The pitfalls of a ‘democracy promotion’ project for women of Iraq

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Introduction

This paper examines how adult education has become one of the primary means of furthering the ideological agenda of imperialism and more specifically of the continued occupation of Iraq. One of the main vehicles employed in the project of ‘democracy promotion’ in Iraq are women’s NGOs. Amongst their central activities are different types of training. Some of this training is skills-based training while some is more ‘cognitive.’ In other words, the second type of training is designed to develop skills that will propagate certain values such as ‘team-building,’ ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘civic participation.’ All of these skills are developed in the name of ‘democracy promotion.’ In this paper, I will analyse a curriculum that is being used as a model for democracy training programs in Iraq in order to set the framework for these theoretical claims.

Theoretical concepts

In my research, two concepts have emerged recurrently that seem to be working in conflict with each other while simultaneously reinforcing one another. These two concepts are dispossession and ‘empowerment.’ Since 2003 we have consistently been hearing about both the dispossession and empowerment of Iraqis. We hear of how Iraqis have been dispossessed of their land, resources and infrastructure. We also hear of how Iraqis are being empowered through civic education projects that are teaching them how to build and live in an American-style democracy. From what I have observed in my research, the dispossession of Iraqis extends well beyond land, resources and infrastructure, and is in fact, the result of these so-called programs of ‘empowerment.’ By using a pedagogical method that prizes abstract ideas and values that have no grounding in Iraqis' material reality, the democracy training programs are dispossessing Iraqis of their ability to engage in a meaningful political, economic, and social rebuilding of their lives. This leads to the second aspect of the method which is the notion of knowledge as a commodity or object, something that the trainer possesses and that the learner needs. Without this commodity, the learner is seen as somehow deficient. I will expand these two theoretical claims by examining Foundations of Democracy, an American elementary and secondary school curriculum that is being used as a model by those involved in civic education in Iraq.

Foundations of democracy: democracy training in Northern Iraq

On my recent trip to Iraqi Kurdistan, where an American-led ‘reconstruction’ programme is well underway, I was given the curriculum, Foundations of Democracy by the Ministry of Civic Education and Human Rights. It is currently being used as a reference for democracy and civic education training in Northern Iraq. The curriculum ‘rationale,’ ‘goals’, and ‘organization’, as well as the content, exhibit a reformist approach to education that aims to reproduce the status quo by reinforcing existing oppressive power relations and disconnecting people from their social reality. This approach does not address the structural mechanisms that are the basis of social inequalities. In certain cases, such as with this curriculum, the causes of the failures of the state, although recognized by those developing the curriculum, are left out of the teaching program.
The educational program of *Foundations of Democracy* is equipped to provide temporary alleviation of inequality at best. Perhaps, more importantly, in providing this temporary relief, it does not equip students with the means to transform their social reality; in fact, social inequality is reproduced. The fundamental relations of capital are accepted as unproblematic and unchangeable. Solutions are sought in changing the behaviour of individuals and communities to adapt to existing conditions of domination rather than eliminating these conditions. Conditions of war and occupation, both constituents of imperialism, are normalised and depoliticised, as people are taught to move on with their lives.

**Curriculum rationale and organization**

The ‘Curriculum Rationale’ behind the ‘Foundations of Democracy’ is ‘to increase a person’s capacity and inclination to act knowledgeably, effectively and responsibly’ (CCE, 2001, pp.2). Later in the introduction to the curriculum, the particular method of ‘Analyzing Issues by Using Intellectual Tools’ is described. According to this method, knowledge is presented as a special object or commodity that is possessed by the teacher and that needs to be imparted on the students. In other words, as Paula Allman, a marxist feminist education theorist says, ‘we relate to knowledge as something to have, to accumulate in the first instance, rather than as something we use, test, question and produce’ (Allman, 1999, pp.55). Knowledge as a commodity is definitely a fundamental aspect of this curriculum.

Another aspect of the dominant approach used in *Foundations of Democracy* is how the relationship between students and teachers is conceived. According to the curriculum, the student needs ‘intellectual tools’ to be taught to them so that they can apply them ‘again and again to decisions made throughout one’s life’ (CCE, 2001, pp.9). This is a justification for the teachers’ existence. Further, just as teachers depend on students to provide a justification for their existence, students need teachers in order to ‘help [the] nation better realize its goals’ (CCE, 2001, pp.9). This logic stems from the idea that the teacher is aware and accepting of these goals and has a duty to impart them to the students. In other words, abstract ideas about ‘the nation’ inform how one should interact with reality.

It is useful here to turn to Paulo Freire’s conception of the educational process. According to Freire, education can be used either to domesticate people, that is, depoliticise and professionalize them, or to prepare people to liberate themselves. Further, Freire believes that if educators do not encourage people to question, challenge and transform their reality, they are simply facilitating the acceptance, adoption and reproduction of the structures of oppression (Allman, 1999, pp.91).

**Ideas over material conditions**

The above conceptualisation of the relationship between teachers and students stems from an ‘idealist’ approach to understanding the world. Allman describes the idealist approach as ‘the separation of ideas from the material world and then the designation of them as the creators or causes of real phenomena’ (Allman, 1999, pp.36). In other words, according to the logic used in *Foundations of Democracy*, the abstract, unchanging idea of the American ‘nation’ is the starting point for an understanding of the world. Conversely, Allman presents us with Marx’s dialectical materialist understanding of social reality (Allman, 1999, pp.37-40). In order to fully understand social reality it is essential to think of different aspects of reality as dialectically related or as made up of two parts that simultaneously reinforce and conflict with one another. Each part is necessary to the other’s existence because one could not exist in its current form without the other, and vice versa. The curriculum organisation explicitly states that the entire basis of the curriculum
are ‘ideas, values and principles,’ as opposed to ‘facts, dates, people, and events.’ A dialectical materialist approach would emphasize that ideas are dependent on material reality and that material reality is informed by ideas. In other words all thought is dialectically related to practice.

The second element of the curriculum organisation is that these ideas are seen as fixed, unchanging and unproblematic. They form a ‘common core of civic values’ without which democratic citizenship could not function. In order for a society to function ‘based on the ideals of justice, equality, freedom, and human rights,’ we need these concepts (CCE, 2001, pp.2). Freire points out however, that educators ‘confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo’ (Freire, 2006, pp.36); in other words it is essential to advance these concepts as neat, unchanging packages by which freedom can be maintained and protected. Any deviation, questioning or alternative formulations of these core concepts would constitute a threat to freedom.

Conclusion

As is clear from the analysis of this curriculum that is being used as a template for curriculum development in an imperialist context, adult education is used as one of the primary strategies of carrying out the imperialist agenda. Education is being used to dispossess the people of their capacity to practice politics in their everyday lives. The current dominant model of adult education not only allows for the reproduction and the reinforcement of the imperialist logic, it is actively contributing to the dispossession of people’s land and resources. If true material inequality is to be eliminated, the fundamental logic of teaching and learning in situations of imperialism has to be changed. In other words, an anti-imperialist critical/revolutionary pedagogy has to be supported where it exists and adopted and sustained where it is absent for real social transformation to occur.

This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008