

Pedagogic schemes for dispelling prejudices

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Set up in 1998, IMPACT-SE monitors the content of school curricula and textbooks in view of checking their conformity with international standards related to tolerance and peace in school education.

Tolerance refers largely to the acceptance of or at least the respect for the "other", namely other nations and peoples as well as minorities (ethnic, religious, linguistic ...) living in the midst of specific nations. Since 2008 IMPACT-SE has also included the gender in the "other".

The international standards regarding tolerance and peace education were drawn from declarations and resolutions adopted by UNESCO in 1974 and 1995 in this respect. To put it simply one can synthesize them in six injunctions, namely that

The school textbooks should be:

- Clean of scorn and prejudices
- Accurate, complete and up to date
- Factual and balanced in presenting conflicts

The school textbooks should advocate:

- Tolerance, understanding and respect for the "other"
- Non violent settlement of conflicts
- Cooperation with the "other"

Does the school have still a role to play in combating prejudices? Of course it still has such a role to play, not only because the school is the place where prejudices are expressed abundantly, but also because the school is the place where they can be dispelled since it is the location par excellence where tolerance and critical thinking are to be taught and practiced.

By the way we should not forget that tolerance is a relatively new value, as stressed by the distinguished historian Professor Bernard Lewis:

*"For Christians and Muslims, tolerance is a new virtue, intolerance a new crime. For the greater part of the history of both communities, tolerance was not valued nor was intolerance condemned. Until ... modern times Christian Europe neither prized nor practiced tolerance itself and was not greatly offended by its absence in others. The charge that was always brought against Islam was not that its doctrines were imposed by force -something seen as normal and natural- but that its doctrines were false. Similarly on the Muslim side, the claim to tolerance, now much heard from Muslim apologists and more especially from apologists of Islam, is also new and from alien origin. It is only very recently that some defenders of Islam have begun to assert that their society in the past accorded equal status to non Muslims. No such claim is made by spokesman of resurgent Islam [3], and historically there is no doubt that they are right. Traditional Islamic societies neither accorded such equality nor pretended that they were so doing. Indeed, in the old order, this would have been regarded not as a merit but as a dereliction of duty. How could one accord the same treatment to those who follow the true faith and those who willfully reject it? This would be a theological as well as a logical absurdity."*¹

One should never forget that advocating tolerance and combating prejudices and intolerance is not an easy but a very difficult endeavor punctuated with pitfalls, obstacles and setbacks. Bias and prejudices are

¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp 3-4.

legion not only among the pupils and their families, but also among the teachers. It is therefore imperative to detect and dispel them.

In monitoring the content of schoolbooks, IMPACT-SE has noted various methods for addressing bias and prejudices. Some of these schemes are effective, others rather counterproductive and should be avoided. There is also a need to develop new methods to address existing voids.

An interesting method to detect prejudices and to dispel them is the technique of the "**Prejudices' Notebook**". We found it in a seventh grade reader used in Israel's state run education:

"Many people think: the dove is a bird that pursues peace. This belief is incorrect. It is a prejudice: people believe it without checking it. There are a lot of prejudices. For example:

The Jews control the world and exploit those who live in it

The blacks are inferior, there are incapable of being scientists

The Arabs only understand the language of force.

*During the year, make a long list of prejudices. Write them down and keep them in a special folder called 'That's what they say, but it is not true- Prejudices' Try to find a drawing or caricature that fits each prejudice. Be ready to explain orally why theses are prejudices."*²

An extremely counterproductive method is the one we found in Egyptian schoolbooks, which could be described as the **hypocrisy method**. On one hand the Egyptian schoolbooks display a very positive attitude towards

² Abraham Cohen *I Understand (HEVANTI)*, Part II, Grade 7, REHES 1993 p. 259

the Coptic minority, presenting its culture as an integral part of Egyptian history and culture, stressing how the Copts welcomed the Arab conquerors in the VII century and lauding their active role in the struggle for national independence against British imperialism. But, on the other hand, they pass over in total silence the brutal and bloody repression inflicted upon the Copts in the VII and IX century by Egypt's Muslim rulers, and in addition they teach that Islam is the **only true** religion, that Christianity (and Judaism) deviated from the true religion, and that their followers are unbelievers, people who have gone astray, infidels, KAFIRIN in Arabic.

This hostile slant against "others" was actually implicitly recognized by the Egyptian political authorities. On April 26, 2010, Dr. Ahmed ZAKI BADR, Egypt's minister of education and Dr. Ali GUMA, Egypt's Mufti, announced at a press conference held in common, that they were planning to reform Egypt' education system in order to purge its curricula and schoolbooks from *"materials and wrong interpretations inciting to violence and extremism"*³. The purge hinted to was referring to the Koran's verses calling to Jihad and to the murder of polytheists. In ZAKI words *"Islam is a religion of forgiveness and love, and its curriculum should not include anything that could be misinterpreted to hate or violence."*⁴

An intense public debate followed this press conference, with on one hand a vehement Islamic opposition to the planned reform and on the other a publicly strong support voiced by many other circles. Some of the supporters dare to demand the stopping of *"teaching to our children*

³ *Al AH'RAM* May 2, 2010

⁴ *Los Angeles Times* April 20, 2010

*contempt and scorn for the Christian faith and even for the Jewish faith*⁵ and to stop one and for all the use of the term infidel when referring to the followers of other religions, since " *This is a dangerous epithet providing the license to kill.*"⁶

A peculiarly appropriate scheme for addressing national biases is the one defined as "**the two viewpoints**" method. It was introduced in the middle of the twenties of the XX century by the French historian Jules Isaac, the well-known co author of the popular history French textbooks series. In a schoolbook on contemporary history, in the chapter dealing with the 1870 French-German war, he included a document entitled " *The origins of the 1870 war viewed by a German.*"

Jules Isaac felt he had to justify his unprecedented move in providing the following explanation: " *The great quarrel of 1870 has had too serious consequences till these very days ... it deserves to be addressed thorough fully. But as in any trial, you have to hear the two parties. This is why you will find excerpts from a German school book taken from one of the best ones. Hence you will see how the question of the origins of the 1870 war is presented to the German youth.*"⁷ Isaac will follow the same method for the chapter devoted to World War I, in providing a long text on the German point of view " *in order to allow all possible exercises of criticism*"⁸.

⁵ *Al AH'RAM* May 2 , 2010

⁶ *Al AH'RAM* May 2, 2010

⁷ André KASPI, *Jules Isaac*, Plon, 2002, pp 95-96.

⁸ Ibidem

In other words, the "**two viewpoints**" method is to provide the pupils with the authentic points of view of the adverse party, in its own words, and to avoid ignoring his points of view or rephrasing them conveniently in his name.

An even more meaningful method is the one that brings the pupil to **question prejudices and taboos** and to distance himself from them by exerting his critical mind. We found such a scheme in Tunisian schoolbooks⁹.

For instance a schoolbook on philosophy notes: "*A religious person often excessively admires the rites of the religion he follows and in most cases that leads him to feel that he is superior to followers of other religions. Consequently, that creates within him the desire to exclude them and treat them like enemies, which puts him in contradiction even with the spirit of the religion he follows.*"¹⁰

Another Tunisian schoolbook goes even far away since it suggests a perverted use of the Koran conducive to fanaticism and narrow mindedness: "*We find mentions of respect for other religions, freedom of faith and respect for all opinions in thirty six [Koranic] chapters [Surah] and one hundred and twenty five [Koranic] verses. Tolerance, therefore, represents the basic idea in the Koran. How come, then, that some people have made the Book of God a tool of bigotry and narrow mindedness?*"¹¹

⁹ IMPACT-SE, *Peace and the "other" in Tunisian Schoolbooks, November 2009, p. 31*. This report is posted on www.impact-se.org

¹⁰ *Philosophy, Grade 13 [Humanities] Part I, p. 192 ;*

¹¹ *[Literary] Texts, Grade 9, 2007, p.157.*

Perhaps the most effective method against biases and prejudices is the **exposure of falsehoods**, as it was impressively performed by Jules Isaac in his book *The Teaching of Contempt*. In its foreword Jules Isaac recalls how he did respond to the advice he was given to rather "be positive" and establish the teaching of esteem instead of incriminating the teaching of contempt. He stressed that both were intimately linked: *"That it was impossible to combat the teaching of contempt and its survivals without by the same token laying the ground for a teaching of esteem; and vice versa it was not possible to lay the ground for a teaching of esteem without destroying the multiple survivals of the teaching of Contempt. Both objectives are inseparable. One cannot build truth on error"*¹²

In this book published close to Vatican II, Jules Isaac demonstrates that the three main themes upon which the Christian teaching of contempt towards the Jews was based (dispersion as punishment for crucifixion, the degeneracy of Judaism in Jesus time and deicide) were historical falsehoods.

This scheme of exposing historical falsehoods seems to have had good results in France where it contributed to uproot the last survivals of the teaching of contempt that were still present in French schoolbooks. But this scheme is still ignored in many countries, notably in Arab and Muslim ones. For instance in Jordan the themes of dispersion as punishment and the of prophets' murder are still largely taught.

¹² Manor's translation Jules Isaac, *L'enseignement du mépris*, Grasset, 2004, pp 7-8 .

A recent example of historical falsehood was displayed at UNESCO, last October when UNESCO's board was abused and led to confer some kind of legitimacy to a Palestinian fake turning Rachel's tomb site in Bethlehem into a mosque.

It should be recalled that one of the first schoolbooks published by the Palestinian Authority in 1995 presented this site as follows: *"Rachel's tomb: mother of Joseph our lord [Said] and Jacob's wife."*¹³ In other words it refers to Rachel's tomb as Rachel's tomb, nothing else. Six years later, a new schoolbook issued by the Palestinian Authority, presented now this site as the *"BILAL bin RABBAH Mosque"*. It was also explained that this change was carried out at the instigation of *"number of Palestinian, Arab and Islamic centers working on the revival of the Arab Palestinian tradition for the protection of Palestine's - particularly Jerusalem's- Arabism ... defending Palestine and its tradition such as Al BURAQ Wall: the Wailing Wall Al BILAL Mosque: Rachel's tomb"*¹⁴

Is it UNESCO's role to provide even indirectly a seal of approval for falsehood? UNESCO board considered that it will escape such an accusation by resorting to the technique of referring to the site by mentioning two denominations, namely *"BILAL BIN RABAH Mosque/ Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem"*¹⁵. This sounds fair, but actually this is giving

¹³ *Palestinian National Education, Grade 6, 1995, page 91.*

¹⁴ *National Education, Grade 7, 2001, p. 54 National Education, Grade 7, 2010, p. 54*

¹⁵ Adopted at the 185th session of UNESCO's Executive Board, October 21, 2010.

legitimacy to a forgery, since till 2001, Muslim tradition referred only to Rachel's tomb as Rachel's tomb. By the way, BILAL was an Ethiopian slave who when liberated and converted to Islam when he met the prophet Mohammed. Till now, only two Muslim traditions were known regarding his tomb, one in Bader, close to Amman and the other in Damascus.

Exposing falsehoods and fakes is close to the **disclosure of facts hidden** from the public. In his "*Les Tabous de l'Histoire. Pourquoi et comment l'histoire nous a caché des faits*"¹⁶ the French historian Marc Ferro provides many examples of such facts hidden from the public. One of the most striking one refers to the French revolution:

"According to the historical tradition the 1789 revolution is presented as the mother and the womb of the republican project. This leads to omit the existence of «aristocratic» republics such as Venice or «patrician» ones such as Geneva. This also leads to relegate the American Revolution, conveniently defined as a war of Independence.

"The most persistent taboo in this context is the one related to Corsica which was also republican before France: «Hence this first democratic state of the modern era ... this country admired by Rousseau was quitting the roads of the future for the «Ancien regime»"¹⁷.

¹⁶ Marc Ferro, *Les Tabous de l'Histoire. Pourquoi et comment l'histoire nous a caché des faits*, Nil Editions, Paris, 2002, 143 pages

¹⁷ Marc Ferro, op cite, p 25

In other words, twenty years before the American Revolution, thirty years before the French revolution, the Corsicans have already rejected French and Genoese colonialism and conceived the doctrine of self determination. Though, this undisputable historical fact was hidden from the French and was not taught to them.

No doubt that the inclusion of such hidden facts, of such taboos in the teaching of history, will sharpen the critical thinking of the pupils and turn history into an even more fascinating discipline.

As we all know, not only pupils are prone to prejudices. Teachers as well as families are not clean of prejudices and biases. We did not encounter techniques dealing with the interfaces pupils/teachers/families with regard to prejudices. Innovative schemes are needed and should be developed to address this issue.

We are not in a position to fairly evaluate the contribution of French schoolbooks to pinpointing and dispelling biases and prejudices, since to our knowledge, they were not systematically monitored in this respect. By contrast we came across two recent books which addressed this issue.

The first one, "*La morale à l'école*"¹⁸ recalls that the moral's lessons has had a central place in French schools up to 1968 when it was abolished. No doubt that today many will be upset in reading some of them and even feel ashamed¹⁹

¹⁸ *La morale à l'école De 1905 à 1950*, BERG International; Paris, 2009,

¹⁹ For instance the claim that "the White race is perfect"

The second one, "*Elèves sous influence*"²⁰ after researching History schoolbooks used in higher grades, noticed that some of them relate to terrorism as the arm of the weak, view it as a form of resistance, and justify the resort to violence.

In view of these surprising findings, it is perhaps due time to carry out a systematic research on the French school textbooks in order to check their conformity with international standards regarding tolerance and peace.

Paper presented at the conference "Ecole et préjugés. Est-ce que l'école contribue encore à la lutte contre les préjugés" ("School and prejudices. Does school still contribute to combating biases and prejudices?" February the 10th 2011, French National Assembly, salle Victor Hugo.

²⁰ Eve Bonnivard, Barbara Lefèvre, *Elèves sous influence*, Louis Audibert, 2005, 361 pages .