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# Literacy at Times of Crisis ~ Lessons from Palestine: Rethinking Dominant Perceptions and Conceptions Towards a Pluralist Vision of Literacy in the Arab World

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P erhaps nothing is more needed in the world today than intellectual honesty, which usually

entails a shift of perceptions and convictions – especially in relation to learning and knowledge. Fear, career, and laziness stand in the way of intellectual honesty. The human condition in the world today compels us to regain intellectual honesty and social responsibility, which means we need to go beyond just the technical, the professional, and what can be measured. This is especially true in relation to crisis situations. This paper is a small attempt in this direction – taking the Palestinian case as its reference.

Major crises in the world today stem from absolutism and the consumption pattern in living. *We need literacy that deals with such crises instead of adding to them.* This means that any talk about literacy or any other aspect that assumes that a word can have a universal meaning, and any talk that builds on a perception which does not affirm that every person is a source of meanings, understandings, and measures, would contribute to current crises. This necessarily requires having a pluralist rather than an absolutist attitude in life, and having health rather than consumption as the core value that governs people's thoughts and actions. This implies looking at tools – especially the alphabet – critically rather than neutrally. The condition in the world today compels us to go deep and bring out fundamental aspects.

I would like to start – again – with the ‘event’ that had the biggest impact on my life: the ‘discovery’ of the tremendous knowledge and wisdom my illiterate mother had. My mother sewed clothes for almost 50 years, no two dresses were the same! Every dress had to fit a particular person. She had tremendous respect for every woman (Fasheh, 1990). In contrast, we try to impose the same ‘dress’ on minds, in matters related to learning! To me, this has been – since the mid-1970s – the biggest onslaught on pluralism, dignity, and respect. These insights have led me to rethink learning, knowledge, and the values that governed my perceptions and actions; they also show the importance of having dignity, respect, and a pluralist attitude in living, thus challenging dominant perceptions of illiterates.

Dignity is a most fundamental issue related to literacy – one which is usually ignored. This is extremely crucial in working with illiterates. The way literate people perceive and treat illiterates is logically identical with the way Israelis perceive and treat Palestinians: they assume they are absolutely superior and always claim they want to help and civilize. Nothing robs people of their dignity more than these two attitudes. The dominant assumption perceives learning the alphabet as an absolute good, which usually implies looking at the alphabet as neutral. The alphabet is a tool and – as such – is not neutral. We need to look at it critically. Probably I need to make one thing very clear: the alphabet, the computer, and all other such inventions, are very powerful tools that could either add to fully interactive communication among people or be manipulated to serve one path that is considered universal. Teachers' training courses, revision of textbooks, and refinement of assessment, all fall into the one path rather than enriching, deepening, and widening human interaction and communication.

Since 1971, when I started working with literacy in a broad sense (literacy in relation to language, to mathematics, to science, to culture and, most importantly, to self), dignity has been a guiding core value (Fasheh, 2006). Dignity, rather than rights, has been the backbone of Palestinian life. Since 1948, we lived with no rights whatsoever, but I cannot remember any time (up till 1993) where people's lives were not driven by dignity and hope. In 1993, hope was replaced by expectations, and dignity was replaced by distractions and the right to consume. Since then, that shaped the behaviour, and formed the horizon, of Palestinian institutions and professionals and eventually contaminated people. We cannot talk about literacy in Palestine in a way that is void of dignity and hope; they are the backbone of our survival. As far back as 1908, when Khalil Sakakini, the most inspiring Palestinian educator in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, established his first school in Jerusalem, he explicitly had dignity as a core value in teaching and dealing with students. Living without dignity is the curse of modern civilization. That is why it is crucial that every participant clarifies how s/he perceives and conceives literacy.

In writing this paper, I do not try to provide ready answers, solutions, and models – an attitude that is contrary to dignity, and usually embodies disrespect and encourages laziness – but to initiate dialogue that can contribute to mutual inspiration and nurturance in relation to literacy, and to learning in general. I will focus mainly on the period 1987 up till now.

Before I leave these introductory remarks, I would like to mention a conviction that has been growing within me since the 1970s – the conviction that Palestine can serve as a magnifier through which

we can see what is happening in the world at large. One aspect where this is true is how we perceive, conceive, and deal with crises. I experienced – in very personal and intense ways – crises at three levels: crises resulting from military occupation with its tools of tanks, warplanes, and other means of oppression and control; crises at the cultural-social-intellectual level with its tools of words, meanings, perceptions, and measures propagated and controlled by institutions and professionals; and crises at the level of environmental degradation with its tools of development, economic progress, industry, and all the waste they produce – including nuclear waste. The crisis that is most obvious is the military one. However, the invasion of Palestine at the cultural-social-intellectual level started much earlier; it started with the establishment of schools by missionaries and other groups. How Palestinians perceived and dealt with language, education, and literacy could be inspiring to people living in situations that are going through multiple crises. This paper focuses on perceptions, conceptions, actions, and practices that developed out of *attentiveness* and *aliveness* within the Palestinian situation rather than on presenting a solution or model to be followed. What helped us was the fact that we had no government and no international organizations, which meant we had to depend on ourselves, on what we have as people, as communities, and as culture. *This is the main value of the Palestinian experience.* Over the years, it made me realize how important it is to re-think perceptions, to co-author meanings, and to re-embodiment wisdom and a pluralist attitude in living and learning.

## Crises and responses

### *First Crisis (1920s)*

Early in the 1920s, after the British occupied Palestine, they imposed their curriculum and textbooks. The textbooks were colourful, neat, with beautiful covers. They impressed many Palestinians. However, as early as 1929, the peasants of Palestine saw not only the irrelevance but also the harm that the British curriculum would have on their children and communities. They called for a conference in Jaffa (first and last of its kind in the Arab world!) where they raised the issue of relevance of the ‘literacy project’ – education – which the British were imposing. As in other places, those who came to the rescue of the British curriculum were none but educated urban Palestinians who perceived what the peasants were saying as a sign of wanting to stay behind!

What is interesting about the confrontation between the peasants and the British curriculum is the fact that the peasants did not mention the political aspect but went much deeper: they saw it as an onslaught on their ways of living, deeply affecting their daily lives and relationships. They felt in a very concrete way that the British project was starting a process of robbing them of their means of livelihood and giving them, in return, shiny false promises about how to improve their lives and raise their standards of living – in today’s jargon, how to be developed! It is very revealing that those working with the land were the ones who were not fooled.

The story is also revealing in terms of the relation between literacy and crises. First, what was clear in the 1920s seems to have lost its clarity over the years – just like people who get used to a drug and lose the ability to see its harm. Second, those who are best equipped to deal with a crisis, are not professionals but people whose life is affected directly by the crisis – which means that the best policy to follow at times of crises is to get out of the way of people and avoid giving them ready solutions designed by those who are not affected directly by the crisis. Third, becoming literate does not necessarily make one closer to the truth; there is no correlation between being literate and having an accurate map in one’s head about what is happening. Fourth, there is a big difference between people who work with land and people whose knowledge comes from textbooks, people who develop textual minds. In other words, *the crisis was not illiteracy as much as the kind of literacy that was imposed by the British.* The challenge, thus, is to be critical of what is presented as a universal solution. Fifth, the story reflects a pattern that was shared by later crises in relation to Palestinians and literacy; the 1929 peasants’ conference challenged both education as an absolute neutral value and the claim that formal, informal, and non-formal education exhaust all possibilities to learn.

### ***Second Crisis: The Expulsion and Dispersion in 1948***

The crisis that resulted from loss of land and means of livelihood in 1948 led Palestinians to rush towards getting degrees in order to get jobs. Arab countries, especially Egypt, welcomed Palestinians to study free in universities. By the early 1970s, the proportion of Palestinians holding university degrees was the third highest in the world (per 100,000). On the surface, it seems that Palestinians gained. However, here we need to look at how we perceive and measure things. We gained university degrees but lost Palestine; we gained some outside symbols at the individual level but lost a lot at two levels: tearing apart of the harmony within each person and of the social-spiritual-cultural fabric within communities. Out of all the crises I experienced in Palestine, the one in 1948 was the least inspiring: people followed a solution that was created outside of them. In all other crises, their response was related to deeper understanding of self, and more in harmony with self-rule.

### ***Third Crisis (1970s)***

The expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan in 1971 left people in the West Bank feeling alone. That was the first time I realized the tremendous resourcefulness and energy that people have, which become very apparent when people are left alone. We had to depend totally on ourselves, and on what people, communities and culture have. There was no national government, no NGOs, no World Bank... That absence led to dignity, freedom, and a deep sense of responsibility. It was the first time I understood the meaning of crisis as opportunity. The flourishing of groups – not institutions, NGOs, and the like – but groups of friends, who got together and started talking about what they could do and love to do. This happened in various fields: in education, in theatre, in arts, in public libraries, in community activities (such as voluntary work) and in many other aspects. It was during 1970s that I first worked with many kinds of literacy: language, mathematics, science, and self.

### ***Fourth Crisis: The First Palestinian Intifada***

In December 1987, at the beginning of the first Palestinian *intifada*, Israel ordered the closure of all schools in the West Bank. That closure lasted for almost four years. That period formed one of the main crises that Palestinians faced in their lives but it also formed one of the main challenges and opportunities to rethink a lot of what we have internalized via modern institutions. A study which the Tamer Institute conducted two years after the closure showed a real crisis and a very serious problem. Our first reaction was in line with the usual approach: plans, training, materials, budgets etc. Those, however, were not available, so we had to think of ways that were more in harmony with what was available. Many people, including educators, artists, writers, theatre and drama people, met regularly for more than a year and discussed how best to deal with the crisis. Ready models were irrelevant and hegemonic organizations non-existent. We knew we had no resources other than what people, communities, and culture had. We decided to start with what was already there, and to work in accordance with the principle of not robbing people of their abilities. In other words, we decided to follow a ‘policy’ of getting out of the way of people and creating opportunities where they could move, act, relate, express, and learn in ways they felt were most appropriate – with no need for permissions, approvals, and budgets. All that they had to satisfy was inner convictions. This policy has a name within the Arab culture: hospitality and generosity, which naturally embody dignity, having faith in people, and are contrary to competition, winning, measurement, control, consumerism, and individualism. We decided to build on what is abundant and available to all people, on what is beautiful and inspiring, and on what strengthens the social-spiritual-cultural fabric in society. We decided to build on two basic elements in learning: reading and expressing. Our work eventually took the form of a campaign that encompassed all Palestinians living on the land of historic Palestine (Fasheh, 1995).

In line with the policy of hospitality and generosity, we invited people wherever they were to provide welcoming spaces, and be generous with their time, energies, and creativities and do what they could as part of the effort in the campaign. In that invitation, we said that the closure of schools was an opportunity to regain aspects of learning that were ignored, forgotten, devalued, or rendered worthless by formal, informal, and non-formal education. It was an opportunity to free us from the single undifferentiated universal path of learning, knowing, developing, and progressing. When a US NGO, for example, offered to provide us with a mobile library, we felt it was contrary to the spirit with which we

were thinking and working, so we refused such partnership. Accepting that offer would have deepened what characterizes modern thinking most: the claim that people cannot do things by themselves; they always need institutions, organizations, budgets, plans, professionals, and activists.

The story of one teacher's efforts to develop a library with her students in the classroom exemplifies the spirit of the campaign; it is inspiring and revealing to tell it here. An elementary school teacher from a poor, remote village called us at the Tamer Institute (in 1992) and expressed her enthusiasm about joining the campaign. She wanted to know how we could help her get books in order to start a small library in her school. I told her that every place had to initiate ways to carry this responsibility themselves. Her reply was, 'Oh! That is a nice idea'. I didn't know whether she was just being cordial and was really frustrated by my answer, or whether she really believed in what I said. About a month later, she called and, sounding happy, said, 'Let me tell you what happened. I asked each student in the two classes I teach to try and save enough money to buy a book. Now we have seventy-seven books, and the children themselves are taking care of the borrowing process.' She added, 'Even my relationship with my students has improved'.

This story is a small but powerful example of an approach that is sustainable, respectful, and builds completely on what is available in the community. It is crucial in any effort related to an aspect in the community, such as literacy. The freedom thus created also enabled children to choose the books that they wanted to have in the library. The activity allowed both teacher and students to gain a sense of responsibility and acquire self and mutual respect. Although their action of collectively organizing and running a library was small and local, they felt that they were part of a larger national campaign that involved many others in society – all working within horizontal healthy relationships.

It is worth mentioning that what was common among the crises in the 1920s, 1970s and late 1980s was how crucial it is to have a policy of perceiving people as the backbone of any solution. Institutions and organizations simply cannot do what needs to be done. The main reason for this is the fact that honesty and dignity are contrary to institutional and organizational inner logic. Not only people do not say what they mean and do not mean what they say, but they also lose the ability to see the discrepancy.

### ***The Importance of People, Community, Context, and Cultural Expressions in Literacy Campaigns***

Any campaign that does not have people, community, and culture as its backbone will end up being shallow, superficial and non-sustainable. The decisive factor is whether the campaign needs professionals or not. If it does, then people, community, and culture are not its backbone but, rather, followers and implementers and, thus, the campaign lacks the spirit and ability of regeneration. If the work does not depend on institutions and professionals then regeneration is its driving force...

Arabic will continue to be hated if we insist on teaching it as a technical tool. Arabic is connected to life, arts, aesthetics, history, religion, and community. As long as we look at teachers as professionals and insist that they should have official technical credentials, rather than people who embody cultural and personal expressions, or who profess certain faiths and passions, teaching and learning will continue to be mainly a coercive activity. One way to break away from this cycle is by accepting illiterate storytellers as teachers in elementary schools. UNESCO can play a major role in this. Insisting on credentials would deepen the mechanical way of living. The spirit of regeneration, which is usually embedded in storytellers, is lost. The Arabic language if taught without its beauty would lack the spirit of regeneration. This means it cannot be taught effectively without its connection to at least one of its sources of beauty: the Qur'an, arts, poetry, literature, storytelling, drama... Storytelling, probably more than anything else, enriches the language and imagination of children. The reading campaign had – in addition to reading – storytelling, drama, and writing. Within the reading campaign, expressing self was the form we used. All expressions were encouraged, but the main two spaces we provided were writing and drama: a weekly page in al-Quds newspaper and a children's character – Nakhleh ash-Shiber (which two Palestinian artists had improvised and presented in several schools before the intifada). An integral part of the performance of the character in the campaign was for Nakhleh to invite children to come to stage and present whatever they liked, in the form that they felt most comfortable with: telling stories, singing, dancing... Language is a 'living creature'; it flourishes best in real situations, within real interactions. Any literacy campaign that is devoid of cultural expressions, such as drama and storytelling, will end up being a skeleton that has no life.

In our reading campaign in Palestine, the Nakhleh ash-Shiber character was crucial. It is worth elaborating on this character here. Using his own words, Nakhleh is a 'non-person' in that he represents

every person through his voicing of communal concerns. He is in contradiction first and foremost with himself. His name – the first contradiction in his life – literally means in Arabic ‘palm tree span of the palm,’ a combination of a palm tree (a tall object) and ‘the palm of the hand’ (a short object). He makes children laugh and clap and sing under conditions that otherwise reflect suffering, death, sadness, anger, and lack of hope. He challenges normality per se and does it naturally and spontaneously through the questions he asks. He is a deeply moral person, with an intense love for life and children, and he is so human that he provokes us to see our hypocrisies. During the first two years of the campaign, Nakhleh performed more than 250 times in various places around the country. His appearance is also very telling: the character is confined in place, but his feet and legs are free to move as they please. He could rub his forehead with his shoe; he could fly and keep his legs free for a long time in the air. That was the funniest unexpected aspect for children. In short, they loved him probably because he symbolized their situation and their dreams at the same time. In Gaza especially, they were confined in place; they saw in his flying legs their fantasies of being able to move around the world... something they always dreamt of, a way of freeing them from that confinement. One way of combating a harsh reality is through imagination; freedom is probably one of the strongest human emotions; it is connected to hope and action... and also to laughter. Nakhleh did not make them forget their confinement, but he personified the fact that that was not the limits of their reality. All the tyrannies of the institutional world – measures, contests, prizes, comparisons, rights, and right and wrong – were absent. He refused to be straitjacketed by logic, analysis, and brute force. Just like the Arabian fiction character Juha, Nakhleh was half-fool and half-wise. Clowns and Juha are needed in the Arab world. The reading campaign helped them survive by overcoming efforts to render them helpless. The opposite of fear is freedom. Laughter was one way of freedom. It was one way of freeing minds and expressions, which is radically different from the shallow slogan of free thought and free expression. No one joined the campaign because of money, or recognition, or altruism, or egoism, or rewards, or patriotism. That was its inspiration and tremendous energy and momentum...

There was another dimension that we used which attracted children: a passport to reading. Since a national passport was forbidden, the reading passport was embraced by children; it tickled their imaginations. It is probably the first instance in history where people had a cultural passport and lacked a national one! In fact, it is much more real and meaningful than a ‘national’ passport. It is a passport that no authority can deny to anyone or take away from anyone. With such a passport, one’s sense of belonging is self-governed and self-ruled. One’s allegiance is not arbitrary, imposed, or symbolic; one’s allegiance is to a culture, to a way of living, to having joy in life, to feeling good and happy, and to having a sense of community. In contrast, a ‘national’ passport is devoid of joy and personal meaning. With a cultural passport, one feels free and builds beautiful relations with others; with a national passport, one has no choice and builds fearful feelings of others (it is connected to powerful institutions and lifeless bureaucracies). In this sense, the campaign was not only connected to language literacy but also to cultural and self literacy.<sup>1</sup>

## Dialogue

### *The Importance of On-going Dialogues in Literacy Work in the Arab World*

I do not think there has ever been, in recent years, any serious and meaningful dialogue concerning education, learning, knowledge, science, mathematics, religion, or literacy in the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> Most dialogues focus on technical matters and how to catch up with the west, such as how to improve

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<sup>1</sup> One project that became part of the campaign was children writing their own stories, which were published by the Tamer Institute. A follow up – later – of that spirit, energy, and momentum are the projects: *The Other Arabia (Azka Dunia)* and *qalb el-Umoor*.

cf. [www.almoultaqa.com](http://www.almoultaqa.com)

<sup>2</sup> One exception was the attempt by Palestinian peasants (which I mentioned earlier) which was aborted.

education, assessment, evaluation, training, textbooks, etc. In the absence of dialogue concerning perceptions, conceptions, values, and basic assumptions, discussing technical aspects is a distraction – to say the least. We keep being distracted into secondary and insignificant issues. In the round table in Paris on ‘Literacy as Freedom’, during the International Literacy Day 9-10 September 2002, I tried to initiate a dialogue concerning our perception of illiterates and our role as people who work in the learning of languages. As usual, however, people were busy with technical and professional aspects. For those who work in literacy, to perceive themselves as practitioners of pure, pragmatic, and marketable technique, and admitting no need of faith<sup>3</sup> – is an illusion and self-defeating. What I am saying is not against learning how to read and write but against considering technical reading and writing as a saviour. An analogy helps clarify: I am not against feeding children who are hungry and thirsty, but against considering potato chips and cola as food! Literacy is not necessarily a saviour. I already mentioned that the main threats today are the making of highly literate minds! Failing to see the corruptive quality of pure technique, and that techniques result not in dialogue but in propaganda and public manipulation should be central in our discussions concerning literacy.<sup>4</sup> One way to avoid treating the alphabet as neutral is to ask literacy professionals about the faith they profess and their motivation in working in literacy.

Through dialogue we can regain aspects that have been lost in modern living, such as pluralism (which is not to be confused with diversity), harmony, wisdom, freedom, and dignity. Perceiving every person as a co-author of meanings, understandings, and measures is crucial in this. This is where we are truly and deeply equal – not in a mechanical, legal, or formal sense but in a deep fundamental sense; we are equal in being incommensurably unique – we are equal in the sense that we cannot be compared with one another along a vertical line.

Why is it so hard to create a sincere and honest dialogue in institutional settings, including those connected to education? As Upton Sinclair says, ‘It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it’. In institutional settings, one’s life does not depend on dialogue and honest understanding. As long as those who work in literacy are valued for technical matters and for following directions, we will not get very far. There cannot be real dialogue concerning literacy as long as the lives of people working in literacy do not depend on the honesty and relevance of what they do or say. As long as their career is more linked to pleasing one’s superiors rather than one’s intellectual honesty and moral responsibility, real dialogue and serious work in literacy are beyond current projects to produce anything meaningful or significant.

Literacy that is Built on Intra-knowledge Dialogue: Embodying Wisdom, Respect, and Dignity The longest ongoing dialogue I had was the one with the world embodied by my mother’s way of living. It was not verbal, and it continued after her death. In my dialogue with my mother’s world, she said all what she had to say without words, in silence, through her work, her relationship with others, and her way of living. We need such dialogues with those we label as illiterates, before we embark on literacy work with them. Obviously, this is hard work, which is different from ‘busy’ work that is characteristic of institutions. As I mentioned earlier, such work although busy, it is lazy – lazy in the sense one does not have to re-think basic conceptions, perceptions, and values. Dialogue with the world of the illiterates we want to work with should be the first step in working in literacy. Any attempt to bypass this step would end up in doing harm with good intentions. We need to heal from the arrogant – though well intentioned – attitude of helping and serving and teaching. My dialogue with my mother’s world was more than dialectical, more than logical, more than rational, and more than emotional and sentimental. It was a dialogue that touched my deepest convictions and conditionings. It was a dialogue that neither unified nor stifled us but re-linked us at a deep level. It took place in the core of my being, in my quest and search for truth.

That encounter taught me some of the most important lessons of my life: it taught me the meaning of humility as an intellectual virtue and attitude, it taught me the meaning of pluralism as a social existential value and attitude, and shook the foundations of my knowledge – a virtue at the personal level. My mother was the source of inspiration for me in all of them: humility, pluralism and healing. This

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<sup>3</sup> What I mean by faith are the values that the person does not violate in her/his actions.

<sup>4</sup> The poster of the four categories of food: meat, dairy products, fruit and vegetables, and grains, was paid for by the Dairy Association of America to be put in all schools! Obviously, one can live without dairy, and many communities do not use dairy in their daily diets. Literacy in this example was used as a tool for propaganda, where being literate makes you more susceptible to it!

'dialogue' with my mother's world shows how important it is to dialogue with the world of illiterates we will be working with before we decide how to work with them.

I mentioned at the end of the paper I wrote for the Literacy Day in 2002 that I have been lucky with three things in my life: I lived a good part of my life in the pre-development age; a main teacher in my life was an illiterate person; and I lived most of my life without a national government. The three provided me with a worldview that is not attainable through institutions and professionals. I feel lucky because I had to rethink constantly of the meanings of words, because I had to be responsible for doing what I thought was needed, and because I learned how to live with what is available. The two periods that were especially inspiring in my life were the 1970s and the first Palestinian *intifada* (1987-91). They were full of crises but also full of healing. What was common to both was the fact that institutions were either paralyzed or many people thought and acted outside them. People lived, acted and interacted in ways that depended totally on what they had as people, communities and culture.<sup>5</sup>

A hundred years ago we failed to engage in dialogues in relation to education and curricula that were dumped on us by the British, French and Americans. And fifty years ago we failed to do this in regard to development.<sup>6</sup> We embraced them with a sheep mentality – literally following the headmaster who had the bell. We believed that what was offered was objective and universal. What came out of that blind 'faith' has been fragmentation as well as robbing us of abilities and what we have. Reflecting on all that should make us more cautious, careful and respectful in thinking and dealing with literacy. Dialogue is the key element in this. Dialogue I am talking about is not only about exchanging experiences, 'successful' stories and innovative strategies but also – as I have already mentioned – about creating a horizontal dialogue among the various knowledges that are embedded in the worlds that form the contexts of such stories.

The assumption that literacy is a saviour and that being literate is absolutely better than being illiterate fall exactly in what I see as the biggest threat to peoples and communities around the world: the belief in a single undifferentiated path for progress. Looking closely at common statements about literacy, including the goals of the Qatar conference, one realizes that many important aspects and questions are left out. Since the 1970s, I became very sensitive to what is missing, what is not said, what is ignored, what is devalued, what is made invisible and what is rendered worthless. I became sensitive to this because I became aware of the fact that what is usually stressed is technical, mostly reflects the dominant point of view and serves the market and distracts us from what is more fundamental. 'Literacy challenges in the Arab States', for example, does not seem to include the challenge to rethink the values, perceptions and conceptions that govern practices in literacy work. We also read in the conference papers, 'The resulting disruption and movement of population, internally and across borders, leaves both children and adults without access to formal or non-formal learning opportunities.' I already mentioned the disruption of the community in Ramallah and movement of its population that resulted from 'literacy' – way before any political or military conflict took place. They did it of course with good intentions; but the consequences were not particularly good. We also read, '...assist countries in addressing their literacy challenges, thereby contributing to... poverty reduction'. No one in Gaza, one of the poorest and most congested areas in the world, sleeps without supper; while many in Boston (one of the richest and most literate cities in the world) do! We also read, 'In a crisis situation where schooling has been disrupted...' During the first intifada, the disruption of schooling was not the real problem; the real problem was two-fold: first, the harsh Israeli measures against teaching and learning in homes and neighbourhoods and, second, by 1987, most Palestinians' imaginations had been impoverished as to the many ways of learning and teaching: we constantly hear the question, 'but what is the alternative to schooling?'. Like others, Palestinians have lost the ability to imagine learning outside and beyond formal, informal and non-formal education. In crisis situations, the policy should be an open one where people are invited to do what they see fit and what they can with what they have, within the realities they live in. Freedom to imagine and experiment is much more fundamental than freedom to express. Every person has time, energy and imagination... s/he can use that somehow and act.

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<sup>5</sup> Many of my experiences during that period are documented in Fasheh, 'math, culture, and authority', which first appeared in *For the Learning of Math*, Montreal, Canada, 1982, and was reproduced in Fasheh 1997

<sup>6</sup> The Indian subcontinent, more than other regions, seems to have been critical of what was offered by the British. It is very revealing for people working in literacy to read what people like Gandhi, Tagore, and Mohammad Iqbal wrote some 80 years ago.

Finally, we read the phrase ‘global literacy’, which invokes positive images and connotations but, in reality, consists of ‘packaged services’ – not unlike fast food. I have yet to see a concrete meaning of ‘global literacy’ that is not blind to the richness in people, communities and cultures. Since the 1970s, my thinking and work has been to dismantle the myth of universal/ global thinking – the belief in a single undifferentiated path for progress; one which can be measured by universal measures and standards. I cannot think of anything that killed diversity and dismantled communities and ignored the richness and beauty in cultures as effectively as the belief in universal measures and global meanings.<sup>7</sup> It is a most dangerous – though subtle – form of intellectual fundamentalism. Healing from it is a most urgent challenge in the world today.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is full of examples of how governments around the world wanted their people to know how to read and write (to be literate) mainly to make them easier victims of official political or commercial propaganda. I feel that we often act the way we see the moon: we never see the other side of the moon. We do not see the dark side of science, literacy, knowledge, education and development in their dominant forms.<sup>8</sup> Even when we see the dark side of technology, we usually embrace it uncritically and unconditionally. Part of the dark side of literacy is creating textual minds: minds that are connected to words that are rootless in one’s life. I asked hundreds of mathematics teachers why they taught what they did; very few had personal reasons.

The formation of textual minds, i.e. of minds that are formed mainly by texts, produce people who can recite thousands of quotes but are unable to provide a concrete experience; people who write books about how to raise children but are unable to raise a happy child, or work as consultants of how to improve education in Egypt or Qatar and cannot do anything concrete in the school that their children attend. Unlike the human body, which is naturally equipped with an immune system, the mind seems to lack any built-in immune system to protect it from being deceived. Put poisonous food into a stomach, and it will quickly vomit it; put poisonous ideas in a mind, and it will not even notice! That is probably why wisdoms flourished in all pre-modern societies: it was the main check on the mind from moving without ‘caring for the seventh generation’ – not even for the next generation! We have witnessed how fast the mind moved during the past 400 or so years – unchecked by wisdom!

That is why in this paper, I tried to distinguish between literacy that controls the mind, limits the imagination, distracts one’s attention and dulls the senses *and* literacy that embodies wisdom, creates intra-knowledge dialogue and sets the mind, imagination and action free. A basic factor as to which literacy we are advocating is whether we perceive people as consumers of meanings or co-authors of meanings – whether people use language or are used by it. Co-authoring meanings is related to freedom, a very special kind of freedom: freedom that is bound to one’s attentiveness to surroundings, to experiences and to acting in accordance with one’s convictions and contemplations – in other words, bound to dignity, self-rule, intellectual honesty and social responsibility.

## Conclusion

It is crucial that we avoid robbing people of what they can do by themselves and of what they have. Every time we use the word ‘global’ or ‘help’ or we provide a ready solution, we would be robbing people and communities of abilities and what they have; we would be replacing what is natural with something that is artificial and fabricated. This means that the best policy in times of crises, and under ‘normal’ conditions too, is to move out of the way of people and let them take control and act. This does not mean not to do anything but rather, not to violate the principle ‘*avoid doing anything that robs people and communities of abilities and what they have, no matter how much they gain at other levels*’. It means to protect spaces where people can take care of themselves as well as to use what is abundantly available to everyone. Sometimes there is need to create spaces that help people realize and regain what was made invisible or valueless. A

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<sup>7</sup> The English have yet to realize that there is a plural for knowledge! I always say that the world cannot regain its sanity if those who speak English (the language of dominant institutions) continue to fail to see knowledge in the plural.

<sup>8</sup> cf. The Swaraj Foundation. The Dark Side of Literacy.  
[http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/rethinking\\_literacy.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/rethinking_literacy.htm)

main question or concern in whatever we do, in literacy as well as in other fields, is ‘what does what I do rob me (or others) of? How it will affect other aspects in life?’ Another question is, ‘do I feel that I am using language or used by it?’

What I would like to suggest is a combination of things that together can help us move outside of the technical and fragmented way of working in literacy. Language literacy will be shallow and short-lived if it ignores cultural literacy and self literacy. That is why we started *Azka Dunia*, which is a project that deals with cultural literacy, with what is available in terms of cultural expressions, cultural products and cultural human treasures in the Arab world. Hakaya: the centrality of stories for self-discovery, dialogue and life... Storytelling, arts, drama... should become part of the basis of education of all sorts – including literacy projects. Spaces where people can meet and dialogue freely and honestly is another must... The *Qalb el-Umoor*<sup>9</sup> project can also be relevant in this endeavour.

Last but not least, we cannot separate literacy from the source of worth of a person. A central aspect in every person’s life is the source of one’s worth. If the source is from outside the person and outside one’s community, then literacy would rob people of dignity and a pluralist attitude in living. That is why the principle that guides our thinking and work in the Arab Education Forum, which I would like to suggest as the principle that guides the worth of a person in literacy programmes, has been a statement said by Imam Ali 1,400 years ago:

*‘qeematu kullimri’en ma yuhsenob’*

قيمة كل امرئ ما يحسنه

In English: the worth of a person is what s/he *yuhsen*. *Yuhsen* in Arabic has at least 5 meanings: the first meaning refers to how well the person does what s/he does – the knowledge and skills dimension; the second refers to how beautiful and how pleasing what s/he does to the senses – the aesthetic dimension; the third meaning refers to how good it is to the community – the ethical dimension; the fourth refers to how much one gives of self – the emotional/ giving dimension (as opposed to only taking or, what is worse, consuming); and the fifth meaning refers to how respectful (of people and ideas) the person is in discussions – the social spiritual fabric dimension.

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<sup>9</sup> cf. <http://www.qalbelumur.com> or [http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/ls2\\_fasheh.pdf](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/ls2_fasheh.pdf)

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