

Hatred Begins in the Classroom

For years, the Palestinian Authority has been accused of inciting violence by promoting the delegitimization of Israel in its education system. According to both Israeli and third-party observers, the PA was ingraining future generations with a worldview that essentially prevented any long-term commitment to peace.

So it was no surprise that a State Department-funded study, called *Victims of Our Own Narratives? Portrayal of the "Other" in Israeli and Palestinian School Books*, published last February, sparked a firestorm that leapt from the otherwise parochial world of education policy straight into the headlines of newspapers around the world.

The study, initiated by the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land and authored by professors Sami Adwan of Bethlehem University and Daniel Bar-Tal from Tel Aviv University, and overseen by Bruce Wexler of Yale, sought to scientifically evaluate how Israelis and Palestinians are educating their children in regard to the other side of the conflict.

What was surprising, however, were the report's findings. The study's most basic conclusion is that Israelis and Palestinians are equally guilty of educating their children with histories, facts, and ideas that perpetuate conflict. Almost every major news outlet zeroed in on the report's finding of mutual culpability, producing headlines like the AP's "Textbook study faults Israelis and Palestinians."

However, something about the study doesn't ring true. As a product of Israeli schools, I can attest that while Israel's public education system has its share of problems, ignorance or hatred of "the other side" is not one of them. Faced with a purportedly objective study that completely contradicted my own experience with the Israel's education system, I felt compelled to examine the report in depth.

The report is not only flawed, but also dishonest. It systematically exaggerates the faults in Israeli textbooks and downplays those found in the Palestinians'. Its methodology tends to distort the raw data rather than analyze it, usually to the detriment of the Israeli education system. Put simply, it makes every possible effort to create the impression that Israeli and Palestinian attitudes toward each other are the same, even when this is demonstrably untrue—according to the study's own research data.

The report makes a point of analyzing ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, school texts, which it unsurprisingly finds are more problematic than their secular counterparts. The study skews the data by presenting the Haredi system, which educates no more than

a quarter of Israeli Jewish students, as essentially equal in scope to the mainstream Israeli and Palestinian systems in its charts and discussions. On the other hand, the report completely ignores the Hamas-run school system in Gaza. Thus, the report gives Israel's Jewish religious extreme equal standing with the secular majority, while the much more violent Palestinian religious extreme's school system is overlooked.

The report finds that 51% of Israeli textbooks portray the "other" positively or neutrally, but only 16% of Palestinian texts do. The report's analysis of characterizations of specific acts reveals similar results: cases from Israeli texts were 49% positive/51% negative, while Palestinian ones were 12% positive/87% negative. The examples cited by the authors reveal that the actual situation is even more uneven. While Israeli texts offer multiple positive depictions of Palestinians, such as moderate Arabs who defended Jews during the 1929 massacre of Hebron's Jews, the only instance of a positive depiction of Jews from a Palestinian text that the authors could cite was religious praise of Abraham and Moses.

When one examines the study in full, one almost gets the feeling that the authors didn't read their own report. In the face of overwhelming data, the report reaches the baffling conclusion that both sides embrace "unilateral and exclusive national narratives" and that "both Israeli and Palestinian school books forcefully and consistently establish distinct unilateral and opposing narratives." Contradicted by the report's own data, these conclusions are simply unsupported.