011, UNRWA has been embarking on a reform process, drawing on values embedded in the United Nations Education for All Framework based around Millenium Development Goals (United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2012). These internationally agreed principles stress the entitlement of all children to a high quality education which will equip them to face the future with hope. UNRWA therefore proposes to transform in UNRWA classrooms, some of which were established in the 1950s, the unhelpful aspects of authoritarian pedagogies. The reforms aim to provide Palestinian refugees with the potential to realise their full potential towards their future livelihoods and personal development.

UNRWA's current reform process (2011) proposes that schools facilitate educationally, technically, socially, culturally and economically meaningful progress among all UNRWA students inclusively. It aims to forge links between schools and work, encourage entrepreneurship and develop computer skills among pupils and teachers alike. There should thereby be a change of *ethos* in UNRWA schools, especially the 'way in which teachers interact with their students' in classrooms. Of particular relevance to this paper, they should encourage 'a pedagogical shift that will enable active learning methodologies to replace traditional rote-learning approaches' (pp. iv-viii). This pedagogical shift will replace the approaches in which fear was actually encouraged and utilized, and will simultaneously limit teaching by rote which was often associated with these. Schools should thereby become enabling environments which support pupils in reflecting without fear on their individual and collective experiences through free and equal dialogue and in authentic relationship with their own people and others (Fielding, 2007). In this way, a refugee's sense of being 'captured, dependent and subdued by his [sic] environment' would be transformed into a sense of potential power to contribute to a more positive future without undue fear.

Research design

Research approach

Our research was planned during a meeting of a TEMPUS project in Cairo that both authors attended (Project number: 530614-TEMPUS-1-2012-1-EG-TEMPUS-JPHES). At this meeting, our conversations suggested that we had mutual concerns about the suitability of traditional primary classrooms for transformative learning. Our research approach was interactionist, in that we looked at both the patterned structures of society and negotiations that individuals accomplish in classrooms and schools (Meighan and Harber, 2007). We could also describe it as critical in its aim to develop knowledge that is potentially transformative or emancipatory: to detect and unmask those practices in the world that limit human freedom by replacing one set of values (e.g. muddled, discriminatory) with another (rational, just and emancipatory). In this sense, we aimed to interrogate '... the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn't make it onto the reports' (Said 2004 cited in Tikly & Bond, 2013, p. 429).

We considered children's voices to be important because they are rarely heard, especially in relation to fear, yet they are essential to understanding and transforming schools. Children's voices might expose uncomfortable truths about classrooms and teaching (Duffy and Elwood, 2013) and bring to light contradictions and unexplained realities about the social structures that underpin them (Kemmis, 2006). In occupied Palestine, the need to hear children's voices is especially great because over 50 per cent of the population is under the age of 18; and over 1400 Palestinian children have been killed since 2000 (PCBS, 2007). At the same time, as Cook-Sather (2002) argued, we must caution against glamorising students' voices as they are likely to be imbued with status quo values. We also noted that

much of their knowledge is tacit, and thus they cannot, except with the greatest of difficulty, surface it in their accounts of their lives; and equally they may be motivated by unconscious forces and impulses which they find it hard to express.

We knew that talking about fear and exploring the inside of actual classrooms were both areas repressed by local custom. In this light, Jones Marshall (2013, p.54) decried the fact that existing accounts of or by Palestinian children portrayed '... children as passive victims or receptors of societal norms, as opposed to social agents in their own right'. Our research aimed to start working on promoting children as social agents in their own right in its investigation particularly of how fear might hinder them in being critically reflective about their situation. We saw this as a small first step towards respecting the social agency of Palestinian children in their learning and adapting the educational system to better meet their personal and social needs. However, from our previous teaching and research experiences in Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East, we recognised the difficulties in doing this, and that our participant pupils probably had little experience of being asked their views.

Our research question, drawing on previous research indicating the potential for fear to influence children's learning, was as follows: *How do children in two Palestinian classrooms describe their experiences of learning in relation to fear in the classroom?*

Sub-questions included:

- *When, if at all, do the sample children experience fear in the classroom?*

- *How do they illustrate such experiences?*

- *What do they tell us happens to their learning when they feel fear?*

Methods

We talked to children in one boys' UNRWA school and one girls' UNRWA school in Ramallah, the West Bank. Each class consisted of 30 pupils who sat in rows at desks in classrooms set around a central courtyard and flanked by a corridor which ran past all the classrooms on each of several storeys. The classrooms were adequately equipped and all children had their own seats and desk-space, without overcrowding. However, the teacher's desk was placed at the front, next to the blackboard and all pupils faced these, which made pupil-pupil dialogue problematic.

Permission was granted for our visits after SA, the Palestinian author, made a personal visit to the Chief of Education for UNRWA in the West Bank, whom she already knew. She explained that this was the protocol for any kind of classroom research, although all qualitative research in the region was rare. We used three triangulating data collection methods:

- whole class drawing exercise;

- completing sentences exercise; and

- individual pupil/teacher interviews.

SA invited all the children in a class of pupils aged 9-10 years in each school to draw pictures of a learning situation: in one class it was one in which they learnt best; in the other where they had felt some fear. There were no gendered reasons for the choice of task but we sought a range of ideas from all the children. We considered these pictures as suggestions about the pupils' experiences and feelings rather than proving any kind of empirical reality. We acknowledged children's tendencies to copy each other's ideas and also to use stereotypical images that did not represent physical reality accurately. For example, the

children's pictures often showed their houses as having two storeys and pointed roofs while actually most children lived in single storey buildings with flat roofs.

SA also invited every child to complete the following sentences, once she had translated them into Arabic:

Children learn best when.....

I sometimes feel afraid at school when....

When I feel afraid and then I try to learn, the result is....

The best way to get rid of fear in the classroom is...

Great care was taken that the words had the same sense in both languages. Sentences, as well as pictures and interview data, were investigated so that our findings were triangulated as much as possible, given the restrictions on carrying out qualitative research of any kind in this situation. We did find that children found these sentences to be an accessible means for discussing difficult issues, and our sentence 'starters' helped key them into the areas we were exploring. We decided that, although three of the questions were 'leading' questions that led the pupils to focus on fear, our approach was justified here because our literature review and our own classroom experiences had indicated that most children were indeed likely to feel fear at some stage during school; we also needed to key the children into our main focus to gather relevant data; and, in the event, the children were comfortable enough and confident enough to say if they did *not* feel fear, despite the wording of these questions.

Once the drawn and written data were collected, the two authors met together and chose children from each class to interview. This was based on the clarity of their pictures and

their allusions to fear in their sentence responses. For example, where one pupil had drawn her teacher displaying an angry, frightening-looking face, we were interested to talk further with this pupil. Another child drew herself standing at the front of the class looking frightened, so we also chose this pupil for interview.

Both authors interviewed the boys in the boys' school while SA alone collected interview data from the girls' school. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded and then transcribed into English by SA. Each interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. Longer interviews might have been more illuminating, but we found the pupils were unused to talking about their experiences and we did not wish to make them start feeling uncomfortable by lengthening the interviews.

In summary, the ten data collection sources in this project consisted of:

1. GIRLS' PICTURES OF FEAR [n=41 because some girls did two pictures]

2. BOYS' PICTURES OF BEST LEARNING SITES [n=30]

3. BOYS' & GIRLS' SENTENCE 'I LEARN BEST WHEN...' [n=60]

4. BOYS' AND GIRLS' SENTENCE 'I SOMETIMES FEEL AFRAID IN THE CLASSROOM WHEN ...' [n=60]

5. BOYS' AND GIRLS' SENTENECE 'THE RESULT OF FEAR IN THE CLASSROOM IS...' [n=60]

6. BOYS' AND GIRLS' SENTENCE 'THE BEST WAY TO GET RID OF FEAR IN THE CLASSROOM IS...' [n=60]

7. GIRLS' INTERVIEWS [n=6]

8. BOYS' INTERVIEWS [n=5]

9. BOYS' TEACHER INTERVIEW [n=1]

10. GIRLS' TEACHER INTERVIEW [n=1]

We each analysed the data independently and then as the two authors, we pooled our thoughts via email, Skype and telephone. We each developed themes as they arose within and across the research methods and cross-identified themes both among methods and between researchers. The issues raised in this article represent the collapsing of our themes into mutually agreeable categories as the outcome of our conversations. The three methods provided contrasting but complementary results. We recognised that this research was a starting point for further investigations into the vital issue of Palestinian pupil fear in learning.

On her first visit to the boys' school, SA explained to the children that she was interested in learning about their experiences of learning in this classroom, including times when they learnt best, when they were afraid and when they felt happiest. We included reference to fear without suggesting that this was our sole interest. SA then observed a lesson in the class of 30 boys.

In the UK classroom we would have insisted on collecting the written consent of all participating pupils and their parents. However, SA was very clear that such protocol was not just unusual but even unacceptable in this particular situation. She did not feel she could pursue an 'unwanted and unsolicited autonomy' (Shamim and Qureshi, 2013, p. 472) by demanding such written informed consent of parents or pupils, and she explained that the responsibility to provide this was seen as resting with the school and UNRWA authorities. We adhered to the British Sociological Association guidelines for ensuring ethical good practice and these guidelines suggest caution in applying ethical codes without sensitivity to the local context. We were also mindful of the common western practice of allowing pupils to choose whether to take part in the research activity or not. However, in

this respect, no coercion was evident as all the children seemed delighted with their research assignments. Afterwards, the head teacher agreed with SA that she may interview the children alone and record the interviews, so long as the final report was presented to the school. During individual interviews, we were able to ask each child for their individual verbal consent. We made particular efforts to disguise their identity in our publishable academic writing, given the small number of interviewees in each school. In the report written for the school itself, we did not refer to the content of the individual pupils' interviews.

The following week we both returned to the same boys' classroom where SA had been on the previous visit. We had drawn up a list of those boys whose pictures we wanted to discuss in individual interview. We were taken to a small staff room where we interviewed one boy at a time. Each boy was told what we were doing and ensured that nothing they said would be identifiable beyond these walls. The boys we interviewed we have given the pseudonyms Abbas, Dani, Farouk, Hilmi and Kerim. In interview, we had a list of prompts to address but aimed to put the child at ease by taking a conversational approach. We noted that these children were unaccustomed to being asked their views on their learning, which was not surprising since qualitative research methods are quite unfamiliar in Palestine. The nature of the interviews is exemplified in the following extract from boy pupil Dani's interview:

SA: Does anyone shout at you inside class?

D: Some naughty children shout inside class and annoy us.

SA: How does the teacher react?

D: He hits them.

SA: How do you feel when he hits them?

D: My heart beats very fast.

SA: Are you scared that he'll hurt you?

D: No! I don't like him hurting my friends. I worry about them.

SA: How often does he hit them?

D: Every time they are naughty...

SA: Did he beat you?

D: Several times.

SA: How did you feel?

D: It was very painful... I learn best when the teacher is not angry...

In the girls' school, the morning SA went to collect the interview data followed a night during which Israeli soldiers invaded the UNRWA camp where the school was located. Shooting occurred and blood was still visible in front of the girls' school. The girls were whispering about this incident. SA observed the class and did as she had done in the boys' class. The teacher stopped the girls from their whispering, saying that if they talked about what was happening outside, they would never learn anything. In interview, the girls said that they did not want to talk about the incident, saying it was just part of their lives. The girls SA interviewed we have given the pseudonyms Amira, Bilal, Dana, Hanan, Jamila and Lamia.

The pupils' teacher was interviewed in each school. We interviewed teacher Mohammed in the boys' school and teacher Ahlam in the girls' (also pseudonyms).

Findings

Children's accounts of being afraid

There were a few children, including girls, who claimed never to feel fear at school. Perhaps they feared losing their image as being 'tough' if they admitted to fear. Indeed, one picture showed the teacher Ahlam saying, 'Read the board, or I will make you cry!' which caused Bilal to be afraid; but her friend was saying: 'No Bilal, don't be scared. Fear makes you weak'. This appeared to be an important statement that underlined the children's awareness of how fear interfered with their progress. But it also belied a fear of confronting fear itself.

We asked the 60 pupils who wrote sentences for this study about the best ways they knew to overcome fear in the classroom. For four pupils, this question was too hard – or too strange - to answer. A frequent response to this question was that they tried to push the fear away by ignoring its source. One child wrote: 'I put my head on the floor and don't listen to anything'. Other children wrote 'I put my hands over my ears', 'I shut my eyes' and 'I sit very quietly and don't move'. We may wonder what was happening to those repressed strong feelings and whether these later showed their impact (see for example, Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983). In any case, while lying on the floor trying not to listen, it is unlikely that much desirable learning was happening and quite possible that the child was learning negative messages about schooling. It is likely that the pupil would need some positive support and take some moments to recover their 'powers of acting and reasoning'. In an authoritarian classroom, especially an autocratic classroom, such time might not be allowed.

Another common response by both boys (4) and girls (6) was to pray when they felt afraid. Again, this strategy might have helped the children in dealing with the discomfort of fear

and might have been a very fruitful strategy had it been recognised openly. Without discussion, though, it may have become instead a distraction from curriculum learning. This was probably the case too with their next idea for redirecting energy. Four children described making themselves think about something nice when they were afraid; four others focused particularly on their families and homes (including the pet cat). Only one child felt that fear actually spurred her on to 'Read and get involved in classwork' – which could be seen as a positive effect emanating from a negative emotion, in contrast to the other responses.

We invited pupils to describe explicitly what happened to their learning when they were afraid. Although 18 out of 60 pupils could not answer this question at all (perhaps because they did not recognise feeling fear), a similar number of pupils simply wrote that they could not learn when they felt fear. Two pupils said independently, 'My brain stops'. Further pupils explained that concentration was a key casualty:

'I can't listen carefully';

'I pretend that I am listening'; and

'I stop learning and cry'.

Some pupils described *reduced* learning:

'I become hesitant';

'I slow down'; and

'I am disturbed'.

Others alluded to some sort of panic which *speeded up* their reactions, which none the less might have distracted them:

'My heart beats very fast';

'My hand shakes'; and

'I write very quickly'.

The impact of these responses to fear led ultimately, they told us, to getting the wrong answers and 'forgetting everything'. This illustrated vividly how the children themselves perceived fear to have obstructed desirable learning. In terms of all pupils being encouraged to reflect critically on their situation and to participate fully and freely in dialogue, descriptions of these moments of 'not learning' suggested that some valuable learning time was wasted. The authoritarian nature of the classroom presumably did not allow for pupils or teacher to reflect on these and make improvements to the situation as the teacher sought to restore order.

Children's accounts of fear of social failure

Most children referred to some sort of fear of social failure. They illustrated fear of social failure in relation to two controlling figures: the class teacher; and the head teacher (or Principal). When describing how they learned best, four boys mentioned the teacher's smile and/or jokes as helpful to learning. Several boys wrote that learning was supported when Mohammed, the teacher, was nice to them. Indeed, Mohammed himself suggested, in keeping with UNRWA's principle of inclusive learning:

> Treating them well improves their learning. ... Treating them well makes them comfortable to speak and share their questions and knowledge with everyone.

However, 'treating them well' might not have indicated a less authoritarian approach, rather a less autocratic one. The teacher may in those moments to have moved from

autocratic person to parental figure or perhaps charismatic figure (Meighan and Harber, 2007). This seems likely because much fear of both the boys' and girls' teacher was still expressed; and the girls seemed fearful of the Principal, for example, when she shouted at them in assembly. Both teachers described threatening to send the children to the Principal for punishment, deliberately using the head teacher to frighten the children into subservience. They were thereby sustaining the 'hierarchical observation' (Lefstein, 2002) common to authoritarian classrooms, whereby figures more powerful even than the teacher were near at hand to enforce obedience.

The children wrote about what they feared in class. Fear was described by girls and boys, of being asked a question in public which they were not expecting, especially if they did not fully understand the question. They described an almost panicky sense of shame and then fear for not knowing what the teacher wanted. This was not surprising given that the teacher was the one who decided what was desirable so pupils needed to know or guess his/her motives. Most frequently mentioned by both girls and boys, however, was being afraid when their teacher shouted, and in their pictures, one girl showed she was frightened that the teacher would swear at her – presumably a clear example of the teacher using psychological means to promote fear. Others were frightened generally whenever the teacher was angry or upset with the class, and yet they did not question the teacher's right to become angry, even though the children had to control their own behaviour. The teacher might also shout, they told us, when the pupils were late to school or had forgotten their homework, regardless of their excuses and reasons, exemplifying the teacher's autocratic approach in this instance. The girls' teacher, Ahlam, told us that she aimed to establish a less coercive relationship, as promoted by the UNRWA reform: 'I don't shout or hit them, I just try to have good relations with the girls'. However, a little later she admitted that:

'Sometimes they drive me mad so I shout at them'. Given large numbers of young children sitting in rows in a limited classroom for many hours, it was little surprise that the pupils sometimes drove her 'mad'.

These comments might have hinted that verbal intimidation – through shouting and swearing – reduced in the children's mind its powers of acting and reasoning, reflecting critically and engaging in collaborative dialogue. In particular, we saw no indication that the teacher's right to shout at them was questioned, suggesting that his or her autocratic approach was accepted without critique.

Physical intimidation was harder to explore because it was completely outlawed by UNRWA policy. In his interview, the boys' teacher, Mohammed, therefore told us that he did not hit the boys with the stick, as this was not allowed in UNRWA schools; and in any case, the parents would not stand for it. But he swayed between his adherence to UNRWA's 21st century approach and a more autocratic one, by adding that if the class were '... out of control, then we have to [hit them] - but we don't do this to kids unless they hit each other'. He also noted that he did smack them with his hand, even when he could not hit them with the stick. The pupils mentioned their fear of being beaten and of their peers being beaten. In these cases they seemed to have been punished both by feeling fear and then by the physical pain itself. Dani had told us for example: 'I don't like him hurting my friends. I worry about them' and then explained that being beaten himself '... was very painful... I learn best when the teacher is not angry'.

In his interview, male pupil Farouk blamed his colleagues, rather than his teacher, for the beatings, thereby emphasising children's responsibilities more than their rights as is typical in authoritarian systems. He said, for example, 'If they stop shouting, then he will not beat

us'. In their pictures, the girls indicated the teacher hitting them when they were 'very loud'. Their teacher, Ahlam, had not mentioned hitting them. However, it is significant that Ahlam told us that the girls were not treated well at home where they encountered a lot of violence. In fact, she believed that some children saw school as a safe haven from the fearsome conditions at home. What was also clear, however, was that these fears imported from home were not processed directly at school through critical reflection or dialogue.

Children's accounts of fear of academic failure

Doing badly in school work seemed to have become a scary prospect because of the normalising judgement: this meant that certain pupils felt they were acceptable to the teacher and others felt that the teacher disapproved of them. This normalisation reflects a common authoritarian means for ordering a large group of children, by encouraging competition among the children themselves. The dominant position of the teacher meant that doing badly in this competition could feel quite worrying; especially since there was little pupils could do to change the outcome.

Boys and girls alike feared the exams which embodied the normalising judgement and described the terror of waiting for the exam results to be delivered, as well as finding the exam itself hard; also of making silly mistakes and not finishing all the questions in the exam. In a context where the teacher sought to assert order on everyone, mistakes could not be tolerated, despite their natural occurrence in learning and the possibility of learning from them. And then there was the dread of not getting full marks or even of not being top of the class. These latter comments suggested that it was not only the children who struggled who feared exams, but also those who did best. All competed in a competition for grades which threatened to incur the teacher's fearsome disapproval.

According to one of the boys, teacher Mohammed threatened to tell parents if they misbehaved or did badly in class (in our terms, extending his 'hierarchical observation'). This threat drew on the children's fear of disappointing – or infuriating – parents. In relation to UNRWA's reform Strategy, and other innovations like it elsewhere in the world, pupils' parents might have found its aims hard to grapple with, given the autocratic nature of much of their own schooling. Thus parents in the UNRWA camps, like parents in many parts of the world, might have favoured autocratic classroom methods of coercion based on fear, because of their own fears about losing future prosperity and their perception of their children's education as a means for achieving that (Flink, Boggiano and Barrett, 1990). While several boys and girls talked about their mothers helping them to learn at home, parental authority figures, especially mothers, coming into school was something children seemed to fear. Four girls drew pictures of their mothers being angry after they had not done well in class.

Children's accounts of learning without fear

Given the authoritarian pedagogical backdrop against which our questions were raised, we were not surprised by answers such as 'I study harder', 'I listen carefully', 'I study for exams' and 'I do my homework' when we asked the children to write how they overcame their fears. These constituted ways for the children to avoid their fears by conforming better to the expectations of the teacher and the *status quo*. By meeting the teacher's expectations in every detail, they could avoid criticism. Their conformity therefore helped to negate the need for the 'transformation' of 'deformative' classroom actions and approaches (to borrow Harry Torrance's words, 2012, p. 323).

Despite, however, the fear that teachers clearly generated in class, pupils wrote and spoke fondly of their teachers too and for some pupils, a fearsome autocratic teacher was helpful because they allowed pupils to study harder in a well-ordered classroom. In a regimented classroom they could better prepare themselves for tests and exams which were the normalising standards against which they were judged.

Despite these responses, other pupils were articulate about different emotions that served their learning best – particularly enjoyment - again illustrating pupils' awareness of the role emotions played in classrooms. This awareness suggested the existence of an ethos in the experience of some children, in which children were encouraged to reflect critically on their learning and engage in dialogue about it. The pupils sometimes seemed to favour transformational approaches to learning, in which enjoyment and personal involvement were key. For example, when asked to draw situations in which they learnt best, nearly a third of the boys drew computers from which they learnt more independently of the teacher, reflecting the UNRWA emphasis on learning suited to the 21st century. Other subjects in which the best learning happened according to pupils were art, singing, drama and story-telling. These subjects involved more pupil-centred and active pursuits in which the authoritarian structures of the classroom were less dominant. Several girls and boys mentioned play-acting as an effective way of learning. Boy interviewee Abbas enjoyed learning English through games with his English teacher, suggesting an equal partnership between game-players. Boy interviewee Hilmi told us that he 'Learned a lot during story-telling' and he explained, 'Moral learning'. These were all learning areas in which the pupils' creativity and personal perspective were encouraged, without being overly dominated by the teacher's control.

Some pupils therefore expressed a desire for ways of learning that demanded a trusting, fear-free classroom environment, unlike the traditional model to which their parents would have been accustomed. Two girls mentioned the value of not being kept quiet in class: being allowed to speak in class and asking the teacher questions as and when they arose. Another girl pupil talked of the benefits of the teacher withdrawing her control by letting her '... write on the board without interrupting'. In fact, in the words of a different girl respondent, Jamila, classroom learning happened effectively when 'The teacher is not talking much'. This view reflects hints of a break with the most authoritarian approaches to classrooms.

Similarly, and in contrast to assumptions of the traditional classroom where seating arrangements provided teachers with the chance for constant surveillance, girls and boys commented that they learnt best outside the classroom in more informal contexts where they could also talk with each other. More than a third of the boys' pictures depicted them learning productively in the open air, among trees, flowers and sunshine. They commented that they desired to relate and talk to each other more. Both the boys' and girls' teachers aimed to take the children outside a lot as part of their ambition to provide variety in their pedagogy in accordance with the UNRWA suggestions for a new ethos in teaching and learning. Perhaps they found this an easier way of providing a variety than changing the set-up of the traditional classroom. Perhaps they practised a less autocratic pedagogy when they were away from the traditional site of learning.

Concluding thoughts

The aim of this article was to gain insights into some children's classroom fears and their influence on learning. Our small-scale research in two UNRWA classrooms helps to illustrate, apart from anything else, that fear does indeed manifest itself among students in the UNRWA classrooms we visited, often closely related to their experience of an authoritarian pedagogy. In our current research, we noted how the teacher advised the pupils that if they talked about what was happening outside school, they would never learn anything. This comment is helpful in concluding this article because it reminds us firstly, that teachers recognised how children's fear could impede learning. If fear robbed their mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning, they would not make the meaningful progress intended by UNRWA. On the other hand, preventing pupils from talking about fear denied them the chance to think critically and collaboratively about their situation with the teacher's support. It may even have increased or distorted their fears while a supportive critical dialogue could have reduced or transformed them. There is clearly a difference between fear caused by war atrocities or political strife and fear provoked in classrooms. However, we suggest that the two are not completely unrelated, as both originate in social injustice and both are based in coercion.

Teachers also feel fear, both inside and beyond the classroom because they are also players in a struggle for social power and subject to the coercion of their own 'ringmasters'. But it seems they are not acknowledging this to be the case, and they are thereby in some sense falsifying their relationship with their pupils in a potentially damaging manner (Rogers, 1988). If classroom fear – whether imported or inherent - continues to receive minimal emphasis, the schooling system will continue to be founded on a deception that is likely to

impede the transformational aspects of children's learning. Our conclusion is that fear in general needs to be explored both by teachers and by pupils in an explicit, collaborative and critically reflective way as the first step towards reducing its deformative powers. In Torrance's (2012) words again:

> Ultimately, however, the solution to the problem is … located in the
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> vitality and authenticity of the relationships between teachers and students. We
>
> need to understand our task [as teachers] as one of collaborating with students to
>
> bring about learning, to be alert to the generation of unpredictable outcomes and
>
> indeed to regard the production of unpredictable and unintended outcomes as an
>
> indication of success, not lack of compliance with the programme (p.339).

Our study illustrated that during a period of reform, the shift from an authoritarian pedagogy to a transformational one was not yet complete in the UNRWA schools we visited. Classroom fears described by the pupils still related to coercive aspects of the authoritarian classroom, sometimes an autocratic one, suggesting that as the schools move towards those fit for the 21st century, more transformational aspects may develop. For example, teachers could start to experiment with alternative seating arrangements, more conducive to pupil dialogue, within the classroom as well as out of doors.

Although the two teachers we talked to in our research were clearly making an effort to relate to the pupils as individuals with diverse needs, the teachers' control of the content, pace and order of pupil activities clearly sustained an authoritarian approach to learning and may have reduced the potential for deep-seated transformation within the child. The normalising judgement or examination, by which pupils were labelled as right or wrong, failing or otherwise, did not seem to be adequately critiqued or challenged (Lefstein, 2002).

Getting the 'right' answer was still highly valued by pupils rather than pupils trying to justify or critically analyze it; and the teacher's 'certifying' information as expert authoritarian seemed to take priority over the pupils' narrative (Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Examination success was still upheld as the way towards future success through examination attainment, despite the fact that a critical analysis of its importance would have shown that only 50 per cent of Palestinian graduates aged 20 to 29 years in the West Bank and Gaza manage to find any paid employment (PCBS, 2013).

In summary, as our initial quote from Edmund Burke [cited in Watkins 2013, p. 28] suggested, the passion experienced as fear did seem to rob children's minds of their powers of acting and reasoning as they sat tensely, 'forgetting everything'. Because the *confronting* of fear is closely related to a sense of power and entitlement, children *controlled by* their fear were unlikely to be transformed into those who later transform these schools to make them fit for - and transformative of - the 21st century. When the child's fear of being the wrong person who has the wrong answer is transformed instead into his/her confident critical exploration of how power differentials work in classrooms and in society more widely, then a more positive future may be possible. Of course this will depend too on a complex raft of political and economic factors that affect refugees in particularly dramatic and horrific ways. But the teacher's explicit, critically reflective focus on children's fear in the classroom might be one helpful step in the right direction.

The potential for a more positive outlook will also depend on the teachers' own sense of confidence and entitlement to provide support for children's transformational experiences. Teachers also need the chance to transform, to make a critical analysis of their own and their compatriots' situation. To freely and fully participate in transformational discourses,

teachers must also be free from coercion, distorting self-deception or immobilizing anxiety and be open to alternative points of view (Mezirow, 1991). It is through school-based professional development that UNRWA aspires to enable teachers' sense of freedom and collaborative creativity and to develop and transform teachers' own approaches to transformative pedagogy. In those professional development sessions, both children's and teachers' fears need to be on the agenda for dialogue.

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