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Domination, Privilege and Fear

Uncovering a hidden curriculum of oppression in the Syrians' narratives on school

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Abstract

Syria is going through a full-fledged conflict with unfathomable educational crisis. With the tremendous challenges in the educational sector in conflict situations, opportunities arise simultaneously for positive educational change. The purpose of this study was twofold: to contribute to informed changes in the educational system for Syrians through better understanding of education in the past, and to join the Global Development conversation on the need to look beyond numbers and schools walls when implementing new educational interventions. For this purpose, I used narrative inquiry and interviewed 16 Syrian former students on their educational experiences in the past. Given that Syria has lived under authoritarianism, I chose to look at the nature of oppression through analyzing the unacknowledged values and attitudes known as the hidden curriculum. I showed that the oppression in schools was full of contradictions; everyone was oppressed differently. In order to advance anti-oppressive educational initiatives, I argued, using Freire's concept of the oppressor/oppressed contradiction that everyone's oppression needs to be acknowledged before starting further changes. Finally, I brought in a few pivotal points for educators to reflect on, such as creating a hopeful space with students built on respect and mutuality in place of fear and mistrust.

Keywords: oppression; hidden curriculum; Syria; Syrian educational system.

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When love, hope and happiness are epitomized, then I am thinking of Murhaf.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

CET	Critical Educational Theorists
EfA	Education for All
HC	Hidden Curriculum
HCE	Hidden Curriculum Element
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoE	Syrian Ministry of Education
RYU	Revolutionary Youth Union
RQ	Research Question
SP	Syrian Pound
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
The Party	The Socialist Arab Baath Party
The Pioneers	The Baath Vanguard Organization

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And what is it but fragments of your own self you would discard that you may become free?
If it is an unjust law you would abolish, that law was written with your own hand upon your own forehead.
You cannot erase it by burning your law books nor by washing the foreheads of your judges, though you pour the sea upon them.
And if it is a despot you would dethrone, see first that his throne erected within you is destroyed.

—Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.

—Nitzsche

1 Introduction

Education has a prominent role in the Global Development agenda; a role emphasized in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework and the Education for All (EfA) movement[1]. While these global goals, as a policy tool, were accredited for transforming educational outcomes to tangible and measurable changes they were subject to sharp criticism (UN 2012; Fukuda-Parr 2013); mainly, for the inherent reductionism in the way these numeric goals were set and came to be used. *Basic education* was reduced to *primary schooling*; *learning* to *access* and *school achievement*; and *education as a means* for human development to an *end* in itself (Harber 2009:2; Unterhalter 2013; Sanborn & Thyne 2014:774). Coupled with an abstraction out of contextual specificities, the reductionist goals gave no idea on *who* learned *what* and by *whom* (Unterhalter 2013). Against this trend of quantifying progress and fashioning globally-transferred 'good practice', a number of critical commentaries point out that measuring educational outcomes must expand beyond numeric indicators and a greater emphasis should be put on learning, equities and contextual conditions (Crossley 2010).

Expanding the Global Development discussion on education to consider its role as a process that shapes and is shaped by a larger societal context, i.e. challenging its view as a neutral and technical process of information dissemination, has already started in 1990 (Inter-Agency Commission 1990), was reemphasized in 2000 (Bush & Saltarelli 2000), and as the decade progressed the lack of acknowledgement of the salience of contextual complexities among other factors came to be stressed (UNESCO 2010; UNESCO 2011; Unterhalter 2013)[2].

The discussion gave special attention to education in conflict-affected countries and in governments that overtly uses education as a tool for ideological indoctrination (Vaux 2003), e.g. authoritarian regimes.

[1] MDG 2 is 'Achieve Universal Primary Education' set the target to 'Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'. Although achieved slight improvements in numeric indicators since 2000, the MDG 2 was not met by 2015 (UN 2015). In 1990, UN bodies collaborated with 15 governments and 150 INGOs and agreed on a vision for basic learning needs under the EfA movement which originally focused on broader goals than MDG 2. In 2000, the EfA was reviewed in Dakar and 164 governments pledged to meet six education goals by 2015 (UNESCO 2010).

[2] Unfortunately, the discussion has not yet materialized into substantial changes, however in the post-2015 agenda there is an increased attention to expanding the quantitative measure beyond access, enrollment and literacy. In 2013, UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution set up and initiative called Learning Metric Task Force that aims to 'catalyze a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access plus learning'. The outcomes of this Task Force are meant to inform the discussion on the post-2015 development agenda (Learning Metrics Task Force 2013).

These two cases are particularly problematic because 'education is not just a means of acquiring knowledge, but also a vehicle for moral and ideological training available to any social organization' as emphasized by Koichiro Matsuura, the former Director-General of UNESCO (in Cairns et al. 2001:90). Put differently, the attitudes flourishing outside the school walls (the macro) are inevitably brought into classroom (the micro) and vice versa (Bush & Saltarelli 2000:v). The fact that students learn a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that are not officially acknowledged, in addition to a formal curriculum, raises the question of what students learn in a context of hostilities and violence or under a government that represses human rights and discourages democratic values.

Syria is a country that has lived under authoritarianism for half a century and is going through a brutal conflict, where very little is known about its pre-conflict educational system[3]. Since the outbreak of the popular uprising against tyranny and oppression in 2011, Syria has been grappled by an outright conflict, with no end in sight that has resulted in displacing almost half the population. Seeing the conflict as an opportunity to bring about changes in the educational system, a comprehensive understanding of the pre-conflict education is vital to inform such changes (Nicolai 2009; Smith 2010).

In Syria, there is a scarcity of sociological studies (Salamandra 2004:7). Specifically, the period between early 1980s and 2000s is characterized by the dominant narrative of the regime against an absolute silence enforced on the people (al-Haj Saleh 2010)[4]. As for the pre-2011 education, qualitative aspects of the Syrian educational system are largely under-researched and there is little evidence on teachers' practices and what kind of learning processes existed within the classroom (Hijazi et al. 2010; Heinrich 2011:7; Rajab 2013:28)[5].

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[3] While education includes and moves beyond schools, I will follow the developmental reductionist discourse in this thesis and reduce the meaning of education to schools only. Hence, education and schools are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

[4] As al-Haj Saleh (2010:8) put it 'Having troubles with the Syrian security intelligence is not the most difficult thing when one wants to write about Syria, but rather is the lack of written accounts by Syrian writers on Syrian affairs. The record is almost empty regarding the years [under Hafez al-Assad's rule]. Except for the official narrative, alternatives are hardly found. The opposition was crushed /.../ [and their] narratives were concealed'

[5] Although the education in Syria was studied in a body of literature, these works do not include a qualitative assessment of teaching practices or of students or teachers perceptions and attitudes towards their schooling experience. Most studies are rather concerned with either conducting content analysis of school textbooks or with the larger sociopolitical impact of education in Syria like, for example, examining aspects of higher education and links to market and economy. Previous studies on Syrian school books have analyzed the following key topics: Sex division of labor (Alrabaa 1985); Arab-Israeli conflict, Jews and Zionism (Wurmser 2000; Groiss & Manor 2001; Rosell 2014); Religious education (Landis 2003; Doumato & Starrett 2007; Cardinal 2009); Nationalism (Bolliger 2011); and Critical thinking (Heinrich 2011).

Today, in response to the unfathomable[6] educational crisis, a multitude of governments, donor agencies and INGOs have stepped up to provide educational programing. Using the same reductionist developmental discourse on education, a prevalent tendency in the INGOs working on education for Syrian refugees is to *praise* the educational system in Syria pre-2011 for *almost achieving a universal enrollment rate* (see Watkins & Zyck 2014:3; Save the Children & UNICEF 2015:2; Save the Children 2015b). The problem is not with citing this information, but with the fact that the (*de*)contextualization stops there. This *praise* can be misleading as it could give the impression that new educational interventions should 'replicate' the schools back in Syria to assist the student to restore 'a sense of normality' (see Save the Children 2014:24). This is problematic because during- and post-conflict education tends to perpetuate pre-conflict structures unless addressed adequately (Vaux 2003). In other words, oppression usually mutates into unprecedented manifestation in new epochs (Kincheloe 2008:72).

Before the war started, education in Syria was inevitably characterized by the oppression in society. There was a clear political agenda indoctrinating a dominant ideology and discriminatory practices, but there were also multiple hidden ones inside the classrooms. The discussion above begs several questions: if the government was oppressing dissident voices, how did this oppression play out in schools? What values and attitudes were promoted in schools as recounted by dissident Syrians? Do Syrians want to perpetuate the educational experiences that they lived in Syria prior to 2011? If not, what else can be done?

1.1 Purpose and RQs

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, to contribute to the discussion on the need to contextualize and evaluate an educational system beyond numbers and school walls. Second, to inform transformational, anti-oppressive educational changes for Syrians in the future. For better informed educational changes, I look into the dynamics of oppression and how they played out in schools in the past. Using narrative inquiry, I interviewed 16 Syrian former students who have experienced the

[6] In Syria, one in every four schools is destroyed and 2.6 million children are out of school (UNICEF 2015). As for refugees in neighboring countries, children make up half the refugee population amounting to two millions (Save the Children 2015a). In Turkey alone, an estimated 70% of school-aged refugee children are not accessing education (3RP 2015b). As of March 2015, around 752,000 school-age Syrian refugees do not have access to education which is 57% of the total of some 1,328,000 school-age children in the region (3RP 2015a).

oppression in Syria at its ‘darkest days’[7] in the 1980s and 1990s, challenged the oppression and demanded social change when they sided with the uprising in 2011. All the participants were forcibly displaced to Gaziantep, Turkey where the interviews took place. In order to understand the nature of oppression, I seek to explore classroom dynamics, values and attitudes known as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (HC) as reconstructed in the narratives of Syrian students.

The research questions (RQs) that guide this research are:

1. How can an uncovered hidden curriculum help us understand the nature of oppression in Syrian schools in the past?

2. How can this understanding inform anti-oppressive education for Syrians in the future?

And an operational sub-question:

- What hidden curriculum elements underpin the Syrian students’ narratives of school?

1.2 Outline

In chapter two, I present contextual insights on Syria and its educational system since 1963. I then move to outline and explain my methodological choices in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter I present the theoretical and conceptual framework employed to interpret the data. The analysis and discussion of the findings are presented in the fifth chapter. Finally, I conclude with summary and a remark for future reflection and action in chapter six.

2 Setting the scene: overview of Syria and its educational system

In 2000, soon after his release of 18 years in a solitary confinement, the Syrian political dissident Riad al-Turk urged that Syria can no longer remain the ‘Kingdom of Silence’ (Al-Turk 2002). He wrote 'fear is *still* defining the relationship between the people and the state'. To put this into perspective, I will escort you through a brief historical overview of the Syrian context.

[7] See (Abraham 2007)

2.1 The Kingdom of Silence: Syria 1963 - 2011

In 1963, the Arab Socialist Baath[8] Party (hereinafter The Party) seized power through a military coup, officially ascribed as '8th of March Revolution[9]', and marked the birth of an authoritarian regime (Hinnebusch 1991:29; Sottimano 2009:8). Pan-Arab nationalism, Arab unity and socialism constitute the ideological pillars of The Party (Antoun & Quataert 1991). The rise of the socialist Baathist ideology in the late 1950s cannot be understood without considering the class structure in the old regime[10] as a backdrop; mainly, the lord-peasant cleavage in a highly inegalitarian agrarian society and a great cultural gap separating the peasants from an urban-based elite. Of particular nature was the grievance shared by mountain peasantry minority, notably Alawites[11], against the urban and rural elite, primarily Sunni bourgeoisie and landowners. Alawites in the mountainous areas felt doubly alienated, both on class and sectarian grounds (Hinnebusch 1991:29–33).

Central to The Party's modernization project was portraying its leaders as pioneers of the peasants and workers mobilization against the backward mentalities represented in imperialist, bourgeoisie and feudal classes (Hinnebusch 2009:4). Having taken full charge of the economy, the Baathist state became the only agent of a development project relying on a network of 'popular organizations'[12] as a mechanism for *controlled* mobilization (Sottimano 2009:14). The outcomes of this transformative project, or the 'revolution from above'[13], brought revolutionary changes to the rural areas in that it widened upward social mobility through enormous increase in the size and role of the state (Hinnebusch 1991:39). However, political democracy was demolished at the expense of this wider 'social democracy' (al-Haj Saleh 2009). Class inequalities were replaced by unequal access to the state paving the way for a 'Leninist party-state' model (Hinnebusch 1991:33).

By 1970, the Baathist state-building project was under discussion. In an attempt to rectify The Party's policies, Hafez al-Assad seized power through a bloodless military coup. He remained in power until his

[8] The Arabic word Baath means 'renaissance'.
[9] 8th of March is a public holiday in Syria where festivals and rallies are held every year to celebrate the 'revolution of workers and peasants'.
[10] Before The Party takeover in 1963 and since independence of the French mandate in 1946, Syria enjoyed a relatively democratic parliamentary system characterized by occasional military coup d'états. However, the political power was heavily centered in the hands of urban elites, mainly Sunnis and to a lesser extent Christians (al-Haj Saleh 2009)
[11] Alawites refer to a religious offshoot group of Shia Islam (al-Haj Saleh 2009)
[12] The popular organizations are: Workers Union, Peasants Union, General Women Union, Teachers Syndicate, Revolutionary Youth Union and Baath Pioneers Organization. For more details on the last two, see Section 2.3
[13] As coined by Hinnebusch (2004).

death in 2000[14]. Under Assad, the state was transformed from an instrument for social change to a machinery of power (Hinnebusch 1991:39). State institutions were instrumentalized to organize public space, including using public spaces for pro-government rallies, schools for patriotic education, cooperatives to organize peasants and workers (Sottimano 2009:9). Assad relied on three pillars to strengthen his rule: the military, The Party and the heads of the security forces who, like Assad, mostly belong to the Alawite minority sect (Wedeen 1999:179). The fact that Assad and his closest supporters, including occupants of highest positions in the security and military apparatuses, are Alawites has consequences on how the Alawite sect is perceived by other Syrians.

The authoritarian[15] regime succeeded in establishing a tyranny over Syria and was distinguished in the region for its brutality and indiscriminate violence (Kienle 1996:114). Wedeen (1999:27; 2013:849) argues that Assad's *cult* is akin to Stalin's[16]. For much of Hafez al-Assad's rule his picture was ubiquitous; in newspapers, television, public buildings and during orchestrated spectacles. The cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior (Wedeen 2002:723).

In 1997, Human Rights Watch (1996:300) estimated that at least 2,700 political prisoners were incarcerated in Syrian jails. Further, the report underlined the tight control of the state in which political dissidence was criminalized and the rule of law was supplanted due to the enforcement of state of emergency. This was the legacy[17] that Bashar al-Assad inherited from his father in 2000 after the later's death - when Riyad al-Turk wrote that Syria cannot be the Kingdom of Silence that it used to be under the father's rule. To al-Turk's disappointment, apart from some economic reforms, political life has not changed for the better during the son's era. Bashar al-Assad's first ten years were deemed a 'wasted

[14] Hafez al-Assad ran five unopposed popular referendums where he allegedly won the support of 99% of the voters (al-Haj Saleh 2015).
[15] Wedeen (1999:26) defines authoritarian regimes as systems in which 'leaders are intolerant of people or groups perceived as threatening to the regime's monopoly over the institutions of the state, including those state-controlled institutions (the press, radio, television, schools) charged with symbolic production'.
[16] For example, the Syrian government has used Soviet specialists to help organize spectacles. Similar to their former Soviet counterparts, Syrian youth hold placards that combine to make the picture of their leader. Like Stalin, Assad is represented as the 'ultimate father' (Wedeen 1999:27).
[17] Bashar al-Assad was 'elected' in unopposed referendum in 2000 and 2007 winning over 97% of the votes, and was 're-elected' again in 2014 against other two presidential candidates for the first time in the wake of the 2011 uprising (al-Haj Saleh 2015).

decade'[18] by Human Rights Watch (2010). Since 2000, Syria has continuously stood out amongst the ten worst-rated countries in the world for political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2014).

2.1.1 A glimpse on geography, demography and repercussions of the Baathist ideology

Before I move to the second contextual overview on how Syria looks today, I want to highlight basic demographic information and briefly discuss The Party's interaction with it.

Syria is commonly referred to as a *mosaic* society, characterized by a complex array of crosscutting, interlinked and overlapping class, religious, ethnic and regional identities (Hinnebusch 1991:29; Salamandra 2004:7)[19]. Despite the overlapping nature of these identities[20], ethnic and religious groups have their own geography. This can be seen across rural and urban Syria[21]. For urban dwellers in particular neighborhoods are strongly associated with social distinctions, be it ethnic, religious, class or a combination of these. Against this intertwining web of cultures and religions, the Baathist pan-Arab ideology considered all Syrians as Arab and Syrian first, therefore sectarian identities are secondary, if at all mentioned (Worren 2007:7). Despite, or perhaps because of, The Party's efforts to dissolve these differences, social distinctions became prominent. That does not mean that they were discussed publicly, but rather public expression of sub-national identities became taboo. The tabooing of this subject signals its significance in the Syrian society under The Party (Salamandra 2004:9; Worren 2007:8). Ultimately, the regime despite its public rhetoric, which emphasized unity and rejected sub-identities prejudices, has implemented every practice to do the opposite, namely, to deepen sectarian and tribal affiliations (Qaddour 2012).

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[18] Although repression might be less severe than the 'dark years' in the 1980s, security agencies continued to detain people without legal warrant under the state of emergency, enacted since 1963; civil society was curbed; no human rights organizations were licensed and the state continued its repressive policies against dissent (Human Rights Watch 2010).

[19] Translated to numbers, in a country of 23 million, approximately, 90% of the population is Arab, while Armenians, Kurds and other ethnicities constitute the remaining 10%. Sunni Muslims account for 74% of the population, Alawites for 12%, Christians 10%, Druze 3% and Jews and other sects about 1% (Lesch 2005:vii).

[20] Crucial to note that mentioning the sectarian or ethnic affiliations here is not an attempt to reduce the identity of Syrians to a single sectarian or ethnic affiliation as much of the contemporary political science literature about Syria tends to do, but rather, is to highlight the multidimensional axes of Syrians identity and how the political rhetoric addressed this complexity. As Salamandra (2004:12) put it, religious, ethnic, and social identity often collide with the region in Syria and hence 'social distinction' cannot be reduced to the sectarian identity. In the Syrian context, Hinnebusch (1991:47) argues, sectarian or religious identities per se would give little clue as to explaining social or political change.

[21] Alawites, for example, descend from coastal villages and mountains in northwest Syria. In the last decades, a high percentage of them moved to settle in the big cities (al-Haj Saleh 2009) mostly though in Alawite-dominated neighborhoods. Kurds are concentrated in the northeast of the country, and Druze live in the mountainous areas in the south.

This suppression of sub-national identities has two major outcomes: the systematic oppression and discrimination[22] of Kurds as an ethnic minority, and the subtle emergence of prejudice and stereotypes among different sects. In absence of public platforms to address these prejudices, every group would have its own story against 'the other'. The nationalist efforts to dissolve everyone's identity into pan-Arabism coupled with having the Alawites dominating the most powerful positions in the state produced new grievances.

2.2 Breaking the silence... and the great exodus: Syria 2011 - today

'Today, Syria is my home. Before 2011, it was *Assad's Syria*[23]'. Suzan, 26 years old.

In March 2011, Syrians broke the silence. As part of the Arab Spring that swept the region, Syria witnessed mass popular protests that were faced by unprecedented government's violent crackdown, and has since mid-2012 took a violent turn until it escalated into an all-out armed conflict. The social movement that started in 2011 is political par excellence, upholding demands adhering to the value of freedom and social justice (Nasser et al. 2013:15; Wedeen 2013:842).

Moving to the present time and four years after the uprising, the situation in Syria today is described as a mix of proxy war by regional and international powers, civil war, and a continuing uprising against oppression and tyranny (Khalaf 2015). The conflict has displaced more than four millions to the neighboring countries and more than seven millions internally (UNHCR 2015).

2.3 Beyond numbers: education in Syria since 1963

Now I present a brief overview on the status of education in Syria situated in the abovementioned sociopolitical environment[24]. I emphasize the macro level[25] (policies) of education, which serves to complement the micro perspective (practices and interaction in classroom) that follows in Chapter 5.

[22] Syrian Kurds are not allowed to speak their language in public, in the workplace, or in private fests. Teaching or learning Kurdish is banned in schools or through alternative means. Since the early 1990s, it has been forbidden for Kurdish parents to officially register their children with Kurdish names. In 2008, there was about 280,000 Kurds who were stripped from their citizenship in addition to similar number of undocumented Kurds living in Syria (Ziadeh 2009:2,4).

[23] The term 'Assad's Syria' was explained by (Lobmeyer 1994:83) who explains that contrary to the constitution of 1973 which postulates Syria as a republic, the official propaganda fits Syrian reality much better than the constitution. Syria is not for the masses but is *Souria al-Assad*, that is, Assad's Syria. He was not the president but '*qa'idun ila al-abad*', 'our leader into eternity'. The formulation 'our' suggests that the people are behind their president, any opposition is hence against the people's will.

The education in Syria is controlled, supervised and run by the central government. The Syrian Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for policy planning, finance, innovation, curriculum design and implementation of educational reforms as it controls 95% of schools in Syria, so the private sector is comparatively small (Rajab 2013:6). With the exception of a few licensed international schools, all public and private schools should follow the national curriculum of the MoE.

As for the educational structure, formal education starts at the age of six and ends at eighteen. There are six years for primary education, three years for lower-secondary, and the last three years are for upper-secondary education. According to article 37 of the constitution, education is state-guaranteed right and is free in all its stages (UNESCO 2011). The score of the Basic Education Exam determines the student's options to enter a general secondary education, or a vocational and technical secondary education. Secondary education students have the choice between literary and scientific branches based on their interest. Another high-stake exam is The Secondary Education National Exam, usually referred to as the Baccalaureate exam, which is taken at the end of the secondary education and its score determines students' choices for higher education.

The Party's public discourse declares education as one of its pillars in the development and modernization project of the Syrian state. It emphasizes the importance of 'equal access' to education as a vehicle to free the country of feudal past dominated by kinship and traditional alliances (Sparre 2008:7). In line with its social policies to eradicate class inequalities, The Party broadened access to education as one primary dimension of this social change[26]. In fact, the record since the 1990s shows that Syria was on track to achieve universal primary education, as enrollment rate increased from 95% in

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[24] In this section, I do not expand on the formal information on the Syrian educational system as this information is available in English and in official sources (See Appendix D for a list of official documents). I chose to use the space to talk about the underreported and under researched areas of the formal educational system. For example, the role of the Pioneers Organization and the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU) which is not mentioned in neither of the Syrian government's reports on MDGs, nor in the other UN documents on education in Syria.

[25] The time period spanned in this section does not take into consideration the educational reforms enacted in 2004, as the analysis and data scans the time period (1986-2006) which is in line with the participants' school attendance time period. For more information on the educational reforms, see: MoE 2008 report under 'quality education' (Ministry of Education 2008).

[26] Between 1964 and 1977, primary school students and teachers more than doubled, and education became more equalized between cities and rural provinces. By early 1980s, university enrollment had more than quadrupled. In short, education became a channel for upward mobility not previously open on a comparable scale (Hinnebusch 1991:36-7).

1990 to 99% in 2008. Syria has made substantial progress in comparison with other Arab countries where the average rate in 2004 was 82% (Hijazi et al. 2010:28)[27].

Beyond high percentages of literacy and enrollment rates there is an issue of quality. As the major player in the positive social outcome, the state has done massive efforts in the provision of consumer subsidies, public services, housing and infrastructure. However, the quantitative expansion came at the expense of the quality in public services, mostly evident in education and health sectors (Nasser et al. 2013:10). In terms of education, the indicators show progress in accessibility, but there is no evaluation of quality. Hijazi et al. (2010:15) highlight that the picture is less promising on this point indicated by high dropout rates, for example.

The second issue is regional inequalities within Syria. Behind the high percentages there are clear disparities between governorates in enrollment and literacy rates (Hijazi et al. 2010:30) as illustrated in Figure 2-1. Disparities in education are intertwined with regional poverty variances as well as rural-urban inequalities with poverty concentrated in rural areas (El Laithy & Abu-Ismail 2005:27). After more than 50 years of The Party's rule, rural areas remain the least developed in Syria which is paradoxical given The Party's official rhetoric as pioneering the advancement of peasant rights.

[27] Similarly, performance in literacy rate for population aged 15-24 illustrates a progress in comparison with Arab countries with the rate reaching 92% in 2006 against an average of 85% in the region (Hijazi et al. 2010:30).

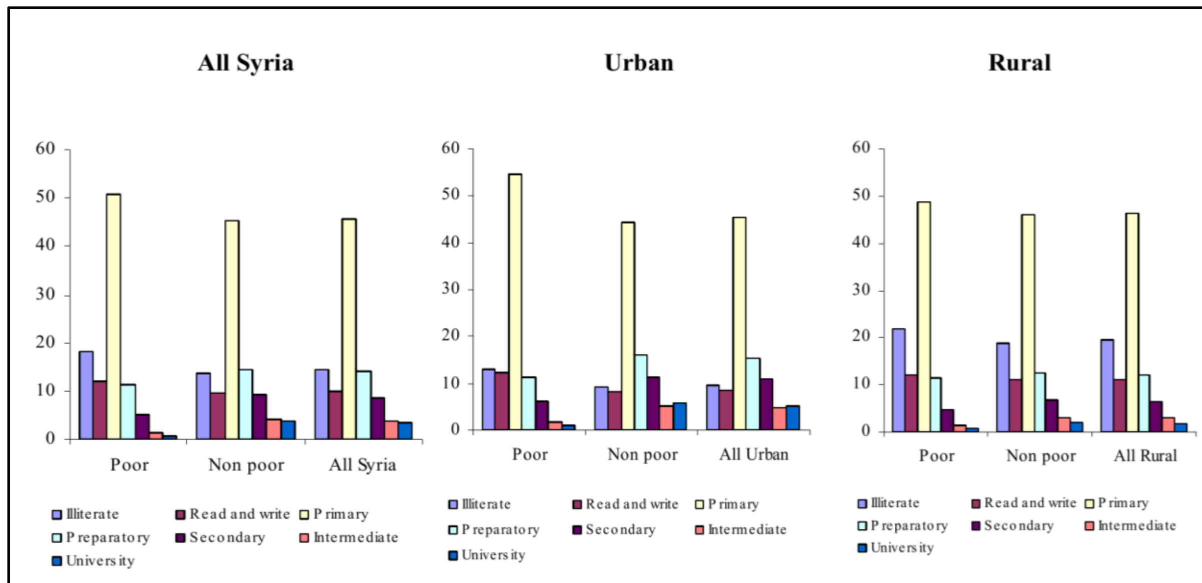

Figure 2-1 Educational statistics 2003 - 2004. It shows significant variations between urban and rural areas with the highest percentage of illiteracy concentrated in the poor rural areas. Illiteracy rate reached 19% in rural areas while it was less than 10% in urban areas. Amongst the poor overall, the great majority had primary education only or no education at all. Source: (El Laithy & Abu-Ismail 2005:42)

The third and last issue is to situate the mass enrollment figures within Syria's sociopolitical conditions. It is important to mention that The Baath Party is the only party allowed to operate within schools (Wedeen 1999:179). Students are mobilized through the regime's children and youth organizations. Mainly inspired by the Soviet Union Young Pioneers Organization[28], all children in Syrian primary schools (from grade one to grade six, between 6-12 years old) are members of The Baath Vanguard Organization[29], also referred to as the Pioneers Organization (hereinafter The Pioneers). It was established in 1974 as a 'gift granted by our father the great leader Hafez al-Assad', according to the organizational profile, and it mainly aims to 'care and breed the vanguard and work to develop their talents and abilities and their orientations and beliefs through participation in the vanguard's various extracurricular activities centers' (Pioneers 2013, para.3).

Students in seventh grade are automatically upgraded to members of the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU) which accepts members between ages 13 and 35. The RYU is a key actor in working with young people as the government entrusted it with the task of coordinating the national youth policy (Demicheli 2008:22). Established in 1968, the RYU is a political and educational organization that was officially

[28] See (Lane 1972; Tudge 1991).

[29] The total number of the vanguards who joined The Organization from 1974 to 1990 is 16,956,746 vanguards (Pioneers 2013). In 2010 alone, the members counted 3,200,000 (Shahba News 2013).

licensed according to a presidential decree in 1970[30]. In tenth grade, active members of the RYU are responsible to hand out applications for the students to fill in and officially become members of The Party.

Finally, propagating the nationalist ideology of The Party is a core element of the Syrian National Curriculum, as stipulated in article 21 of the Syrian Constitution: (emphasis added)

> The educational and cultural system aims at creating a *socialist nationalist Arab generation*, which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to a*chieve its nation's objectives of unity, freedom and socialism* to contribute to serving humanity and its progress

Article 22 and 23 specify that the 'nationalist socialist education is the basis for building the unified socialist Arab society' (UNESCO 2011). In particular, the National Education textbook instructs students on The Party leadership in details and states the achievements of the president (Rabo 1992:105). Another *indoctrinating* class was the military instruction class[31] that ran for two hours a week starting in lower-secondary education. The Syrian Government (2004, para.379) views the military instruction class as

> in line with similar educational courses being given in certain countries that face extraordinary security circumstances. In the Syrian context the purpose was to provide training in civil defense and emergency preparedness in the face of the permanent threat that the country faces as a result of Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Syrian Golan Heights

In a historical perspective, Hafez al-Assad has extended the network of 'popular organizations' that were established by The Party as a mechanism to control mobilization. Hence, it could be argued that a mass enrollment campaign was established to ensure that The Party's ideology reaches every village and neighborhood (Sottimano 2009:14). It can be seen from the previous discussion that the public educational system has contributed significantly to the ideological production of the modern Syrian state (Vogt & Lie 2002:4). The ideological program attached to the educational infrastructure as popular movements as well as written into the formal curricula also affects the education, devaluing its quality.

[30] The official decree text stipulates its objectives on three levels: local, regional (pan-Arab), and global. Among its goals on the local level, the RYU works on raising awareness among the youth, developing their potentials and preparing the youth to protect the revolution that is led by The Party. Regionally, it aims to foster partnerships with its Arab counterparts, and to 'fight backwardness, partition, colonization and the Zionist existence'. It also works toward the Arab Unity. Finally and on the global level, it works toward scientific progress, contributes to the international liberation movement, works on revealing the global zionism and fights all forms of discrimination (Majlis al-Sha'ab n.d.).

[31] The military instruction class was removed in 2003 along with the khaki-colored military-like uniforms.

3 Methodology

After I shed light on the sociopolitical scene in Syria and its implications on the educational system, I turn now to explain my methodological choices, guided by the RQs, and their implications on the data analysis. I see this thesis as a narrative built on several accounts stitched together where I decided which incidents are important and interesting to be told. Similar to every narrative hence this thesis is neither neutral nor objective. In the following I reflect on my choices and their implications on this research.

3.1 Research design

I entered the field, Gaziantep city in Turkey, in February 2014 almost one year before I started my fieldwork in January 2015. Turkey is the host country of the largest number of Syrian refugees, where the majority of non-camp, self-settled Syrians live in Gaziantep[32]. Located along the Syrian border and the sixth largest city in Turkey, Gaziantep has become a hub for the humanitarian and political response to the Syrian conflict. Most notably, Gaziantep became the stronghold of the Syrian political opposition since the establishment of an Interim Government in 2013 to serve the northern areas of Syria that are under the opposition control.

During my frequent partaking in Syrian gatherings in Gaziantep, stories reminiscing on family, traditions and other aspects from the past life in Syria have very often dominated the conversation. In essence, Syrians cast their past experiences into *narratives* as a way to make sense of the past. Narratives can be as short as talking about lunch yesterday or can extend to a life history. They can also belong to different genres; the topic-centered narrative is a series of snapshots of past events stitched *thematically* (Riessman 1993:18). As the RQs of my study precisely look into past events revolving around school, I found that adopting a *narrative inquiry* as my research strategy best serves my problematique.

Since mainly expressing subjective experiences, narrators' stories do not reflect a world out there. They are not an objective construction of life, but rather a tradition of how life is perceived (Bold 2012:17). As opposed to the naturalist view that the social world is to some degree out there, the constructivist

[32] There are around 1.8 million Syrians in Turkey out of 4 million refugees in the neighboring countries (UNHCR 2015). No official statistics exist as to the total number of Syrians living in Gaziantep, however, registered Syrians only in Gaziantep province account for 200,000.

view recognize that the world is constantly ‘in the making’, that knowledge does not reflect an external reality (Silverman 2013:200) hence the emphasis is on understanding the production of that social world (Elliott 2005:18). Interpretation is inevitable to narrative analysis. Interpreting experiences involves reconstructing reality; voices are recreated over and over again during the research process in studies of personal narratives (Riessman 1993). As a constructivist researcher who adopts an interpretive stance to produce knowledge, I choose qualitative approach given that the research is exploratory in its nature and because I believe it captures the depth of subjective meanings that participants make and attach (Silverman 2013:120) to their narratives on school.

3.2 Methods and sources

In preparation for the narrative interviews and during the analysis phase, I reviewed academic and grey literature related to education in Syria[33]. As a primary source of data, I used narrative interviews. My observations and experience as a volunteer teacher in a Syrian school in Gaziantep from May 2014 until January 2015, along with a round of exploratory, informal interviews in January 2015 served as a backdrop to formulate the research purpose and to obtain culturally-specific insights.

3.2.1 Sampling: who are the narrators?

On top of having a story[34] to tell (Creswell 2007:128) I used purposeful and snowball sampling as Bryman (2012:418) recommends, considering the following criteria in relevance to the RQs.

Since I wanted to understand the nature of oppression in schools, I chose to talk to those who have *experienced* oppression, and who are *self-conscious* of their oppressive experience in schools and in the society at large as they have sided with the people’s uprising in 2011. Therefore, all participants upheld anti-regime political position which informs how they view the past and their oppressive experiences in schools. Second, since oppression is experienced differently given our multilayered social identities[35] (Collins 1993), and taking into consideration the sociopolitical context that fueled sectarian and ethnic tensions (outlined in Chapter 2), I paid attention to four variables: age, sex, religion and ethnicity. I

[33] See Appendix D for a list of official documents on education in Syria.
[34] I use stories and narratives interchangeably throughout the text although not all narratives are considered stories in the linguistic sense of the term (Riessman 1993:18).
[35] The term Social Identity refers to the way a person cognitively self-define his or her group memberships. Self-definition is shared with others who also claim the same categorical membership, for example, gender, religion, political orientation, vocation and ethnicity are all types of social identifications (Abrams 2015).

choose the age variable to span the 'silent' years of the Syrian record; therefore all participants were born between 1980 and 1990.

I interviewed 16 Syrian former students in total, half are males. One is ethnically Kurd, and the rest are ethnically Arabs. Three are Christians, one is Muslim-Alawite, one is Muslim-Druze, and the rest are Muslim-Sunnis. Interviews were recorded and conducted in Arabic, both my and the narrators' mother tongue. The shortest interview lasted for 1h30 and the longest for 2h40. I used a few guiding questions[36] to help me re-open the conversation during the interviews rather than standard questions to be asked to all the participants. I tried to start the questions with 'Can you tell me about …', as suggested by Riessman (1993:54), in an attempt to give respondents freedom to construct their answers in collaboration with me as the listener in the ways they find most meaningful.

A final note on the sample; when we tell stories about our lives we perform our (positive) *preferred identity* (Riessman 2000). This entails that the narrators in this study have consciously, or not, chosen to tell certain stories related to school when they have been subject to some form of oppression while leaving out other events when they are perceived as otherwise. This *preferred identity* is taken into consideration for the analysis in Chapter 5.

3.3 Analysis

In the first layer of analysis, I used the structure-centered narrative analysis approach following Labov and Waletzky's (2006 originally 1967) model which allowed me to see the narrative analytically in relation to the operational sub question. In the second layer, all the data was analyzed inductively, meaning I built themes 'bottom-up' through organizing the data into 'emergent codes' in a reiterative process while contrasting and comparing the codes with the RQs (Creswell 2007:152) and in light of the theoretical tenets, that is, in relation to the concept of oppression. In the final layer, I classified the codes into themes[37]. Since I am aware that all interpretations are missing something, this presses me to be more cautious and reflective about the claims I make, which brings me to the next section discussing positionality and reflexivity.

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[36] See Appendix A for the Interview guide

[37] These are the three forms of oppression presented in Chapter 5: domination, privilege culture and dehumanization

3.4 Positionality and reflexivity

Situated in a story-eliciting context of an interview, the narrator would inevitably select stories that most likely are different from those being recounted in a natural, non-research situation (Andrews et al. 2008:29) which makes me aware that I am part of, and fully implicated in the *reconstruction* of the stories of the interviewees. My position as a middle-class, privileged female who is studying in Sweden and coming from a big city in Syria has certainly influenced the conversation and shaped the narrator's choice and formation of stories. In several incidents, participants would say 'I will tell you a story that should be interesting for you', which demonstrate how they might have deliberately selected what they think is most valuable for me as the researcher, which adds one more selection layer to the selectivity nature of telling stories from the past. Further, the fact that I am Syrian and familiar with the topic should be kept in mind for analyzing the narrators' choice of stories. Our point of departure when the interviews started was that schools were oppressive. In fact, my familiarity with the topic was at times an obstacle to elicit stories as some participants assumed that I already knew how life in schools looked like, which is to some extent true from a general perspective. However, I was interested in personal stories and subjective meanings attached to them. To overcome this, I found that starting the interviews' with a question on the everyday activity in schools proved fruitful.

My next challenge occurred during the analysis stage as I needed to exert considerable efforts to make *the familiar strange*. Fearing that I would be biased toward certain stories, I followed a meticulous transcription process that resulted in large amounts of transcribed manuscripts. Since I took around six months for the analysis process, I made use of this time period for revisiting the transcripts every one week or so. Every new round of reading and coding brought new perspectives.

3.5 Ethical considerations and limitations

All participants were informed about my identity and the research topic. I also made it clear that they can withdraw at any time or ask me to erase the recording. I tried to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity and thus I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and I refrained from mentioning specific details in their profiles to ensure they are not identifiable. Since I was asking about events in the past, one dilemma I faced was my fear of extracting disturbing memories especially that interviewees would be prompted to reflect on areas on which they have not explicitly reflected before (Elliott 2005). I hence

kept the questions as open as possible for the interviewee to lead the stories[38]. One more ethical consideration is that most of the interviewees are not fluent in English and thus might not see the outcome of this research as valuable to them. For that reason, I plan to send them the results in Arabic.

Narrative inquiry often challenges the notions of validity and reliability, as narratives are not meant to be read as an exact reading of the world (Riessman 1993). In this study, the results of the analysis are not generalizable, nor do I think are replicable. If I come back again and ask the same participants, I do not foresee them telling me the same stories. Narratives are located with social discourses, power relations and a historical moment, which do not remain constant over time (ibid).

As for future research, it would be interesting to include teachers, and former students from a wider political spectrum to gain a broader and deeper understanding on the dynamics of oppression.

4 Theoretical framework

What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine?
I learned our government must be strong.
It's always right and never wrong.
Our leaders are the finest men.
And we elect them again and again.
That's what I learned in school today.
Tom Paxton, sang by Pete Seeger, 1963

In this chapter, I present theoretical concepts to serve as lens through which we can see and interpret the data; they are not all-encompassing for understanding the topic. I start with introducing different sociological responses to the fundamental question of the reason we have schools. Then I conceptualize oppression and how it plays out in schools. Next I define the Hidden Curriculum (HC) as a framework to understand what is learned in schools. Finally, I explain the conceptual framework that will be used in the analysis to uncover the Hidden Curriculum Elements (HCEs).

4.1 Why do we have schools? The covert and overt role of schooling

At the center of all the different sociological interpretations of the schooling process is their affirmation that schools do more than teach students how to read, write and master the content of formal subjects.

[38] Although I term the participants as having been oppressed, this is not an intention to victimize them. Contrary to how research with the *oppressed* portrays the researcher as giving a voice to the oppressed, I echo (Andrews et al. 2015:20) and rather believe that the participants gave their voice to my research. Using open questions allowed the participants to lead the interview and talk about what they think is meaningful to them.

Schools came to be seen through a wide range of social, economic and political perspectives as sites of socialization with a dual purpose, an overt and officially acknowledged one and a hidden and unofficial one. These hidden aspects of life in schools and classrooms captured the attention of the critical educational theorists (CET) and detecting them became one of their core missions. The CET (Giroux 1983b; Freire 1985; Apple 1995; McLaren 2003) approach emerged in the 1980s after almost three decades[39] of the conventional sociological approaches to education.

CET countered the functionalist apolitical and consensual readings of the educational system, argued against the over-determinism of the neo-Marxist approaches and criticized the interactionists mere focus on the micro process of school[40] by underlining that schools cannot be understood as sites to 'mirror' and reproduce social relations where students are viewed as passively controlled by the dominant class; rather, schools are contested sites situated in larger social, political and economic arrangements and students often negotiate and act in a manner that contradicts expected norms and dispositions that permeate the schools (Giroux 1983a; Apple 1995:95,151; Margolis et al. 2001).

Against the assertion made by traditional theories of education who viewed schools as relatively neutral institutions, CET argued that education is always political as 'no pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is value-free and no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations' (Macrine 2009:134). Defining education as political also involves recognizing the *dialectical* interplay of social interests: political power on one side, and school practices on the other. As such, schools interactions are not effectively reducible to the interest of the dominant group but rather are dialectic (Giroux 1983b:44; Apple 1995). In order to examine and analyze this dialectic, CET emphasize the act of contextualization

[39] Although some of the classical sociologists of the nineteenth century made significant contributions to the study of education (such as Durkheim 1858-1917), it was only in the 1950s that the sociology of education emerged as a distinctive area of inquiry (Blackledge and Hunt 1985:2). The conventional sociological approaches can be summarized in three major strands: the functionalist tradition, the neo-Marxist perspective and the new sociology of education or the interactionist approach (Blackledge and Hunt 1985).

[40] Functionalists (Parsons 1959; Dreeben 1968; Jackson 1968) see the role of school as maintaining the social order by socializing students to acquire unquestionable set of norms, beliefs and dispositions that are essential to the functioning of the larger society. Unlike functionalists, neo-Marxists (Bourdieu 1973; Bowles and Gintis 1976) viewed schools as producing disagreement and class domination rather than social cohesion, hence legitimizing inequalities and reproducing class structure (Sadovnik 2011). Building on the neo-Marxists reproduction theories, the interactionists of the 'new sociology of education', were concerned with the everyday, taken-for-granted behaviors and interactions in the school where socialization in this approach involves interactive model of creating meanings. That is, meanings are created by students as they interact in classrooms (Young 1971; Margolis et al. 2001).

where a rich understanding of the social background and political context help understand the complexity of the educational process (Kincheloe 2008:31-32).

By developing a new attentiveness to the linkages between school and society (i.e. the microanalysis and the macro processes), a viable approach to study classroom practices should acknowledge the hidden social and political assumptions of schooling. Taking into consideration the CET premises, schools in authoritarian regimes are undoubtedly characterized by the prevalent oppression beyond the school's walls, which takes us to the next section on conceptualizing oppression and its dialectic in schools.

4.2 Learning oppression… and how to overcome it

In an attempt to understand the complex forms of oppression and how they play out in schools, educators and CET in particular, have engaged in two types of projects: understanding the nature of oppression, and articulating ways to overcome it. They seem to agree that oppression entails a situation of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination and subordination, in which certain groups are privileged while others are marginalized, which lead to conditions of injustice and inequalities (McLaren 2003; Apple 2004). But they disagree on the particular causes, nature of oppression and on the policies, curricular or pedagogies needed to bring about changes (Kumashiro 2000).

Oppression can involve the legal system or direct acts of violence but need not be. Everyday processes also include forms of oppression but are rather subtle and more difficult to recognize[41] (Deutsch 2006). Collins (1993) brings up different dimensions of oppression such as *institutional*; when systematic relationships of domination and subordination are structured through social institutions such as schools and are often obscured by rhetoric of equality. Apple (1995) argues against the concept of *institutional* oppression in schools which implies that oppression has the same general effect on people. He does not deny that certain groups have been historically oppressed and members of these groups might share common experiences with oppression. Rather, he explains that people have multiple identities and hence not necessarily have the same or similar experiences with oppression[42].

[41] Depicted as ‘civilized oppression’, Harvey (2010) distinguishes characteristics of everyday oppression as embedded in unquestioned norms and habits underlying rules and institutions, and the collective consequences of following these rules.
[42] Kumashiro (2000:38) gives an example how female students might be able to exert power over male students in certain activities while rendered powerless by them at others. This fluidity of power relations in the classroom cannot be understood with a static structural framework of oppression, but rather requires a more situated understanding of oppression in schools.

Several contemporary thinkers theorize oppression as a problem of misrecognition (Cudd 2006:19) such as Freire (1996) who conceptualizes oppression as an act of dehumanization. He sees dehumanization as an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressor which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed. Dehumanization, Freire argues, does not only mark those whose humanity has been stolen but also those who have stolen it. In what he defines as 'banking concept of education', Freire projects an ideology of oppression on this method of education rejecting the conventional distinction of teachers as the experts, tellers and knowers and students as the ignorant, listeners and passive recipients who are waiting to be 'filled' by teachers (Freire 1996:53). Implicit in this model of education is the *dichotomy* between teachers and students, which precisely what Freire denies. Following similar analogy, Freire (1996) steps out from the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Instead, he talks about the 'oppressor/oppressed contradiction' which means that every oppressed has an oppressor inside. Having internalized the image of the oppressor, during the initial stage of struggle, the oppressed tend to become oppressors or 'sub-oppressor' (Freire 1996:27).

In the same vein, Collins (1993:25) explains that oppression is full of such contradictions, as she points out that there are 'few pure victims or oppressors' (Collins 1993:26). As such, she viewed the dichotomous thinking when applied on oppression particularly problematic because the simultaneously being oppressed and oppressor becomes conceptually impossible.

Central to any discussion of oppression is the acknowledgement that oppression involves asymmetric power relations and creating 'privileged groups' over others. Some educational researchers argue that in studying oppression in schools it is not sufficient to look at marginalized and denigrated groups only, but also how some groups are favored, normalized and privileged, as well as how this privileging process is legitimized and maintained by social and political structures (Kumashiro 2000:35).

Across all sociological schools of thoughts, there is a consensus that the power dispositions of the classroom are bifurcated into the powerful (teacher) versus the powerless (students). The teacher is institutionally defined as superior to the student in knowledge and responsibility. Babad (2009:30) discusses that teachers possess five out of the six social powers defined by French and Raven (1959).

These are reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power, and information power[43]. The only social power that the teacher does not usually enjoy is the *referent power* which is a power attained through the association to those who have power[44].

Unequal terrains of power in schools was of controversy to many CET. Freire (1985:xii) saw oppression as more than an imposition of an arbitrary power by the teacher or one group on another. Instead, it represents a body of competing ideologies embedded by contradictions and constantly shaped by asymmetric relations of power. The subtlety of domination is not exhausted by simply pinpointing the cultural forms that bear down on the oppressed daily; it is also to be found in the way oppressed internalize and thus participate in their oppression (Freire 1985). On a similar note, Apple (1995) explains that dominating ideological practices and meanings in school are not monolithic. Students and teachers act on meanings through layers of mediation that exist between the dominant ideology and the school. In essence, the classroom is viewed as a negotiated order and school becomes a fundamental institution for seeing the dialectical interactions between the political, economic and social sphere.

After conceptualizing oppression and its different manifestations in schools, I turn to a brief discussion on how to overcome oppressive education. Titled under different headings[45], educators and researchers advocated an amalgam of approaches, however, stressing that in order to overcome oppression in schools one cannot import strategies or methods; rather it is about reinventing ideas and philosophical insights in a context considering its complexity and situatedness (Kumashiro 2000). Yet, providing teachers with pivotal points of references in the development of their teaching practices can be helpful to encourage a reflection and an engagement process in anti-oppressive education.

For example, Freire (1996:61) argues that education, as practice for freedom, begins in resolving the student/teacher (oppressed/oppressor) contradiction. The teacher and the student cease to exist; instead,

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[43] *Reward power:* involves the ability to provide positive or to remove negative consequences as the teacher can and sometimes must praise students. *Coercive power*: the teacher has a power to punish non-conforming students. *Legitimate power*: the teacher is recognized to enjoy an institutional authority to prescribe and control students' behavior. *Expert power*: the teacher possess knowledge and skills that are regarded superior to the students and are needed by them. *Information power:* the teacher controls the information needed by the students for certain goals (Babad 2009:30-1).
[44] Most often, this power is irrelevant, unless association with the head of school might be a source of teacher's power as perceived by the students.
[45] Such as 'anti-oppressive' education (Kumashiro 2000), 'pedagogy for liberation' (Shor and Freire 1987), 'pedagogy of hope' (Freire 1998), 'pedagogy of possibility' (McLaren 1999), 'pedagogy of the heart' (Freire and Freire 1998), 'humanizing pedagogy' and 'problem-posing pedagogy' (Freire 1996).

a teacher-student and a student-teacher emerge where both teach each other. Only in dialectical understanding of the world of the oppressed and the difficulty for them to recognize the oppressor inside themselves, is it possible to comprehend the complexity of oppression and start reflecting on ways to overcome it (Freire 1998). In this philosophy, the starting point is what the learners know, *their world* and how they read it.

'Since the world has been constructed by human beings, then it can be reconstructed by human beings. Nothing human made is intractable, and because this is so, then *hope* exists' (Kincheloe 2008:71-2 emphasis added). Hope lies at the core of Freire's work. Of his foundational learning principles is that learners must consider a *possibility* for new makings of reality (McLaren 1999). In order for teachers and students to create and live this *hope*, they need to understand reality as a process rather than a 'static entity'. In this frame, teachers and students can start imagining the future in a way that is freed from the past.

In their attempt to cut the chains of oppression, educators and students should take a step back to gain a vantage point and reflect on who they are? Why? How? To what end? For whom? Against whom? By whom? What is learned? (Freire 1998; Kincheloe 2008). In an attempt to answer the last question, we move to the next section on the hidden curriculum.

4.3 The Hidden Curriculum as a framework to understand what is learned in schools

Student's progress in reading, writing and arithmetic tells only part of the story of what she learned from school. For the CET, the curriculum in schools encompasses much more than a program, a text or a course syllabus (McLaren 2003:86). In contrast to the formal curriculum, students experience 'unwritten curriculum' characterized by informality and lack of conscious planning (Kentli 2009:83). Widely referred to as the 'hidden curriculum', the term is defined as 'unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life' (Giroux 1983:47)[46].

Martin (1983) pinpointed the HC as a set of *learning states* (LSs) where each LS is comprised of a *state* in a given *setting*. A state can be a *cognitive states* such as believing or knowing; *attitudinal* states such

[46] Similarly, Vallance (1983:11) defines it as 'non-academic but educationally significant consequences of schooling that occur systematically but are not made explicit at any level of the public rationales for education'.

as appreciation; or *emotional states* such as feeling shameful. While a setting can be procedures, practices, rules, relationships, structure or physical characteristics. To illustrate this I take the example of a student who developed an appreciation for art because his teacher used to put Picasso's paintings in the classroom, assumingly intending to make the classroom beautiful. The *state* is the attitude of appreciating art, while the *setting* is the practice of the teacher and the physical space of the classroom. Finally, the HC is relational; it is always *of* some settings, *at* some time, *for* some learner, for some investigator and *against* some *concept* (Martin 1983:125). In this study, oppression is the concept against which I analyze the HC.

While the definition of what constitutes a curriculum in the HC concept was exhaustedly discussed, less authors addressed the 'hiddenness' aspect. Portelli (1993) provided a comprehensive definition of four different dimensions of hiddenness. One is the *unofficial expectations*; the unofficial institutional expectations and values aimed at by educational administrators but are unknown to the learners. The second is the *unintended outcomes,* the consequences that may never be identified, and even if they are they may not be formally acknowledged. The third dimension includes the *implicit messages of the structure* which are not officially recognized and remain outside the control of the teacher or the school. These include messages that have to do with the institutional aspects of schools like social relations that legitimize authority and particular views of work and class. Finally, a fourth dimension is *created* by the students or learners.

Finally, studying the HC[47] is important not only because of its insights on schooling and what it does to students, but also because it links schools to the wider society and social structures (Giroux 1983b:42). Among the many social structures we live in is the structure of exploitation and oppression for they do not exist 'out there' in the abstract, rather in our daily life and our practices within the family, school and workplace make them up (Apple 1995:152). Consequently, the concept of HC serves as one

[47] While the HC was predominantly used by CET as a framework to examine outcomes related to, merely, functions of social control, like learning to be submissive to authority, docile and obedient or to value competition over cooperation. However, the HC was later applied in a volume of literature in relation to other *concepts* in educational institutions, such as: management education (Blasco 2012); political participation (Martinson 2003); gender construction (Hernández et al. 2013); practices of professionalism in medical school (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2010); prejudice (Kiss et al. 2013); and resistance (Yüksel 2006).

valuable theoretical framework to examine the unacknowledged dynamics of oppression in schools which takes us to the conceptual framework, how to understand oppression through the HCE.

4.4 A conceptual framework: The Hidden Curriculum Element

The conceptual framework is compiled of the following theoretical concepts: the multidimensional hiddenness of Portelli (1993), the definition of LSs by Martin (1983), the conceptualization of oppression discussed above and the assertion of CET of the necessity to contextualize the HC in relation to broader sociopolitical context. As for the multidimensional hiddenness, I focus on three dimensions: the officially overt messages, the meaning that is created by the learner and the third is created by myself, the investigator.

Accordingly, the HC I analyze in Chapter 5 is made of a set of Hidden Curriculum Elements (HCEs), where each HCE is made of the following dimensions as outlined in Figure 4-1:

1- **Overt**: the officially intended outcomes as created by the educator or the legislator. This dimension will be discussed in relation to sociopolitical considerations.

2- **Learned:** the LS (Martin 1983) created by the learner which includes both a *state* (such as passion, conformity, pride or mistrust) and a *setting* (such as architecture, rule, interaction, procedures or measures).

3- **Hidden:** the analysis is created by myself as the investigator in relation to the concept of oppression.

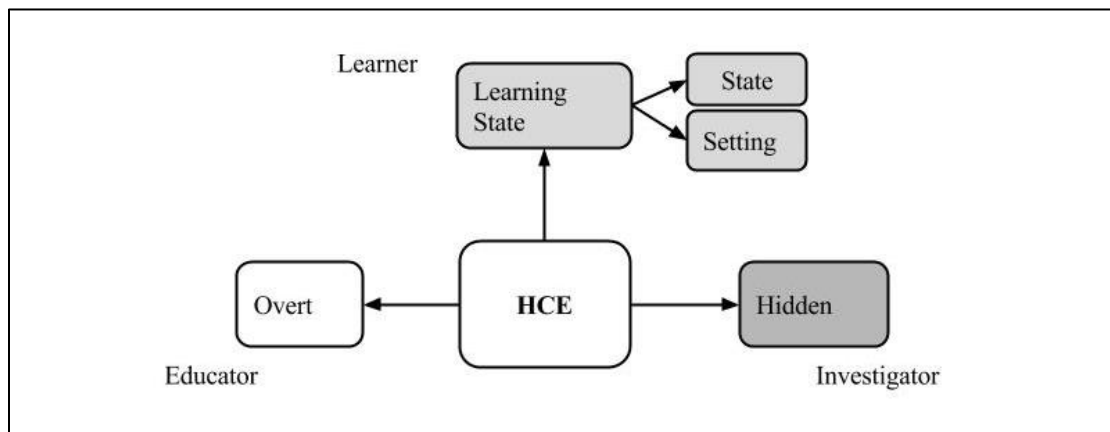

Figure 4-1 Conceptual framework outlining the different dimensions of a hidden curriculum element. Source: author.

5 Analysis: understanding the nature of oppression through the Hidden Curriculum Elements (HCEs)

After I presented the theoretical concepts and my conceptual framework, I turn now to apply the HCE framework in an attempt to understand how oppression was manifested in schools. While the participants mentioned stories that correspond to 'universalistic' features of schools like students stratification through tracking and grading system, labeling, bullying, etc. these will not be highlighted here as I focused on other aspects though might not be unique to the Syrian case, yet are more relevant to the Syrian context and in line with the RQs.

5.1 The daily grind of domination

As Blackledge and Hunt (1985:234) put it, 'if we want to understand education, we must begin by looking at everyday activity'. In this section I examine two HCEs that are relevant to the everyday practices of The Party's dominating ideology.

5.1.1 HCE 1 - The Baathist Soldier Student: 'Execute, then discuss'

Asking the participants to narrate an ordinary school day, one event almost always stood out: the *morning assembly*. At the beginning of every school day, the whole school lines up to repeat the *slogans*[48] and salute the flag[49]. Morning assemblies took place upon arriving to school, before entering the classrooms. They were mandatory for everyone; late students were punished. One essential part of the morning assembly was for the military teacher (in secondary education) or the supervisor to walk among students' queues and check for adherence to exemplary uniform[50]. Given the political orientation of the participants, the morning assembly was perceived as a pure attempt to indoctrinate students with

[48] The slogans that were repeated in the school's daily morning assemblies include: 1-*Our Goals -Unity, Freedom, Socialism*; 2-*One Arab Nation -One Eternal Message*; 3-*Our Leader Forever -The Entrusted Hafez Al-Assad*; 4-*Be Ready to Build and Defend the Unified Arab Socialist Community -Always Ready;* 5-*Our Pledge -To Confront Zionism and Backwardness and to Crash their Criminal Puppet the traitor Muslims Brotherhood gang.* To give a background of the last slogan, between 1979 and 1982 the country was close to enter a civil war on the ground of confrontations with the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Numerous Alawites and persons close to the regime were assassinated where the latter responded with violence and indiscriminate acts of retaliation (Perthes 1994:54). The confrontations culminated in a savage repression of the Islamist opposition bringing with it repression of civil rights and political movements (Kienle 1997:10; Nasser et al. 2013:29). Since then, the Muslim Brotherhood was promoted in the official discourse as an enemy of the state.

[49] The flag salute takes place twice a week; the first day of the week to raise the flag and the last day to take it down while singing the national anthem.

[50] Students from first to sixth grade wear the pioneer's uniform consisting of beige apron, three-cornered neckerchief and a sidecap. Students from seventh to 12th grade wear the military-like uniform. See Figure C-1 and C-4 in Appendix C. The military uniform was replaced in 2003 by blue and gray suits for boys, and pink and gray suits for girls

the Party's ideology, and was hence met with resentment as Wisam explained: 'I used to hate the state and The Party /.../ I could not stand the slogans and I did not repeat them unless the [military] teacher was very close by, then I would only move my lips'. Strongly connected to the memory of the morning assemblies is the picture of the military instruction teacher:

> I always had problems with military teachers. The teacher often dragged me from my hair and put it under the water because she felt it was unkempt. I remember her one winter taking my colored scarf and stumping on it /---/ I remember that the military suit was very ugly. We would wear the jacket just before we enter the school and we took it off and set our hair loose as soon as we left the school. During the morning assembly [the military teacher] would walk between us holding a very long stick to check who had her hair loose, or who was wearing a colored sweater [under the jacket] (Suzan)

This militarized culture starts to take shape in grade seven; in parallel to adopting the khaki-colored uniform, military instruction was introduced for two hours per week. During classes students learned theoretical concepts on The Party's ideology as well as more practical lessons such as how to dismantle and reassemble Kalashnikov rifles, use hand grenades and attack and defend positions[51]. One mantra consistently taught in classes is that of the Syrian Army: 'Execute, then discuss' meaning that soldiers should always execute orders before attempting to discuss or think about them. No wonder students felt like 'little soldiers' (Adel).

Military teachers were particularly known for their harsh corporal punishment methods 'there was always fear of their punishment because it was unpredictable, they could hit us on the hands, the legs, or even punch us' (Wael). It also included military-inspired methods such as so-called duck walk in the schoolyard. Military teacher was depicted as an 'absolute horror' (Rand) or a 'criminal' (Adel). Added to this militarized culture in school were the high walls and flags that made students feel as if they were in 'a military camp or a barrack /.../ especially after the doors were closed I used to feel I was locked in this *camp*' (Wael). The school's' walls were often painted from the inside and outside with the president's sayings along with the Syrian and The Party's flags[52].

Against this dominant ideology of The Party, the glorification of the leader as well as the militarized culture, students were often warned by their parents not to say anything about The Party or the president because *walls have ears*: 'My parents used to always tell me not to repeat in school what I am haring at

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[51] See Figure C-6 in Appendix C
[52] See Figure C-2 and C-3 in Appendix C

home. When I was little I did not really understand why should I be afraid and of whom' (Neveen). However, Neveen explained that she later knew why she must fear her teachers:

> When my brother was 11-year-old, his physical education teacher wrote on the board 'I see life in sports' [a famous and widely-quoted saying by the president Hafez al-Assad]. My brother joked with his friends and said 'I see death in sports'. The teacher told the administration which called my father. When he arrived to school, two security agents were waiting for him and started interrogating him to understand on what basis my brother made his joke and what kind of conversations we had at home. After four hours of interrogation, my brother was banned to study in any school and was since home-schooled until he took the National Baccalaureate Exam.

The story underlines the serious and negative consequences that can follow (mis)interpretations of non-conforming signals. It also captures a teacher-student relationship that was built on fear and mistrust.

One remarkable event in school life is when students are asked to fill in an application to become members of The Party, which takes place in tenth grade. Students reactions varied from meekly filling and submitting the application to more outspoken students who took a confronting position and decided not to turn in the application which was not only a frowned-upon act but could also bring about serious consequences as explained by Amir 'the teachers started threatening me of being expelled and banned from taking the national exam', and Basel 'it later turned into a big problem and the teacher started to tell me that if I do not join I cannot enter university'. However, in most cases it was settled after a small argument with the teacher or the responsible 'comrade' of the RYU.

Further, on days preceding national holidays[53] students were asked to come wearing normal clothes to participate in mass rallies and were handed banners, pictures of the president and flags to be collected after the end of the rally upon their return to school. Participation was explicitly made mandatory and some sources pointed that students were usually threatened in advance 'if you do not show up you should write an official apology and then we will know how to handle this' (Laila). In one of these demonstrations, Laila recounted

> We were standing in a big group and almost suffocating because it was very hot and crowded. My friends and I put the President's picture on the ground and we started to tell people to watch out not to step on it, so we made a space around us and we were happy we were able to breathe some fresh air

[53] These include among others: 8th of March, the memory of The Party's revolution; pro-president rallies in referendum days that were used to 'renew the loyalty for the leader'.

Bearing in mind the power of the dominating symbols and the harm of transgression, this last story shows how Laila and her friends managed to subtly subvert the domination and appropriated the symbolic power of the president's picture to work in their interests. Previous stories on refusal to join The Party also show that the dominant ideology was negotiated by the students as they were not simply passive complaints.

Although most participants expressed similar resentment toward the military teacher, the nationalist slogans and the ideology in general, their description was often accompanied by a prevalent feeling that this is part of a bigger show, as Nour talked about the military teacher: 'She did not care. It was a play. She was violent and would scream and shout but it was clear for us that she was *acting'*. This tendency to believe that *everyone,* teachers and students alike, was a part of a play was confirmed by several participants: 'Everyone hated the Nationalist Education /.../ because it was very dry and full of empty slogans so everyone knew it was meaningless' (Ahmad). Moving to a more serious level, sometimes repeating the slogans clashed with some of the students' core beliefs: 'I was in a Syriac[54] church-affiliated school and we were forced to repeat *One Arab Nation* every day which is something Syriacs don't believe in. This could be even against their right to exist in Syria [as a non-Arab minority]' (Nour).

The Overt

The official rhetoric in relation to two aspects, The Party's ideology and the militarized culture, is to some extent consistent with its practices. The Pioneers organization is officially described as an 'educational and doctrinal school for the coming generation, [where] the ideology of the party will be learned by the children' (Pioneers 2013, para.3). Moreover, the constitution stipulates the objective of education to be the propagation of socialist nationalist ideology. As for the military culture, the government clearly stipulates its *raison d'etre* as taking measures to battle the Israeli occupation of Syrian and Palestinian land. These stipulations can explain the majority of the *settings* described by the students.

The Learned State

Setting: the physical arrangements: high walls, wired windows, slogans painted on the walls, the president picture and The Party's emblem in every classroom; *teachers' practices*: use of a threatening

[54] Syriacs are a Christian ethnic group. They speak, read, and write distinct dialects of Eastern Aramaic.

language, harsh physical punishment; and *procedures*: quasi-mandatory membership to The Party and participation in pro-government rallies, requirement of strict adherence to the uniform, anthems that glorify The Party and the president.

State: cognitive state: disbelief in the Party's ideology*; attitudinal state*: mistrust in the teachers and the school; and an *emotional state:* fear of teachers and the military teacher in particular.

The Hidden

First, the different stories show that students were not merely passive bearers of the dominant ideology; rather, they appropriated different powerful symbols of the ideology (e.g. the picture of the president) and contradicted the expected norms and dispositions that pervaded the school (refusal to join The Party). In return, teachers conveyed the message that conformity to the dominant ideology is rewarded, and nonconformity is punished. Also, by dismissing The Party's ideological practices (not repeating the slogans, and considering it part of a play) students were acting upon meanings and values that contested the ideology. Apple (1995:85-7) explains that when students are controlled, they attempt to articulate challenges to this control in countervailing practices that might not be as powerful and might be contradictory and relatively disorganized, but they exist. However, Apple (1995:84) argues that these contradictions the students live in might end up supporting the very same ideology that they opposed, which leads us to the second aspect.

As students unanimously dismissed, and even mocked, the ideology, it seemed at first sight that the *intended* messages-were not successful. However, delving deeper into how domination works begs the question of what does it imply for the students to continuously repeat slogans that not only contradict their beliefs but at times clash with some of their core values? Žižek's (1989:37) definition of obedience suggests a possible answer:

> The only real obedience /…/ is an 'external' one: obedience out of conviction is not real obedience because it is already 'mediated' through our subjectivity that is we are not really obeying the authority but simply following our judgment, which tells us that the authority deserves to be obeyed in so far as it is good, wise, beneficent.

According to this explanation, even when students keep an ideological distance and show they do not take what they are doing seriously they are still complying and this is what ultimately matters politically (Wedeen 2002:724). The definition also implies that obedience requires a self-conscious submission to

authority (Wedeen 1999:73). Turning back to the example of Syriac or Kurdish students who are compelled to chant *One Arab Nation* everyday; the ideology of The Party became powerful not because students meant or believed in what they were saying; rather, it maintained its dominance exactly because it forced them to verbalize the absurd. To conclude, the students have *reproduced* the dominant ideology however embodying varying layers of mediation and contradictions.

5.1.2 HCE 2 - The Arab Secular Student: assimilation as in hiding differences

A second HCE in relation to The Party's ideology is the Arab Secular element. As discussed in Chapter 2, geography in Syria often reflects ethnicity and religion. As a result, there were Christian-majority, Alawite-majority and Sunni-majority schools. Given the fact that students usually attended the nearest school to their neighborhood, their schools usually revealed the diversity, or lack thereof, of their neighborhood.

While none of the students remembered a teacher explicitly saying that it is forbidden to talk about religious or ethnic affiliations, it was clear from their accounts that this was *silently* communicated as a social taboo, just like the overwhelming majority of social norms acquired in school are implicit and hidden (Babad 2009:5). Remarkably, this taboo seems to have deep implications. Among the answers to the question of how diversity was manifested in the classroom, I distinguish two different categories of answers.

The first group answered with indifference, indicating that this was not an important topic, 'we were not concerned with this issue' (Fadi) or with a remark explaining that there was a feeling of sameness among the students 'we did not feel we were different. We *never talked about it*' (Dania). An Alawite student stated: 'I do not think there were differences between Sunnis and Alawites. Alawites were the majority in the classroom and there were also Sunnis and Christians. But we *did not discuss it*'. Just like this student, previous comments came from students belonging to the majority group in their classroom which suggests why they were not overly concerned with the issue of diversity. Moreover, they equated *not talking* about their differences with having no problems in being different. In fact, *not talking* about differences in and of itself is problematic and can reinforce misconceptions about 'the other'. As Basel said 'Since we never discussed [sectarianism] in school, or even at home, we picked up a few words from here and there, from the street and friends and then we formed our own story about others' (Basel).

Such partial knowledge about the 'other' often leads to stereotypical assumptions (Kumashiro 2000:31) as we will see.

Not talking about different affiliations in schools is particularly problematic in the Syrian context as it hides the various and complex tensions associated with the topic in real life (outlined in Chapter 2). This was reflected upon by some participants:

> *Basel:* I don't remember ever feeling any tension in the classroom because of our differences
> *Author:* Do you think this was a positive thing?
> *Basel:* I think it was good, but not realistic. It did not reflect the reality because even though I had friends from different sects and religions, I knew that there were certain neighborhoods in the city that I could not enter because of my sect.

Nonetheless, it could still be argued that the case in these students' educational experiences was not problematic but it is difficult to reach a conclusive assessment since their views constitute one side of the story.

The other side of the story was told by the second group, participants who belonged, at some point of their education, to a religious or ethnic minority in the classroom. Examples include Muslim students in majority-Christian classrooms and vice versa, Muslim-Sunni students in Muslim-Alawite-majority classrooms and vice versa, and a Kurdish student in an Arab-majority classroom[55]. In these cases, assimilation has taken two forms. First, the legislated assimilation policies to the Arab and secular identity. The second is of a more implicit nature that took place on interpersonal level.

On the legislated level, one Kurdish student recounts:

> I was aggrieved at seeing Syriacs allowed to learn and speak their language at school. It was at this early age when I first started to feel victimized on the basis of belonging to a discriminated-against minority /.../ when teachers told us we were only allowed to speak Arabic in the classroom, we would ask them why other students are allowed to speak Syriac

The Kurdish minority in Syria was specifically discriminated against for political reasons in comparison with other non-Arab minorities. For example, Syrian Armenians and Syriacs both had their own schools and were allowed to teach their languages. The quote shows that grievance was felt at an early age in school not only against the Arab majority, but also against other minorities.

[55] Usually, and as noted by the participants, teachers would also belong to the dominating majority in the school.

A similar systematic practice was to ban the headscarf in schools. In The Party's secular ideology the symbol of unveiled and 'modern' women was central to the school military uniform[56] (Vogt and Lie 2002:13). Reactions to this policy were expressed by two girls who wore the headscarf (*hijab*) when they were in school as Dania recounted

> In military classes in particular it was forbidden for girls to wear the hijab /.../ I remember that the girls tried to negotiate with the military teacher but to no avail, they even went on strike. /.../ they used to cry and feel subjugated because it was very difficult for any girl to take off her hijab

Another interviewee had a somehow different reaction:

> *Laila*: I remember this as one form of oppression, we had to remove it once we entered the school /.../ If we forgot and the military teacher saw us she would instantly shout out. /---/
> *Author*: how did you feel about it?
> *Laila*: I have to say I did not mind it as I did not want to put on the headscarf in the first place, and so when the military teacher asked me to remove it I used to feel that I had no other choice. Although this was also oppression, it was freeing me from a different kind of oppression

Laila explained that she wore the headscarf only because she lived in a very conservative neighborhood, hence school was the only place where she could be 'freed' from that restriction. This reaction is interesting because it highlights that girls who belonged to the same group, in this case the veiled girls, experienced the same act of oppression very differently[57].

I turn now to discuss the *de facto* by-products of the assimilation policy. Students brought up tensions in regard to Christian-Muslim[58] and Sunni-Alawite relations. In a school's society that discouraged 'differences', some students might have felt urged to be the same as other students as Basel's comment shows: 'in my class there was only one Christian student and her mother insisted that she took Islamic religious education with us… Maybe she did not want her daughter to feel different'. However, the opposite was not perceived to be as common, and in some cases was even averted as one Christian

[56] For The Party's secular ideology, education is an important factor in building a secular state. In 1967, The Baathist regime has nationalized all private Muslim and Christian schools although all schools still instructed both religions (Vogt and Lie 2002:8).

[57] This is not an attempt to undermine the fact that many girls felt subjugated as they were forced to remove their headscarves; however it is a remark that oppression is experienced differently. By applying Cudd's (2006:23) definition of oppression as causing 'harm through which groups of persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened, or reduced by any of several forces', I see the practice as a blatant act of oppression that inflicted grievances and feelings of subjugation.

[58] In mixed classrooms that have Muslims and Christians, students belonging to the minority in that particular classroom, whichever one it was, would leave the class during religious education and take their respective religion instruction class in the teacher's or supervisor's room. This was perhaps the only officially-acknowledged practice that seemed to invoke student's belonging to different religions in such an obvious manner.

student said ‘as a child I remember we were warned not to discuss Christianity with non-Christian classmates as this could be interpreted as missionary work. Such anxieties were difficult for us as children to fully grasp’. Although the comment comes from a student who was in a Church-affiliated school with predominantly Christian students, it highlights how the situation was handled more delicately compared to the counter example. This could be explained by the fact that Syrian Christians felt more self-conscious about their status as a minority and shied away from undertaking any actions that could be misinterpreted by others. This also highlights how perceptions of the other and social relationships experienced outside school inevitably make their way back into the classroom but with different manifestations. The opposite is also arguably plausible; as a Christian student says:

> Up until sixth grade I was never cognizant of this section [Muslim people] of society /.../ This *isolation* was not disturbing because I did not realize it existed at the time; not until I grew up. I somehow feel that part of what is happening today in Syria is because the *other* was not part of our daily life. I grew up thinking that everyone is Christian

This remark shows how school, as a site of socialization, is a place where one forms early conceptualizations about society. However, it fails to capture the complexity of the issue. Apparently, interacting with students from 'the other side' on a regular basis did not lead to addressing diversity more openly. Adel, who was in a mixed classroom, recounts:

> I remember how Christians clustered together in one group and so did Muslims, Alawites and Druze /---/ And every group had its own stereotypes about the others /.../ [in my circle] Christians were good, Sunnis were lowlifes, and Alawites were the powerful ones

As Collins (1993:33) explains, having stereotypical images about different groups is key to maintaining systems of domination. In the absence of free space for students to come together and talk about their differences, coupled with an enforced assimilationist ideology, stereotypical thinking flourishes and bonding with one’s group can bring feelings of safety and protection. As Adel highlighted, ‘The teachers were Christians. And we, Christian students, for one reason or another were special. Since we were little, I was raised to believe that Christians will protect me’. This same attitude was brought up by other participants who also thought that the teacher and/or other students from the same sect would protect them if a problem occurred. A Sunni student in a mixed classroom (Sunnis and Alawites) explained, ‘I knew that in case of trouble, my Sunni friends would defend me’.

In conclusion, students reacted differently to these inter-group tensions. As the Sunni student who mentioned a great deal of stories about the Sunni-Alawite cleavage at his school concluded: ‘In my area, the school taught us how to be divided’. The Christian student reflected ‘I wish they had taught us to be open toward each other’s. I wish we had learned more about each other, if a Muslim had come to our Sunday school[59] that might have been good’. Finally, the Kurdish student, when asked how he would like Syrian schools to look like in the future, said, unsurprisingly, that he wants students to learn whichever language they want and he would like to change history books to reflect the role Kurds played in Syria’s modern history, a topic completely dismissed from the Syrian official curriculum.

The Overt

The intended policy in regard to the Arab Secular HCE is clearly evident in article two of the founding principles of The Party: ‘The Arab nation is a cultural unit; any *differences existing among its sons are accidental.* They shall dissolve with the awakening of the pan-Arab unity’ (Baath Party 2011 emphasis added). Since the Teachers Syndicate is one of The Party’s popular organizations, article 2.a of the syndicate bylaws states the first objective of the teachers is to ‘struggle to achieve the unified Arab socialist society under the leadership of The Arab Socialist Baath Party’ (Teachers Syndicate n.d.). It is not surprising then that students were treated as Arab Syrians and that the teachers’ role was viewed as reinforcing this identity, hence explicit expressions of different identities were not tolerated.

Secondly, the systematic oppression of Kurds and denying them the right to speak or teach their language is also legislated (Ziadeh 2009). In discussing the destructive role of education, Bush and Saltarelli (2000:10) depict the act of depriving a minority of its right to teach its language, forcefully assimilating it to the majority dominant language, as a ‘weapon in cultural repression’. The Syrian government was direct in its repressive policy; in intention, legislation and act[60].

[59] Churches usually have affiliated clubs, called *Akhaweyya* in Arabic, which organizes various activities for Christian children and youth, including recreational activities, trips, festivals, and camps.

[60] As for the policy to ban the hijab, I was not able to find the legal text of this law. I found some information that there was a decree in 1983 banning the headscarf and it was removed in 2003, however, I could not verify this information from reliable sources. Hence, I consider removing the hijab to be somewhere between an overt and a hidden practice as it was not legally enforced.

The Learned State

Settings: procedures: forcing girls to remove their headscarf; classroom that is divided in the religious instruction class.

State: attitudinal state: seeking help from one's group; *emotional state:* fear of talking about sectarian differences, feelings of subjugation; *cognitive state:* learning that 'the other' is not part of society; or learning that 'the other' is part of my society but talking about differences is not tolerated; thrusting stereotypes upon 'the other'.

The Hidden

Students experienced subordination through imposed assimilation. While the openly acknowledged outcome of the assimilationist ideology was the systematic oppression of Kurds and veiled girls, the hidden outcome of this ideology was the sanctioning of expressions of differences which ushered in misconceptions and stereotypical thinking about 'the other'. The stories demonstrate that interacting with other groups was, in itself, not sufficient to erase stereotypes and create understanding. Conversely, it worked to foster hostilities and misconceptions when differences were camouflaged by a permeable facade of 'sameness'. As a result, students lived in dual realities, one in which they were conscious of their differences and another in which they *learned* to pretend that they were the same[61].

Groups that were subject to stereotypes and biases were not static but shifting depending on the context and power relations in the school, which is often the case with oppressed groups in schools whose identities are fluid and contested (Kumashiro 2000). For instance, a Sunni student who felt subjugated in an Alawite-dominated school felt 'powerful' and was treated differently in one of the classes where the teacher was Sunni. Paradoxically, the student was not aware how in this particular class his Alawite classmates might have felt subjugated by the teacher; this is one of the complex facets of how oppression works: the oppressed groups have little difficulty identifying their oppression, but they show little insight as to how their membership in some groups is implicated in repressing others (De Lissovoy 2008:87). In the same vein, only the Kurdish student, for instance, pointed to the structural oppression of

[61] Here it is important to make the distinction that the students' different ethnic and sectarian identities were not problematic per se, but suppressing these identities by not giving them the chance to discuss and reflect on their differences was the problem. Put differently, being different is not a source of grievance, but rather the way these differences were addressed and often suppressed is the problem (Bush and Saltarelli 2000).

banning the Kurdish language in school. Although many other students mentioned that they had Kurdish classmates in school, it did not occur to them that their classmates might have felt oppressed by this practice. Finally, the different reactions of the veiled girls show that members of the same group do not necessarily experience the oppression exercised upon them in the same way, as we are all situated in a myriad set of social identities (Collins 1993).

Despite the fluidity in boundaries of the oppressed groups in the school, perceptions and attitudes were inherently forged by the reality outside school; Alawites were still perceived as 'powerful' even if they were subjugated in school; Christians still internalized the concerns of a minority even when they constituted the majority in school and Kurds held grievances against the Arab majority even when the teacher and the majority of students were Kurds. School is once again seen as a site for reproducing oppressive practices and hostilities through varying degrees of contestations.

5.2 HCE 3 - The Special Student: nurturing the culture of privilege

One phrase that came up in almost every interview was 'I was special'[62]. The reasons varied. As expected, sources of 'privileging' students came from both the direct officially-acknowledged practices, and the hidden practices.

Starting with the legislated, officially acknowledged practices. A practice that favored students who are loyal to the *authority* was running summer camps in the summer break one year before and one directly after the Baccalaureate National Exam (which usually takes place in June). To join the camp, the student must be member of The Party and on the basis of completing either one of the pre- and post-exam camps, the student can earn up to extra 20 marks in the final exam which enhances her admission chances for a university degree. A student who refused to join The Party in tenth grade recounted that as he heard about the chances to get extra marks he tried again to join The Party in eleventh grade 'I did not believe in The Party but I joined for the extra marks' (Wael). Two other participants mentioned similar stories and the same reason for joining The Party. Through granting this *undeserved* privilege (i.e. extra marks), The Party is gaining more legitimacy and the students who dismissed The Party's ideology found a way to rationalize their behavior.

[62] The Arabic word for special *momayaz* is a tricky one as it can be also translated to 'distinctive, privileged, differentiated' and it shares the root of the word 'privilege' *imtiyaz*.

Moving to the hidden and unacknowledged practices, the most common source of feeling privileged in this category often came from a ‘special’ treatment by the teacher or one of the administrative staff on the basis of personal relationship with the students’ parents: ‘in tenth grade, I was special because the teacher knew my father’ (Fadi), ‘my teacher was our neighbor. My mother would often visit her and tell her to take care of me. Sometimes she gave me the exam questions one day in advance. /... /she used to do this with several other students in the class’ (Adel). Other than personal relationship with the teacher, high-achievers were also preferred by the teacher ‘in sixth grade the teacher used to ask us to grade other students homework because we were high-achievers’ (Nour). Special treatment also included placing the special students in the front of the classroom. Ideally, the students should be seated according to their height. But soon after the school year begins, a student’s position would be an important indicator of the teacher’s favored students ‘the high-achievers and polite sit in the front and the lazy or misbehaving ones in the back’ (Suzan). Locations in the Syrian classroom were apparently significant, which confirms a consensus in the educational research that seating arrangements are meaningful and often reflect hidden social phenomena (Babad 2009:116)[63].

Parents seemed to be active partners in pursuing differential treatment for their children:

> It was very common in my surroundings for parents to ask the teacher to give their children private lessons at home in an attempt to raise the student’s grades. In that way, the teacher would give the students hints on what to expect in exams. /.../ My mom was doing this for my brother (Nour)

As this might be one form of illegal attempt to bribe the teacher, there was one day in the year when 'bribery becomes legitimate', that is the Teacher Day which was also brought up by the majority of participants. This was a public holiday in Syrian schools. In primary education, it was common that students bring presents the day after the public holiday while in secondary education it became less salient: ‘if the student came from a wealthy family, her family would send a fancy present to the teacher so that she gets a special treatment’ (Rawan). Not all teachers were welcoming of the practice, but parents were more inclined to do this as long as they could afford it:

> Our teacher was very determined in asking us not to bring any present because she knew that we belonged to different social classes, there were poor, rich, and official’s children in the class and the teacher was critical of this so she did not want to cause any tensions. Nonetheless, I remember one student brought her

[63] Seating locations and their influence on the learning process have been an important domain in educational research, see for example (Montello 1988; Pedersen 1977; Çinar 2010)

> a present worth 500 SP and my father’s salary at the time was 600 SP. Some students still insisted and brought her gold (Ahmad)

One of the most normalized patterns that came up in the interviews was the preferential treatment for children of teachers and high officials. Some of the participants did not even mention it when I asked if there was any kind of discrimination in the classroom until I specified. 'Yes, sure this is *normal*. The teacher's child was in the same classroom with me throughout my primary education' (Basel). The teacher’s child would *normally* be seated in the front and most likely get full marks[64].

As for the children of officials, officials usually point to army, intelligence, or high-ranking government officers. In some cases, it also refers to relatives of the president who used to come to school with fancy cars, hence they were very distinguished by all students ‘we knew them from either the military car /.../ or other fancy cars. The most powerful of them were accompanied by bodyguards’ (Adel). Students coming from these backgrounds were the most powerful due to their connection with the regime’s apparatus. While not all of them abused this power, many students recounted stories when a teacher or the head of school stood helpless in front of a powerful student. One participant who mentioned a lot of stories involving insulting the teacher, disrupting the class, concluded ‘I was sitting in one side of the classroom along with around 12 other students who were *connected*[65], among us there was a son of a general [in the army] and another of a major. So no one could talk to us’. Another student mentioned her experience in the Basic Education National Exam when the supervisor in the classroom was checking the information from her exam paper to then relate them to another student who was *connected.*

One student reflected on the previous practices: ‘They taught us if you are good, powerful, then do not look after others, as if they want to guarantee that we do not cooperate or be compassionate with each other' (Wael). This attitude was also echoed by Fadi: 'I wish we learned how to work in a group and how we complement each other /.../ Instead; we learned that you are smart if you deceive others'. What made the students feel further isolated from each other is the *collective punishment and individual praise* technique that was used by the teachers. Group work was completely absent from the classroom. Wisam mentioned ‘we had a teacher who asked us once to work on the math problems together but we made fun of him’. Students were used to be praised for individual effort; hence group work was strange as

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[64] This is mostly prevalent in primary education where there is one teacher for all subjects and teachers would also favor other teachers’ children.

[65] In Syria, people who have strong relations to the ruling apparatus and usually rely on nepotism for their affairs are referred to as ‘supported’, ‘connected’ or ‘have access’

individual effort would not be recognizable. Conversely, if someone misbehaved (made a noise or wrote something unpleasant on the board) and the teacher could not recognize the source, the whole class would be punished.

Finally, Wael reflected on the 'culture of privilege':

> When I was in school, I used to enjoy the culture of privilege because I was privileged and I did not empathize with the underprivileged /---/. If I have the choice now I would eliminate all cases of discrimination that would privilege groups at the expense of others

Wael's remark touches upon a critical aspect of being a member of a privileged group. Aside from this note, the majority of other sources were not aware or critical of their own privileges. For example, the student who felt angry about the supervisor relating her information to another student mentioned that the head of school knew her parents so when she needed special requests she directly asked him because their relationship was built on 'trust' as she said. The other participant who was a member of the disruptive and *connected* group, also talked extensively about other stories where he felt discriminated against, however has not reflected on his behavior in the classroom how it could have affected other students as well as the teacher.

The Overt

Before 2004, 25% of university admissions went to students who are members of The Party. The percentage has gradually decreased since then (Wilson 2004)[66]. Students who performed best for the RYU were also granted scholarships, state jobs and priority access to universities (Hinnebusch 1980). As for the equal treatment of students, the Syrian Government (1995, para.48-50) stipulates that 'All citizens are equal before the law in regard to their rights and obligations' and reaffirms that education is a right guaranteed by the state and that The Party treats all citizens equally in human value with no discrimination on grounds of sex, origin, language or religion.

[66] For more information on the university admission process and how the youth perceive it as a corrupt system, see Buckner (2013).

The Learned State

Setting: physical arrangement: seating locations; *procedures:* Teacher Day; *teacher's practices:* preferential treatment for children of teachers and officials; collective punishment and individual praise.

State: emotional state: subjugation; *cognitive state:* learning to seek individual praise.

The Hidden

The Special Student HCE uncovers several facets of privilege and power. For one, many have normalized certain kinds of privilege (the children of officials and teachers). Second, everyone recognized and protested other types of privilege. Third, participants showed little tendency to reflect on their own privilege and how it was playing out in the classroom. Hence, it could be argued that since everyone felt 'special' in one way or another, then everyone might have participated, directly or indirectly, in causing others to be underprivileged, hence subjugated and oppressed.

One form of oppression that took completely different dynamics than the rest is when a teacher felt *powerless* confronting a child who is connected to the State apparatus. Revisiting the six social powers, five of which were available for teachers, the student's *referent power* seemed to have subverted all the teacher's other powers. This is a reflection of the distorted relations outside the school where the society is built on loyalty and affinity; close supporters of the regime have unquestionable authority and sit on the highest position in the power hierarchy (al-Haj Saleh 2015). But what does a reversed teacher-student power imbalance entail? Faced with absurd disturbance of power relations, it could be argued that the teacher is subject to one form of oppression that cast feelings of impotence and subjugation. In order to reject their inability to act, oppressed might attend to identifying with a person or group having power (Freire 1996:59). In this case, teachers might turn to identify with the powerful students through submission while tending to exercise different dynamics of oppression onto other students. Hence, teachers become the oppressors and the oppressed.

The technique that helped maintain the contradictory and distorted relations of oppression was the individual praise and collective punishment. *Divide-and-rule* is a fundamental dimension of how oppressive action works (Freire 1996:122). This technique helped keep students weakened as a group

and created deepened rifts among them. Students internalized that powerfulness comes from *individual* privilege, which arguably worked in the interest of maintaining the oppressive actions.

5.3 HCE 4 - The Donkey Student: dehumanization and its backlash

The phrase a 'donkey student' might sound disturbing to someone not familiar with the Syrian context. However, the participants mentioned it was a very *normal* discourse in the classroom: '[teachers] did not use bad words, *only* donkey, ass, rude' (Fadi), and 'I don't remember any teacher motivated us apart from using words like you donkey, ass, animal' (Adel). Common phrases also included 'Stay calm, you lizard' (Laila) and 'O donkey, if I see you smiling I will take out your teeth' (Nour). Other than *normalizing* this language, one participant mentioned that they used to feel like grownups when his teacher used to say dirty talk in the class.

Animalistic depiction was not only limited to language. One way of punishing the students in primary education included attaching a tail or a paper that read 'I am a donkey' on the back of the student and asking her to walk in the schoolyard during the break. Ahmad talked about one of his teachers:

> He used to sometimes draw a point in the center of the blackboard and ask us to stare at the point. He threatened us if he finds any of us not looking at the point he would punish us. Sometimes he brought grass with him /.../ He was sadist. He used to bring, what he purported was a lie-detector machine using it to ask us random questions like what did you eat today? If he was in a bad mood he would say 'you are a liar. Either eat the grass or I will hit you'.

This is a particular teacher who deliberately *dehumanized* the students. Though this could not be generalized, it highlights the unquestionable authority of the teacher and the absence of accountability measures. As for other forms of corporal punishment, one of the prevalent methods was *falaka*[67], where the teacher would ask one or two students to fix the punished student on the chair. Students also stressed that this kind of practices would often go unnoticed unless the student is *supported*. Some students internalized these punishments as an act of care, as one participant recounted a very brutal punishment by one of his teachers. He explained, however, that he was *special* for this teacher in particular and this was the only time the teacher hit him, so he read it as an act of love and care about him for not studying hard enough. Another strong factor that contributed to normalizing the corporal punishment was the parents' role. All participants mentioned one or more stories when they were either slapped on the face,

[67] *Falaka* or *falanga* is a corporal punishment method that includes foot whipping. See Figure C-7 in Appendix C

or hit by the ruler as part of a collective punishment and stressed that this felt humiliating. However, when asked about their parents' reaction, all mentioned that they did not do anything. Some parents would blame their children for having done something wrong; many participants said they did not even tell their parents in such incidents.

Some students reacted in a different way than internalizing or normalizing the act. A few participants mentioned stories when a student wrote swear words on the board insulting the teacher. Three participants also talked about incidents when a student hit a teacher in a brutal way. Some of the students in these stories had family connections so they were not punished. Adel mentioned a notable reaction by other students, as bystanders, 'we used to degrade a student beating a teacher. But deep inside we felt *happy'*. Why would they feel happy inside? Oppressed by the teachers' violent acts, students' worldview is contradictory and shaped by and existing in a concrete situation of oppression and violence as Freire (1996:37) suggests. By trying to restore their humanity, the students' reaction was as violent as the initial violence of the oppressor. They identified with the teacher and became themselves 'sub-oppressors' (Freire 1996:27).

The Overt

According to the Syrian Government (2004, para.376): 'Violence is not tolerated in schools. The guidelines of the Ministry of Education instruct the teachers to use only educational means of discipline and to refrain from using physical or moral punishment with the children'. The law also specifies the legal penalty for abusers in schools. However, it does not point to a monitoring policy or a procedure to lodge a complaint.

The Learned State

Setting: procedures: corporal punishment; *teacher's practice:* use of animalistic depictions in the language.

State: emotional state: humiliation, low self-esteem; *cognitive state*: reading the act of beating as an act of care and the use of swearing language as an act of mutuality.

The Hidden

Dehumanizing is a distortion of becoming fully human. Oppressors define the oppressed as subordinate and undeserving and morally exclude them from the realm of ethical behavior that they would apply to themselves, hence do not feel bound to behave toward the oppressed in moral ways. This leads to dehumanization of victims, where the oppressed are not perceived as human beings (Prilleltensky and Gonick 1996:137). The teachers, when blatantly beating a student in a humiliating manner they become dehumanized as well, though in a different way, because they prevented others from becoming fully human (Freire 1996:26). The students, being either passive bystanders or becoming engaged in a violent act against the teachers have also contributed to the distorted reality of oppression and violence. In particular, when a teacher is hit by a student while standing helpless, is once again breaking the dichotomous definition of oppressor-oppressed. Similar to the hidden layers of oppression in HCE 3, the teachers here were subject to a form of oppression that was often-overlooked in the students narratives.

5.4 Discussion: dialectics of oppression in the Syrian schools... and the way out

In this section, I discuss the findings and revisit the RQs and the operational sub-question.

5.4.1 HCEs - What are the overt and the learned?

To sum up the HCEs, the first two corresponded to the overt and official discourse. A Baathist Soldier and an Arab Secular student were coherent with the government's indoctrinating and militarizing messages. The overt policy helped explain a few of the practices in these two HCEs. Conversely, the last two HCEs, a Special Student and a Donkey Student rest on the extreme opposite of the government official discourse promoting equality and no-violence policy in schools. However, in all cases, the learned and the hidden outcomes revealed completely different aspects from the overt, which underlines that the majority of what is learned in school does not come from the formal curriculum.

The learned states (LSs) constituted various settings including *physical arrangements* such as seating locations and walls decorations; *teacher's practices* such as the use of a threatening language and corporal punishment; and *procedures* such as quasi-mandatory participation in pro-government rallies, the Teacher Day present tradition, and the collective punishment and individual praise method. As for the states, all students recognized the indoctrinating nature of the dominant ideology and dismissed it. The teacher-student relationship was often built on fear and mistrust. Students felt humiliated for having

been subject to harsh corporal punishments and military-style treatment. Some, however, have internalized the teachers' use of force as an act of care, and their use of swearing language as an act of mutual treatment. Further, suppressing different social identities was silently communicated in schools and students addressed their diverse classrooms environments through resorting to their comfort zones: building stereotypes about 'the other' and seeking support from their own group when a problem occurs. Similarly, students learned that they are not part of a larger group; what mattered is their individual status and showing signs of loyalty to The Party and to the president. They also normalized the 'nature of privilege' and learned that being *special,* i.e. receiving preferential treatment, was something good when applied on themselves, however, they were critical of other privileged students.

5.4.2 Resolving the hidden contradictions: oppression oppresses everyone

The students' stories illustrated that oppression manifested in tacit and explicit ways, embedding different layers of contradictions while reproducing a state of oppression in society. Everyday practices of domination were recognized by the students, yet their role in reproducing the dominant ideology did not seem immediately recognizable. Their shared perceptions of unbelief might counteract the effect of the dominant ideology, but at the same time reproduce the self-consciousness reinforcing it. This highlights the *dialectical* relationship between ideology and practice, as practices produce ideological renditions and ideology becomes real because it is forged in practice (Wedeen 2002).

Similarly, the stories brought up cases where they felt oppressed either directly by the teachers or the administrative staff, or indirectly by feeling underprivileged or discriminated against as a member of a group. Absent from most of the stories was self-reflection on one's role in reproducing inequalities and inflicting oppression on others, whether students or teachers. In other words, the stories corresponded to upholding the *preferred identity* as oppressed students. Hence, it was difficult to recognize how students sometimes have themselves identified with their oppressor, the teacher and the school in this case. This preferred identity, I argue, has also resulted in downplaying two factors in the way students perceived oppression.

Firstly, parents' involvement was often underemphasized. I argue that parents were active accomplices, both through action (such as sending fancy presents to the teachers) or inaction (allowing humiliating practices by the teachers). Secondly, the structural conditions that might have impelled the teacher to use

force or accept the 'legitimate bribery' were mentioned by a few students only. For example, teachers were underpaid in comparison to living costs which was the reason why most teachers either give private lessons or have a second part-time job. Another condition is the large number of students in the classroom, amounting to 50 or 60 in some cases, the average being 30. In absence of psychological support[68] by the school, teachers were made responsible for dealing with critical cases. These few conditions help give a partial explanation as to the teachers resort to force as a quick and effective solution to stop the class disruption. Not to mention that some non-conforming teachers must have also been subject to degrading practices by higher employers in the hierarchy. Overlooking the previous factors would make it difficult to understand the contradictory nature of oppression, which takes me to the last point.

In discussing The Hidden outcomes in the previous section, I sometimes claimed the student as the oppressed and the powerless, other times the teacher was labeled as the oppressed identifying with the powerful student. Precisely this is how I summarize the discussion. Like Freire, I step outside the binary thinking in labeling one group or individual as oppressor and other as oppressed, or one group oppression as more important than the other. I believe that the contradiction will be resolved by breaking the dichotomy, by speaking of neither oppressor nor oppressed.

I want to make sure this is not understood as an argument that students were *equally* oppressed as their teachers. This is not an attempt to compare as to who was oppressed *more* than the other. Rather, this is an argument that oppression is complex, nonlinear and so often there was no static oppressor and oppressed. There were many interlinking conditions at interplay. In order to become fully human, as Freire (1996) says, oppressed and oppressors need to acknowledge that everyone is human and everyone is oppressed *differently*. Resolving the contradiction is the first step in breaking the chain of oppression.

5.4.3 Breaking the chain

Once the contradiction is settled, other aspects can be considered. As concluded from the analysis and discussion, oppression plays out differently for different people in different contexts. The multiple and fluid identities of students make it difficult for any anti-oppressive efforts to revolve around only *one* form of oppression against *one* social group. What is needed, perhaps, is then efforts that target the

[68] School psychologists were introduced to schools only in 2000 (Syrian Government 2004, para.236)

multiplicity of oppression while keeping the boundaries of oppressed social groups fluid and situated as Kumashiro (2000:30) suggests. Further, it is important to recognize that the dynamics of oppression in schools are not confined solely to the ways in which students are treated by teachers or by other students. As we saw, oppression was *dialectically* reproducing a distorted world outside the school; hence changing interpersonal relations and individual prejudices is not sufficient, if not coupled with broader change in structural oppression outside the school. On the other hand, we cannot eliminate oppression by simply getting rid of the rulers or the oppressor, nor by only making new laws and procedures. As stressed earlier, oppression is reproduced in various ways and while many people benefit from it they do not recognize themselves as agents of oppression.

Therefore, overcoming oppression is also nonlinear, complex and situated. In an attempt to prevent an inversion of an oppressor-oppressed role, Freire (1996:42) advocates constant reflection by those who are willing to make a change: ‘those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly’. He (Freire and Freire 1998:69) intends to create a new order where students and teachers

> can be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy. /.../ Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. Hope is an indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. Without it, instead of history we would have pure determinism.

A philosophy of hope pedagogy upheld by Freire revolves around the students expressing themselves without the fear of authoritarian or autocratic practices, including principles of mutuality, respect, free will, and dialogue in place of mistrust, prescriptive, and fear imposed in an oppressive system.

6 Conclusion

Stories have the power to direct and change our lives
(Noddings 1991:157)

Using narrative inquiry, I asked 16 Syrian former students, who were forcibly displaced to Gaziantep, Turkey to recount stories about their schools back in Syria. The underlying assumption was that Syria lived under authoritarianism for 50 years; hence life in schools has inevitably been colored by hues of oppression outside the school. My overarching purpose was to inform anti-oppressive educational initiatives in the future through better understanding of how oppression played out in the past. Also, I

emphasized the Global Development discussion on the need to contextualize educational interventions instead of profiling one-size-fits-all solutions. As for expanding the development discussion beyond numbers, I highlighted that assessing a country's educational system in terms of numbers only is not only partial, but can be deceitful if not accompanied with broader discussion on qualitative aspects, contextual specificities as well as socio-political considerations.

In Chapter 2, I contextualized the discussion on education for Syrians (macro) where I showed that the ideological project pervaded the educational sector in Syria at a detrimental cost to the quality of the education itself. In Chapter 3, I explained and reflected on my methodological choices. Then, in Chapter 4 I presented the overt and covert role of schooling and I conceptualized oppression and ways to overcome it in order to be examined through the hidden curriculum in Chapter 5. Through looking into four hidden curriculum elements and different manifestations of oppression in the everyday life (micro), I highlighted the contradictory nature of oppression where everyone was oppressed *differently*. I also discussed how the situation of oppression was nourished by an unjust order beyond the school walls. Schools served as sites to reproduce oppression *dialectically*.

To overcome oppression in schools, I argued that the oppressor/oppressed contradiction should be resolved before starting to embark on anti-oppressive education. For future interventions that aim to bring about positive changes, I provided pivotal points for educators and students to engage in a reflection and reinvention process. For oppression not to mutate in a new cycle, learning process can be built on the learners' reality; where they can consider a possibility for new makings of their world.

Finally, I end with a quote and a question. During a conversation with a 14-year-old Syrian boy about his new school in Turkey he said 'the only difference is that they replaced the picture of Hafez al-Assad with the Revolution flag' in reference to the flag adopted after the 2011 uprising. Is that the change that Syrians want? If not, then it's time to reflect and create change that brings in new possibilities...

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Background

When were you born and where did you grow up?
What can you tell me about your family?
What can you tell me about your city/village?
How can you describe to me the everyday life in your city/village at school-age? How has it changed over the years?
What can you tell me about your parents' role during your school time?
What do they wish they could have done differently or better?
What do you thank them for?

School

What can you tell me about your school?
How did a typical day in your school look like?
Would you describe to me in details the school and classroom as you are seeing them now.
What are the items that you kept from school?
If you were to change one thing, what would it be?
How does your utopia school look like?
What do you think you have learned in school?
Which aspects of your school experience you wish for your children/next generation to live and which aspects you wish they never have to experience?

Appendix B: Profiles of interviewees

Name	Sex	Date of Birth	Years since left Syria	Interview date
Fadi	Male	1989	2	2/8/2015
Nour	Female	1984	1	2/9/2015
Waseem	Male	1990	2	2/10/2015
Suzan	Female	1987	2	2/11/2015
Amir	Male	1986	3	2/12/2015
Ahmad	Male	1983	--	2/12/2015
Wael	Male	1987	3	2/13/2015
Dania	Female	1983	2	2/14/2015
Adel	Male	1981	3	2/14/2015
Laila	Female	1980	1	2/15/2015
Neveen	Female	1980	1	2/15/2015
Basel	Male	1988	2	2/16/2015
Rawan	Female	1983	1	2/16/2015
Joolnar	Female	1983	3	2/17/2015
Hala	Female	1984	1	2/17/2015
Karam	Male	1988	1	2/17/2015

Appendix C: Snapshots from the Syrian school life under the Baath Party

Figure C-1 The Pioneers wearing their full uniform (apron, sidecap, and neckerchief) while repeating the pledge during the school morning assembly.[69] Date unknown. Source: YouTube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-4VpNiJhLM

Figure C-2 Students in schoolyard during one of the national festivals. In the back, the Syrian and Baath flags together with the picture of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad wearing military uniform. 2014. Source: http://www.homsgovernorate.org.sy/index.php?cat=show&id=3728

Figure C-3 A typical public school from the outside. A saying by Hafez al-Assad is written on the wall outside. On the right, the word Pioneers is written. Date unknown. Source: http://www.fayrozah-sy.net/articles/article7.html

Figure C-4 The military-like secondary school uniform. Date unknown. Source: http://www.souria.com/ar/em/cs/cover.asp?c_v=78

[69] Since this picture is a close-up, I blurred the students faces because I could not make sure they were asked for consent when it was taken.

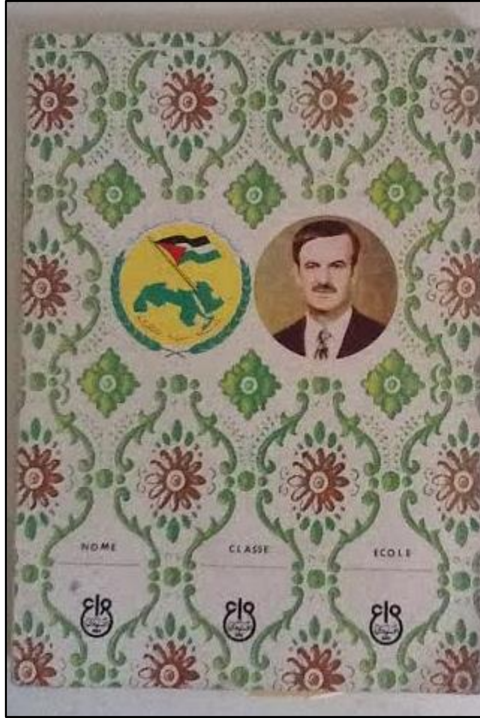

Figure 6-5 Notebook used in Syrian schools in the past showing the picture of the previous president and the emblem of The Party. Date unknown. Source: Facebook

Figure C-6 Recent photo for military training run by the Revolutionary Youth Union - Damascus Branch. The training is part of a summer camp organized by the RYU, however, it resembles the practices that were carried out during the military instruction classes. 2015. Source: Facebook page of the Revolutionary Youth Union - Damascus Branch: https://www.facebook.com/dbryu

Figure C-7 *Falaka* in a Syrian school. The photo is taken from a video that was posted on Facebook in September 2010. The video went viral and led to a campaign titled “Help us expose the identity of the two teachers who abused our children”. 2010. Source: http://www.factjo.com/pages/fullnews.aspx?id=20160

Appendix D: Official documents on the educational system in Syria

National Report on the Educational Development In the Syrian Arab Republic. *The 47th International Conference of Education Held in Geneva 2004*. Avilable at: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/National_Reports/ICE_2004/syria_ocr.pdf

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UNESCO world data on education. http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/services/online-materials/world-data-on-education.html

Centre for Civil and Political Rights: http://www.ccprcentre.org/country/syrian-arab-republic/

Syrian Government, 1995. *Convention on the Rights of the Child. Initial reports of States parties due in 1995 Addendum SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC*, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

The Pioneers official website: http://www.syrianpioneers.org.sy/