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Classroom Clashes: Film Spotlights Gaps in Israeli, Palestinian Education

In 'Teaching Ignorance,' filmmaker Tamara Erde offers powerful footage of bright educators who teach one narrative and yet seem oblivious to the existence of another. A must-see for teachers in conflict zones.

Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt | Nov 10, 2015 3:16 PM

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A scene from Erde's new documentary "Teaching Ignorance." The footage feels raw – and thus, as skeptics of all-too-polished stories, we trust it. Credit: Courtesy of Ruth Diskin Films

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Too often we imagine the future of peace in this small strip of land as being determined in the offices of Israel's Defense Ministry, behind the desk of Moshe Ya'alon.

Yet too often, we forget the power of yet another ministry vis-a-vis the peace process – that of Naftali Bennett: the Ministry of Education and its curriculum as it is implemented nationwide.

It is this subject that filmmaker Tamara Erde takes to task in her brilliant documentary "Teaching Ignorance," which was screened this week at the Other Israel Film Festival in New York. In the documentary, this young French-Israeli filmmaker takes a journey through Israel and the Palestinian territories, showing the conflict through the eyes of schoolteachers – speaking with them in their offices crammed with books, in their dark apartments, in their classrooms as they teach.

A must-see for any teacher, especially those living in conflict zones, "Teaching Ignorance" is powerful because it is quiet, humble. The footage feels raw – and thus, as skeptics of all-too-polished stories, we trust it. Erde herself, beyond narrating minimally from behind the camera, lets the teachers and students speak for themselves.

In Ramallah's Yamina Husseini School for Boys, for example, Yaad Hadash leads a discussion, sporting a blazer and wild curly hair, leads a discussion with his students: What is freedom? Does a bird have an identity card?

With the masterful creativity of a pedagogue, he comes up with scenarios for his students to play-act. He encourages the boys to kick the separation wall that goes through their schoolyard: "Is this suitable for a school – or a prison? Is it better to keep it or remove it?" he asks, to a chorus of answers.

– Advertisement –

The advertisement displays four book covers in a row. From left to right: 'The Black Sun' by Amnon Rubinfeld, 'The World of Azeem' by N. S. Abu, 'And Hate Preceded' by David Gali, and 'Rabin' by H. S. Ditzgraber. Below the books, the text reads 'We're not just a publishing house, we're family'. At the bottom left is the KIP logo, and at the bottom right is a red button with the text 'Publish your book with us!'.

The parents, he explains, see his effort to spark the children's imagination as "dangerous for human beings." But he sees role-playing as essential to education. Another day, Hadash has the children kneel down, their heads bent, their mouths taped. "Is that how the Jewish soldiers position you? No, you must sit further away from each other – alone, each alone in a corner."

One child says: "Teacher, yesterday morning, the Jews came and we

started throwing stones at them. I spat on a woman who I thought was Jewish.” The children smile, and list their "accomplishments."

The teacher corrects them: “Say that you thought that she was a settler, not that she was Jewish. I told you that we should differentiate between Jews – and who? The Israelis. We have a problem with the state which occupied this place, raped it and distorted it. Right?”

One boy stands up: “I don’t understand.”

It is at moments like these – seeing excellent teachers using creative methods, yet teaching narratives that don’t allow room for the Other – that Erde captures her most powerful and most damning footage: of educators who tell one story and appear to be oblivious to the existence of another.

Erde continues to I’billin, an Arab town in the Galilee, where history teacher Johnny Mansour struggles with the curriculum he is given, instead writing his own textbook, refusing the official Israeli version of the Palestinian narrative. He is shown teaching the United Nations 1947 Partition Plan to a co-ed classroom of secular-looking students: “Each side insisted that it is right...,” he tells them “The Palestinians tried everything, politics, to soften things up, to talk things out, to negotiate. What did the Palestinians reach at the end? A dead end.”

Mansour is not alone in trying to impart to his students a sense of the historical aspects of the land. To the east and over the Green Line, in the settlement of Itamar, a bearded Menachem Ben Shachar teaches Bible and Mishna at a national-religious school for boys, where he encourages his pupils to get to know their texts by experiencing the land itself. He takes them out of the schoolroom to inspect an ancient cave nearby – to see if it meets the standards of burial according to *halakha* (traditional Jewish law), as described in the Mishnaic text the class studied.

“We need to kick out the Arabs,” one boy tells Erde. Another tells of picking olives from Arab trees. “They think it’s theirs,” he smiles.

Erde asks one student: “How do you think they teach about the conflict and about you in Palestinian schools?”

“What is a conflict?” he asks.

Ben-Shachar laments Israel's ostensible "loss" of Nablus. Standing on a hilltop overlooking the city, he says: “There’s no reason why we should only stand here and point, and not be inside. The students... they live so close to it, yet they can’t even enter it. It seems like it’s lost [to us]. But that’s really not the case; it can turn around in a second. In the Middle East there are many surprises, and we know this best.”

'Speak louder'

Down in the valley, in the heart of Nablus, Noor Jabour addresses her class, in the Balata refugee camp: “When you are talking about rights, you must speak louder!” she demands of the young boys.

“There are hidden things I cannot say because of the system. Politics... But the child learns it from the social environment,” she tells Erde in her dimly lit home. “There is no system that can stop me from conveying my message to the child. [But] I’m teaching idealistic concepts that are impossible for us to practice.”

Jabour instructs the children to depict the Nakba (or "catastrophe" – the Palestinians' term for the creation of the State of Israel); they choose to paint in black mostly, with some green and red.

“I feel like I’m living outside of my hometown,” one small boy says. Do you feel that this is temporary situation, he is asked by Jabour. He nods.

Some teachers have tried to find solutions to these totally separate forms of education. In Neve Shalom – a cooperative Israeli-Palestinian village located between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that promotes coexistence – children from both populations study together at a school which Erde describes as enjoying "relative freedom from the Israeli Ministry of Education."



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The filmmaker focuses on a bilingual classroom there: one Jewish-Israeli teacher, one Arab-Palestinian teacher, standing in front of the pupils.

“We speak both languages, so no child feels like a minority,” the Palestinian teacher says.

Yet the image of the peaceful, “balanced” classroom here quickly shatters: “To save the Jews from Nazi attacks, they brought them here. But that came at my grandfather’s expense,” says the Palestinian teacher, in a mix of Hebrew and Arabic.

“I disagree,” says the Israeli teacher, laughing nervously. “Israel would have come into being anyway, even if the Holocaust did not happen.”

“Assumptions, assumptions!” the Palestinian teacher says.

The children look on, unsure of what to make of the performance going on in front of them, until one child interjects: “We kids don’t know anything.”

Close to home

Closest to home for Erde is a school similar to the one in which she herself was educated. Perhaps that explains how a filmmaker can emerge from a school that has teachers who are this self-conscious, who encourage their students to question and to see the other side.

In Haifa’s prestigious, private Reali School, we meet Oren Herzman, a history teacher who throws impossible dilemmas at his 12th-grade students and, with the enthusiasm of a math teacher, urges them to come up with solutions to the conflict. “In the Middle East, it’s either you or him.” He pushes his class: Was evacuation of the Palestinians from their villages in 1948 an existential need? “The question is, do you want to establish a safe state, or do you want the enemy to live within you? This is the question of our lives.”

Herzman asks the students what they predict for the future. “It’ll get worse here, because we see that every few years the Palestinians are

taking from us another piece of land,” one teenager offers. Says another: “If there were an option for peace, it would have happened by now. If there will be peace, it will only happen after we make sacrifices.”

One student voices his fear of living in the country, of the “Arab menace”: “I can’t find my place in Israel, so I think I’ll move away.”

The teacher later says, in private, that the students live in fear: “Some of them are grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. And the atmosphere... the permanent fear for life, with the attacks – children are led to the conclusion that there will be wars forever.”

Erde joins the Reali high-schoolers on the traditional Holocaust-related trip to Poland. There, an Israeli tour guide takes the students to various sites, including extermination camps, and then poses questions afterward.

"When you educate people to learn that if you don't do as you are told, you are betraying your homeland, and if you do what is required, you are loyal to the country – this is a most dangerous point," he says. "Because loyalty doesn't raise doubts, loyalty doesn't stop to ask questions. Loyalty doesn't think. If you are in a country that asks you to kill for it, I'd allow you to pack your bags and go."

“But Israel asks people to kill, when you’re in the army,” one student wonders aloud.

His classmates grow animated: “No, that’s different, that’s defense! It's a wrong definition.”

“The moment you aren’t tolerant, or wanting to understand the other, you start building a Belzec ... and if you won’t build it, your son will,” the guide says to the students, standing outside the gates of the extermination camp.

Moved by the history they feel they are witnessing, the students reflect: “[The Holocaust] was a process of several years, that started in schools,” one says. “The [Germans] were indifferent, they didn’t realize it passes by them. Conscious or unconscious.”

“It’s all about... education,” another muses.



Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt
Haaretz Contributor

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