An Educational Crisis in the Land of Jesus: Unprecedented Challenges Facing Catholic Schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank
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The New Evangelization presumes that Catholic schools play a valuable role in spreading the gospel and transmitting the faith. For the first time in their collective history, demographic changes have nevertheless made it difficult for Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank to do this. Using a mixed-method study with data obtained from fourteen institutions, this study determined that the mandate of these schools is affected by challenges related to their Catholic identity and financial stability. With limited resources at their disposal, administrators of these institutions are in a precarious situation. Without strong leadership and support from the international community, the future of Catholic education in the region is uncertain.

INTRODUCTION

Pope John Paul II emphatically declared, “The contemporary world urgently needs the service of educational institutions which uphold and teach that truth is that fundamental value without which freedom, justice, and human dignity are extinguished” (John Paul II 1993: n4). Pope Benedict XVI echoed this same sentiment by stating that Catholic schools are a fundamental and “essential resource for the new evangelization” (Benedict XVI 2012: n2). He additionally insisted that Catholic education must remain firmly within the reach of Catholic families, regardless of their social or economic status. Catholic education has long played a vital role in spreading the gospel and transmitting the faith in communities around the world. Although the contexts have sometimes been vastly different, these institutions have been able to survive in a variety of diverse situations. Yet, there are some locations where the challenges seem insurmountable. In East Jerusalem and the West Bank—geographic regions closely associated with the life of Jesus—Catholic education is in peril. Despite having contributed extensively to the social and religious landscape for centuries, new and unforeseen realities have put Catholic schools into a precarious position and they are facing an uncertain future.
The challenges affecting Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank today can be traced back to the second intifada, what Palestinians call the Al-Aqsa Intifada. This uprising—the result of longstanding feelings of Israeli oppression on the part of Palestinians—was triggered in September 2000 by two closely related events. Glick identified how the Arab minority in the region was emboldened toward an insurgency after “a Palestinian security officer on a joint patrol with Israeli forces turned his firearm on his Israeli counterpart and murdered him” (Glick 2005: 32). Sharon recognized that the excuse for an insurgency came after he paid a formal visit to the Temple Mount as part of his campaign for Prime Minister on the following day (Sharon and Chanoff 2001: 6). As he recalled in his memoirs, Sharon declared that Israelis have an eternal right to visit the locale, which is near the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, due to its intimate connection with the ancient Jewish temple. With these two provocative events occurring within days of each other, Palestinians were provoked to outrage, and the intifada began almost immediately.

A number of major clashes took place between Israeli soldiers and Islamic radicals from East Jerusalem and the West Bank in the following weeks. By early October 2000, many Palestinians had resorted to aggressive anti-Israeli maneuvers, such as rock throwing and firebombing (McNally 2002). In response, the Israelis used tear-gas and rubber bullets against the Palestinians. A notable flashpoint occurred on October 12, 2000, when Palestinian authorities detained two Israeli reservists for passing their checkpoint into Ramallah. Hearing that Palestinians were holding two soldiers captive, an Arab mob gathered outside the police station. A BBC report claimed the group was so enraged by “the funerals of about 100 Arabs, nearly two dozen of them children” occurring over the previous two-week period that they stormed the building—the soldiers were lynched almost immediately (Asser 2000). The Israelis naturally responded to this incident swiftly, and the conflict was further enflamed.

Although these tragic events had diverse implications, the period between 2002 and 2005 revealed the concern that many academics had about how the intifada would negatively affect education in the Palestinian regions. Zureik published an article in the CAUT Bulletin entitled “Palestinian Education in Disarray” that highlighted how more than half the Palestinian population was under the age of 15 years (Zureik 2002). He conjectured that the harsh military presence in East Jerusalem and the West Bank would have terrible consequences on Palestinian education. The Arab schools simply could not operate normally, because, as he re-
revealed with one stark example, “navigating through the maze of checkpoints and road closures, a mere distance of 20–30 km, can take an hour or more in so-called normal times” (Zureik 2002: 3). The intifada did indeed affect Palestinian education adversely, and despite a tense peace that has prevailed in recent years, mutual hostilities and an Israeli military presence linger in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. These continue to impede the progress of Palestinian education in the region—affecting in a particular way those schools that are Catholic.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Seeking to understand the exact challenges that face Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, a major research study was undertaken to explore the lingering repercussions of the second intifada. Although the academic institutions run by the Catholic Church have a tremendous legacy—many having served the region for hundreds of years—they are not widely known outside of the Middle East. With other political and social issues taking center stage, it is understandable that Catholic education has been a less significant concern. For academics connected to the Catholic Church, this is nevertheless an unfortunate oversight.

Both the Islamic and Christian communities in East Jerusalem and the West Bank almost universally recognize that Catholic schools have had a positive influence in the region for centuries. Without the presence of these institutions, the region would neither be as dynamic nor as vibrant as it is today. From an ecclesiological perspective, the loss of Catholic schools would mean that a fundamental part of the Church’s mission of evangelization would disappear completely in the very land where Jesus walked.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES

Although the Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have faced major challenges over the centuries, none, it seems, is as daunting as the ones that exist today. Within the last fifteen years, Catholic schools in the West Bank have started to cater almost entirely to Islamic students. Massive emigration from the region means that the “Christians [now] compose roughly [only] 2% of the population” (IMEU 2012: ¶4). At the same time, due to the tense situation that exists between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Catholic schools in East Jerusalem cater almost completely to Arab students—whom Israeli authorities generally see as “immigrants who live in their homes at the beneficence of the authorities and not by right” (B’Tselem 2013: ¶5). These conditions have affected the nature of Catholic education dramatically.
An extensive research study into the challenges that these schools face produced two conclusions. First, due to rapidly shifting demographics, the Catholic identities of these institutions have eroded almost to the point of total collapse. Second, the same shifts in student demographics have put the solvency of most of these Catholic schools into question.

THE SITUATION TODAY

In the West Bank and East Jerusalem today, Catholic schools often fall into one of three categories. Schools owned and operated by the Franciscans are the oldest and most influential academic institutions in the region. These trace their lineage to those friars who first came to Jerusalem in 1217 and then to Bethlehem in 1309 (Maier 1998: 21). Schools owned and operated by other religious communities—such as the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of St. Joseph, or the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary—do not have the same historical legacies. Yet, they are typically large and well-established institutions in the region. The schools owned and operated by the Latin Patriarchate, which is essentially the local archdiocese, remain the smallest and most underfunded of the Catholic schools in the region. These are usually attached to a Catholic church and subsist almost entirely on student tuition and parish contributions. Although a central office officially oversees the general operations of all Latin Patriarchate schools, these are autonomous institutions that largely operate independently of each other.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The two unique challenges facing Catholic schools in the East Jerusalem and West Bank were identified from a mixed-method study. In particular, a large cross-section of fourteen institutions from Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Jericho, Beit Sahour, and Taybeh was first selected. Together these schools represent about 74 percent of all the Catholic schools in the region. These institutions include approximately 60 percent of the schools operated by Franciscans, 75 percent of those operated by the Latin Patriarchate, and 83 percent of the schools operated by other religious communities. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews (McMillan 2008: 281) with each administrator were undertaken, as well as quantitative survey data relating to school composition. The administrators demographically comprised a group of eleven men and three women; their ages ranged from 35 years to 75 years. This included five school leaders who were priests, brothers, or nuns, and nine who were lay administrators. The school leaders had various levels of formal training, yet only three completed any graduate degrees in educational administration.
Each of the school leaders was asked four questions with follow-up prompts that tangentially addressed the relationship between Israel and Palestine, national security concerns, local administrative challenges, and perceptions relating to the future of Catholic education in the entire region. Although the questions set the tone for the meetings, the interviews were allowed to move in any direction based on each school leader’s thoughts or desires. At the conclusion of the interviews, the transcripts were first analyzed to reveal general themes. Once the qualitative interview data were obtained, descriptive analysis of the transcripts for both frequency of and emphasis on specific terms and ideas allowed for the isolation of major challenges. Based on the prominence of certain perceived ideas in these transcripts, ten initial challenges were identified.

Once these varieties of challenges were identified at each school, they were compared against the quantitative survey data, the transcripts with teachers and staff members, as well as the extensive field notes of operational performance. By looking for confirmation through redundancy, the most significant challenges were identified for every school. Administrators were then asked by e-mail whether they approved of the assessment and considered it reflective of their particular context. From its inception, this study involved a mixed-methods approach insofar as various configurations of qualitative and quantitative strategies were used. By identifying general themes and then each of their frequencies of appearance, it was determined that the fourteen leaders saw the preservation of Catholic identity and the financial solubility of their institutions as two of their major institutional challenges.

**CATHOLIC IDENTITY**

Nearly all of the administrators spoke about how Catholic education in the region is in peril due to a perceived loss of Catholic identity. The demographics of staff and students in most Catholic schools have dramatically changed in recent years, and administrators are generally trying to take steps to maintain the specifically Catholic ethos. One school leader at a West Bank school admitted, “We have only 25% [students] that are Christians. Most of our teachers are Muslims. Nobody remembers when there were a lot of [religious] brothers. You just can’t make it a Catholic school as it once was—those days are gone.” The demographic change in the student body is in large measure a reflection of the demographics of the region, where the Christian population is in decline. More than 35 percent of the Christian population in the West Bank, for example, has emigrated since 1967 (CNEWA 2002).
This school leader saw that, although the school has mandatory chapel-time for all grades and a variety of Christian images visible throughout the school, nobody pays much attention to them. The remaining Christian quarter of the student population is broken down into Latin Catholic, Eastern Catholic, and Greek Orthodox. Hence, traditional Latin Catholic devotions, such as the rosary or adoration, are without meaning even to most of the Christian students. The same administrator recognized that it was difficult to figure out how to augment the Catholic identity of the school and welcomed any local or international advice. Without articulating it directly, there was clear recognition that the loss of such an identity would be detrimental to the Church’s mission of evangelization in the region.

Another administrator from a West Bank school—a member of a religious congregation of sisters—was asked how she was currently ensuring that the school would maintain a Catholic identity. Her simple response was that she was praying for vocations, so that someone would replace the sisters at the school. If the school was going to continue as a Catholic institution, she said, then it was up to God alone to send nuns to the convent to be their replacement. She wanted the identity of the school to remain firmly Catholic, but her tactics consisted of ensuring that she wore her religious habit daily and praying for new vocations. When the sister was asked what would happen to the Catholic identity of the school if something were to prevent her from acting as the school leader, her response was sobering. She claimed that if she suddenly found herself unable to work, the school would close. Although the sisters had administered the school for decades, neither she nor her religious order had anticipated that they might one day be left with few Christian students and without sisters.

In many schools, the diminishing size of the religious congregations operating the institution is distressing. However, this sentiment is not universal. In some schools, the Catholic identity is perceived as strong, because there are still large numbers of priests and brothers or sisters working in the schools. Although in these institutions few seemed concerned that the Catholic identity of their schools could change dramatically, the recent experiences of many of the other Catholic schools in the region suggested that they likely will. To this end, administrators of Catholic schools in the region should reflect on how they will maintain their missions and identities once the Christian populations drop in numbers, and the non-Catholic teaching staff grows. In this period of great demographic change, ongoing evaluation of educational mandates might allow administrators to determine what they could offer to distinguish themselves from non-Catholic schools.

Discussions with teachers and staff members about the Catholic identity of the schools were often passionate. Depending on the individuals
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and their respective religious backgrounds, sentiments ranged from a belief that the school is doing more than enough to foster a Catholic identity to the opinion of one staff member who felt that the school leader had not even considered the issue. It was apparent that Christian teachers and staff members in many schools increasingly feel like a minority at an institution that becomes less visibly Christian every day. In addition, a substantial number of the Christian teachers are starting to look at their Islamic co-workers with suspicion and contempt. One teacher at a West Bank school, who had self-identified as a Christian, stated in a hushed voice,

The Muslim teachers here are slowly taking power away from the Christians. The former principal never let them pray—he said this is not a mosque and they are paid to teach. Now they gather on a regular basis in the classroom to pray. It’s now impossible to stop them; there would be a revolt.

The Christian teachers generally have mixed feelings about the increasing numbers of Muslim teachers. In most schools, the two groups seem to get along well. However, private conversations with staff members revealed deep, underlying tensions.

For the most part, Islamic teachers are also aware that the Muslim population is growing both among staff and in the student body. Although they seem to have no intention to make the school Islamic, they also seem to have very little interest in keeping it overtly Catholic. Indeed, a Muslim teacher from an East Jerusalem school stated, “Why do we care if it is Christian or government run? For us, we just want a job. They can make it Christian, but none of the Muslims care that much—as long as we’re not expected to be Christian or agree with their religion, they can do whatever they want.”

The reality seems to be that Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are located in areas where Christians are becoming the minority, if they are not already. Although all administrators claimed that they would very much like to have increased numbers of Christian teachers and students, the demographic shift has now made this impossible.

FINANCIAL STABILITY

In addition to concerns about Catholic identity, the most common challenge facing administrators seems to be school finances. Without money, a school is quite limited in what it can do. In fact, an administrator from an East Jerusalem school suggested that, although it is not ideal that money is the primary administrative challenge, no other task is more important.

Most administrators consider issues related to finances and the financial stability of their schools to be their biggest challenge. Walking
through the halls of one large West Bank school, the school leader pointed out problem after problem with the physical plant. The desks were old, the windows cracked, the classrooms unpainted, the walls were in disrepair, and the flooring was unpolished. He commented, “So much to do; it is just sad. My students should come and be proud of their school, but we have no money. What do we fix first isn’t a question to worry about. We can’t afford to fix anything.”

Catholic schools in the West Bank generally survive entirely on tuition and fundraising efforts. Unlike the government schools run by the Palestinian authority, they have little excess capital for physical repairs, although they are desperately needed.

Additionally, unlike some of the newer schools in the West Bank that were built by international organizations supporting the Palestinian cause, very few international organizations regularly contribute to the Catholic schools in the region. If any foreign donations are made in support of Catholic education in the region, they are typically given to one school or another, because the administrator has fostered a special, particular connection with the donor. This has led to a few schools with savvy school leaders doing very well when it comes to fundraising for capital repairs.

School leaders typically do not have the skill or the time to do such work, however. The administrator of a West Bank school claimed that he became a principal to lead schools, yet he now finds himself performing the duties of the chief fundraiser. Because he neither likes this task nor sees himself as particularly good at it, he believes that his focus on these extra duties is negatively affecting the school.

He is not alone, of course. Most of the school leaders entered the realm of education because they wanted to teach; those who accepted the role of school leader did so because they believed that they had skills to offer the school community. They never expected to spend hours every week sending e-mails to Europe and North America requesting money for new desks or filling out grant applications to get the roof fixed. The administrator of an East Jerusalem school made the following astute comment: “We talk with pity about poor baby Jesus who was born in a cave. At least there his family had no worry that the roof would come down on them. It was much more solid and safe than this old building.”

The physical plants of the schools in East Jerusalem are typically much better, since they receive some funding from the Israeli government, but when compared to Jewish schools, they evidence a certain tiredness and wear.

Yet the physical plant is only one issue related to the lack of financial resources. It also directly affects students’ academic development. The school leader of one West Bank school recognized that, although young
teachers come out of university prepared to use computers and other multimedia systems, they are never given the chance. In his particular school, two televisions mark the extent of the multimedia equipment. A few of the schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank had overhead projectors available in the classrooms, but these were an obvious exception. Instead, nearly every school has an old blackboard; the teachers typically employ various colors of chalk. Many of the school leaders recognized that whiteboards with erasable markers would be much nicer and easier to use, but those cost money.

The lack of financial resources, even from foreign benefactors, means that many of the elements of school life that are normal in North American institutions simply do not exist in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Textbooks are a luxury for many schools, photocopying for classroom use is extremely rare, and students as well as teachers guard their pens and pencils like priceless treasures. In addition to the financial effect on the classrooms, such constraints also impact many other programs in the school. Money cannot, and typically is not, spent on expensive extracurricular programs such as art or music. The few sports teams that do exist rely on old equipment, and field trips are reserved for students in the higher grades. The administrator of a West Bank school pointed out that bus rental for forty students for a single day can cost all of one student’s yearly tuition. This same administrator additionally suggested that it is almost unjustifiable to spend one-fortieth of the school budget on transportation to an event that is not necessary. Because of this, field trips, particularly at schools in the West Bank, are exceptionally rare.

The financial difficulties that face many schools also have a major impact on the teachers. Every administrator indicated that teaching is considered a transitional profession due to low teacher salaries. During an interview with a West Bank administrator, the question arose about what happens if the school cannot keep itself financially stable. The response was unambiguous. It was stated that teachers are paid on rotating schedules until either the tuition is paid or grants are obtained. However, a debt at the end of an academic year naturally means increased class sizes in the following year. The school leader of an East Jerusalem school highlighted this as a normative procedure by explaining that only 75 percent of students pay their tuition. To remedy this, he fills the classes up to 150 percent to break even.

Although the teachers generally recognize that their schools’ financial struggles create a variety of problems, they are typically most concerned with how the lack of money affects them in the classroom. Many expressed great frustrations with outdated resources and increased headcount, which, they claimed, make teaching a nearly impossible endeavor.
One teacher at an East Jerusalem school spoke with frustration about how, in his biology class, he has to draw formulae in chalk on the board in every class. Although technology would help him, there is no projector to use, and the school has no computers. This particular teacher was trained at Bethlehem University to use many of the most modern pedagogical tools.

Many teachers in the government schools in both East Jerusalem and the West Bank have access to these materials, yet the Catholic schools, which do not receive the same government funding, are unable to purchase such contemporary tools. As a result, as another teacher from the same school noted, although the public documents describe the school as top-rated, the teaching tools are limited to a 1970s standard.

A new teacher from a West Bank school recognized that the class sizes are simply unmanageable for many of the new teachers. This is a direct result of issues related to tuition collection. He claimed, “The students come from poor families. They cannot pay tuition. They say they can at the start, but always something happens. They [the school administrators] know this here and make the classes very big. It is just not possible to teach so many students.”

Especially in the West Bank, many of the families are large and regular employment is rare. Catholic parents in the West Bank are often forced to choose between sending their children to the government schools (Islamic by default), or to claim that they could pay tuition at a Catholic school when they cannot. Although some Islamic families default on the tuition payments, the vast majority of tuition defaults are from Catholic families. A teacher from the same school pointed out that Christian families are the poorest and often do not pay their fees.

A teacher at another West Bank school claimed very discreetly that the principal sometimes did not take Christian students if they could not pay. Instead, he maintained a policy that only admitted those students who could pay tuition. As a result of this policy, many of the poor Christian students were forced to attend public schools instead of the local Catholic school.

Although no Catholic school leader would admit it publicly, the interviews revealed that more than half would take Islamic students who could pay the tuition over Christian students who could not. Although it seemed to be a justifiable choice in the view of many of the Islamic teachers, many of the Christian teachers considered this a significant betrayal of the school’s identity.

One particular teacher expressed in hushed tones that it was shocking to imagine that Christian students would be sent away from Catholic schools in order to fill the spots with Muslim students. Such sentiments, which are present among many of the Christian staff, are always articu-
lated quietly. Nobody would publicly claim that this is an injustice to the Christians, but these sentiments are prominent. Christians on staff want to serve Christian students. It is a source of frustration to see them turned away due to financial limitations.

**SUMMARY**

The challenge of maintaining a Catholic identity in schools despite changing demographics is daunting. Nearly half the school leaders who said that they were working to maintain the Catholic identities of their schools seemed willing to try any approach but had no real methodology in place.

With thousands of Christians having left the region since the first intifada, it is not only difficult to fill the desks with Catholic students, but it is also hard to find Christian teachers. The total West Bank population of 3.9 million includes only about 50,000 Christians (Reuters UK, 2009) scattered throughout the region. Although the Muslims who work and study in these institutions are generally described as respectful to the Catholic identity, they are often seen as not willing to do more than necessary to build it up. Because they are, in fact, the religious majority in the region, no motivation drives them to cooperate with administrators who seek to respond to the perceived loss of Catholic identity.

In addition to the challenge of Catholic identity, financial stability poses a great challenge for Catholic school leaders in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Because Catholic schools do not receive the same funding as government-run schools, and the families of Christian students often default on tuition payments, school leaders must spend large amounts of their time trying to raise money. The lack of financial stability means that the majority of Catholic schools in the region are in various states of disrepair. The schools are additionally unable to adapt to changing pedagogies or adopt modern technologies due to prohibitive costs. This means that teachers suffer with low wages, obsolete teaching materials, and large class sizes.

School leaders are working with dedication to put the schools on a firm financial footing, since everything depends on raising the appropriate funds. The majority of school leaders made it clear that a dramatic and necessary change in circumstances is needed if Catholic schools in the region are to survive.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Concerns about Catholic identity and financial stability are not limited to schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. In many places across the world, religious congregations, once a ubiquitous aspect of Catholic education, are dwindling in membership and influence. These groups of men
and women can no longer be counted on to provide the framework around which Catholic schools are structured. Administrators of these institutions must establish new ways to maintain the identities of their schools that do not rely exclusively on the presence of a religious congregation. These same school leaders might also consider how the specifically Catholic identities of their schools could be substantially changed with subtle variations in staff and student composition. They might thus look to East Jerusalem and the West Bank to see how the acceptance of large percentages of non-Catholic staff and students—often done because of financial need—has been shown to affect the mission and identity of Catholic institutions over the long-term.

It is clear that Catholic school leaders around the world often face similar challenges relating to Catholic identity and financial stability, which undoubtedly affects how well the Church can engage in the new evangelization. The ways that Catholic schools in East Jerusalem and the West Bank respond to these challenges are important, because the responses themselves will affect not only the local institutions but the future of Catholicism in the land of Jesus.

Notes

1. Descriptive analysis is often embraced within the fields of education and the social sciences (Johnson 2004, Goodlad 2004, Hallinger and Heck 2010), because it offers an overview of the status quo at the time of investigation.

2. In his book on educational research, Creswell wrote that mixed-method designs are helpful insofar as they might be nuanced by manipulating the timing, weight, mixing, and theorizing of either the quantitative or qualitative strategies (Creswell 2008: 208).

References


