



## "Success Stories" and Democratic Governance in the Middle East

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today and on behalf of Bethlehem University to thank the organizers of this conference for their invitation to be part of it. Bethlehem University has always enjoyed a good and fruitful relationship with the Spanish people and acknowledges the contributions of the Spanish government to the University over decades.

It was a great pleasure listening to the valuable input of the presenters and the audience into the topic of the conference: Arab Spring, Democratic Governance and future agendas and while listening I could not help but think so much hinges on the role and responsibility of education and education providers in it all.

No doubt that education is at the core of any development and transformation of a society. There was a time where Palestine boasted the value it gives to education and its educated people, today we know that the quality of education has deteriorated to alarming levels. Students literacy skills even in Arabic are weak, analytical and critical thinking skills and problem solving skills are not being developed at all. Education has boiled down to an exercise in memorization and rote learning. Moreover, the government is unable to meet the increasing demands for schools, for appropriate facilities and for qualified teachers.

While we all understand the dire conditions imposed on Palestine by the occupation and its military machine that have affected our schools and universities, but to build this nation we will need well educated, creative and resourceful people. Bethlehem University as place for higher education has a set as its mission to provide quality higher education to the people of Palestine and to be an active partner in building the future Palestinian state.

Bethlehem University was founded in 1973 jointly by the De La Salle Christian Brothers (the Freres) and the Vatican, to become the first university to be established in Palestine. It has always been sensitive to needs in society and its academic programs and services were developed in response to these needs. In its mission statement:

**The University emphasizes excellence in academic programs and the development of students as committed people prepared to assume leading positions in society. The University aspires to fostering shared values, moral principles and dedication to serving the common good.**

Inspired by its Lasallian tradition, Bethlehem University has always placed great importance on the education of youth and on teacher formation. The Faculty of Education was one of the first faculties to be established at the University. It's programs have grown to cover all aspects of teacher training from Kindergarten to Secondary school.

It is within this context of education that Bethlehem University and Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura with the support of the Spanish Cooperation have collaborated in two significant and far-reaching projects to improve the quality of education in the schools. The first project "quality education for all through partnership" that was carried out between 2007 and 2010 targeted 11 schools. The objectives of the project were:

1. Enhancement of the quality of education for Palestinian children: promoting students as active learners, improving the qualifications of teachers
2. Transmission of democratic values and human rights in the teaching and learning process.

Building on the success and lessons learned from this project Bethlehem University and the Foundation have embarked on a more far-reaching project with the generous support of the Spanish Cooperation entitled "**Improving the Quality of Education in Primary and Secondary Palestinian Schools.**" It is a 4-year project that started in

June 2010 and would involve expanding at Bethlehem University the Teacher Resource Center and a new building to house the Faculty of Education, to enhance its abilities it to fulfill its mission and outreach services to the community and the schools.

The project called for a very close collaboration of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and would involve 50 schools from the Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Northern Hebron regions, covering public schools, private schools and UNRWA schools.

The project was planned in harmony with a broad-based teacher training policy study conducted for the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) in 2006, and is informed by the following educational principles:

- Equal opportunity for all children to develop their full potential regardless of gender, race, religion, culture, and ability
- Primary and secondary education should encourage a child's mental, physical, moral, social, and spiritual development in a diversity of subject fields and the growth of the child's critical and creative abilities rather than only its abilities for memorization.
- The basic rights of children should be respected and protected (Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- Education should encourage respect for fundamental human values including gender equity, democracy and human rights; respect for the environment, and pride in the Palestinian and Arab cultural identity as well as respect for other cultures.

The project is in fulfillment of the vision of MoEHE Teacher Education Strategy in Palestine (with UNESCO, 2008), stressing the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the development away from rote-learning, the profile of the teacher as a learner, and the recommendation to start up special needs programs for teachers. To date there are no programs to train in special education. Students with special needs are hence marginalized and often neglected because of lack of skilled teachers to work with them.

Needless to say, this requires a paradigm shift in the focus and approach to education to achieve a transition from teaching to learning and from transmission of knowledge to the construction and production of knowledge, and from students consuming textbooks to participation in developing the information and utilize it in learning.

The project aims to empower teachers and educators (especially women, who make up a significant part of educators) to take initiatives at their schools and communities for democracy, human rights and environmental protection. This inevitably, would indirectly empower civil society actors who share those principles, especially when they become involved themselves.

The Palestinian Ministry of Education's Teacher Education Strategy in particular emphasizes the need to empower and train teachers in media education and the use of internet and computer in their teaching.

The project targeted three broad areas in teacher training:

Pedagogy (improving teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills imbued with principles of democracy and human rights).

Use of IT: Introduce and train teachers in the Use of IT.

Special Education: train teachers to develop skills for working with special needs.

To inform the planning and the implementation of the project a base line study of the 50 schools to be involved was conducted with all sectors involved. The choice of schools followed criteria agreed between the University, and the Ministry taking into account geographical and social distribution (representation of city, countryside, refugee camps; involvement of government, UNRWA and private schools) so that the selected schools represent the larger reality of education in Palestine. The second criterion has been chosen to ensure the involvement of schools that are socio-economically marginalized or otherwise have less access to the developmental sector.

The study revealed that there is a large gap between present-day structures and programs of teacher training in Palestine and the constructivist, student-centered approach to education and the vision set by the Ministry as mentioned earlier.

The project set up programs to address this gap. It encourages formal partnerships with other stakeholders in the educational process. The quality of the program will benefit from the information and insights coming from the social environment that impact upon school education. Organizations or circles involved included municipalities and other public agents, women organizations, parents, educational NGOs, and the private sector. At the same time, these organizations and circles would benefit from enhanced cooperation as for their own strategies towards the educational sector.



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The project involved the other main educational agents related to school education and teacher education: the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the UNRWA Department of Education and educational development centers related to private schools.

In the implementation and monitoring of the project and the feedback that was collected, the challenge for teachers following training courses is the translation from theory to practice at schools. Much of the knowledge and skills acquired are felt not to match the class situation especially in schools that lack infrastructure and suitable facilities and resources.

The Teacher Resource Center whose capabilities and resources have been significantly enhanced in this project will continue its collaboration with teachers so that they can continue in their engagement in self-reflection and self-improvement. The programs and activities offered at the Center will therefore encourage creative and critical action research, lesson design and testing, strategic planning, discussion, evaluation and active learning by teachers. Moreover the engagement of the Faculty of Education in these projects having this first hand direct collaboration with schools, policy makers, educational organizations, has enriched our own teachers experience and knowledge about school settings and has helped them in improving their own curriculum and programs to be more suited to the needs.

Through our shared mission to provide quality education, we have been able to touch hundreds of students, teachers, administrators and parents alike through well planned strategies and programs. As our project comes to a close, we are fully aware that a lot more needs to be done. It requires a long process to bring about the transformation we dream to have. But we can confidently say that through these projects and the strong collaboration of the partners we have planted the seed and through the support of the Spanish Cooperation and the Spanish people BU is better placed today to continue with its mission. The experience and infrastructure to sustain this development have been significantly enhanced, especially the Teacher Resource Center, curricula revised in view of our experience gained through involvement in these projects. We are better placed today to serve the people of Palestine through quality education.

We hope that the operations of the government (Palestinian Authority) are made more effective as the trainees at the Teacher Center become more equipped to apply the Palestinian curriculum in a constructive-critical way. The feedback from the schools and the teachers about the project and its impact will also benefit the policies of other educational stakeholders including the Ministry and inform better curricula.



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I would like to close my presentation today by a quote from the papal bull from Pope Nicholas V to establish Glasgow University in 1451 about the purpose of education which I believe continues to be true today.

"The purpose of education to help and raise to distinction those that were born in the lowest places."