

Education and chronic crisis in Palestine

by Susan Nicolai

Development of a largely secular and modern education system in the Occupied Palestinian Territory over the past decade was mainly due to strong local leadership and external support.

The Palestinian education system has emerged through its formative years against a backdrop of on-going crisis, repeated emergency and intensifying restrictions on movement. When the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) was established as a result of the Oslo Accords, Palestinians were in charge of their own education system for the first time in history. Since 1994, when the Palestinian Authority (PA) was formed, enrolment in all schools has risen from 650,000 children to over a million, an increase of more than 50% in a decade. During this time, the MoEHE has struggled to establish mechanisms for planning, budgeting and coordination while coping with student growth and the chronic crisis of occupation.

(the Civil Administration) had full authority over all education matters in the West Bank and Gaza. Government schools reported to the occupying administration which was staffed by uniformed military personnel. Only minimal funding was provided, almost entirely to cover teachers' salaries. Construction of new schools and teacher training were virtually non-existent. The management

discrimination and closures by establishing a parallel system of 'popular education'. Schools began working with university faculties and with NGOs to create home schools and prepare take-home lessons. The Israeli Civil Administration responded by criminalising home education and imposing jail sentences and heavy fines on organisers. The impact of these years continues to be felt: increased discipline problems and fascination with resistance appear to have contributed to a drop in academic standards at various levels of education.

Hebron
checkpoint



Arrested development

In 2000, after six years of struggle to establish an education system, just as focus began to shift to improving quality by creating a new curriculum and improving teaching, the second *intifada* – the al-Aqsa *intifada* – began. Even before this, the creation of the new education system occurred

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), education is compulsory for ten years, followed by two non-compulsory years of secondary education culminating in the Tawjihi general examination. The PA – through the MoEHE – runs 76% of all schools and educates 67% of all school children. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) administers 13% of schools and teaches 24% of the students, while the private sector caters for 6% of students. Schools run by UNRWA offer grades 1-10 but do not provide secondary education.

The starting point

Prior to the Oslo Accords, from 1967-1994 the Israeli military government

system was highly centralised and information was withheld from teachers and administrators. Any mention of Palestinian heritage, culture or geography was forbidden.

When the first *intifada* erupted in December 1987, the impact on education was dramatic. Many teachers were forced to retire, teachers unions were prohibited and students were expelled, arrested and prevented from travelling abroad. Palestinian schools were closed for extended periods and some universities shut down for more than four years. A number of schools were taken over as detention centres.

Education became a centre of nationalist struggle during this time, with Palestinians battling

within an increasingly fractured geography. Oslo created a 'cartographic cheeseboard', and as Israeli settlements grew, the already separate West Bank and Gaza were further sectioned into a series of enclaves. Areas over which the PA had jurisdiction were often physically separate, with movement between them requiring Israeli permission. Restrictions have increased to the extent that movement between MoEHE headquarters in Ramallah and offices in Gaza is now impossible.

A new Palestinian curriculum has been developed and introduced progressively since 2000. With the conflict at centre stage, this effort has been politicised from many angles. Allegations that Palestinian textbooks incite hatred received international

attention. While unsubstantiated, they have had major impact with some donors shifting funding away from education. Many schools have photos of children and youths shot dead by Israeli soldiers prominently displayed. These posters of 'martyrs' – as they are commonly referred to – become the theme of long discussions. One teacher from Gaza explained that "Our kids have become politicians; they are still young children but they think and act much older than their age."

Palestinian school days are lost due to curfews and other movement restrictions, with students detained and lives lost during military incursions. In April 2002, the Ministry building in Ramallah was severely damaged by the Israeli military who confiscated equipment and records. The 275 schools within 500 metres of an Israeli military post are particularly unsafe. Since the outbreak of the Al Aqsa *intifada* MoEHE reports that 43 schools have at some point been occupied and turned into Israeli military bases. Between 2000-2005, around three thousand schoolchildren were detained by the occupying forces.

While the occupation has been the main factor causing these difficulties, internal Palestinian political divisions, corruption and incompetence have played their own part in holding back educational progress. Coping with the occupation has been a necessary fact of life for administrators, teachers and students. During the second *intifada*, closures, curfews, permits, demolitions and the separation wall have made coordination and development of the education sector nearly impossible.

Rights and violations

International law enshrines a right to education for every child. In the OPT those with the duty to fulfil this right – the PA, MoEHE, district education authorities, principals, teachers and parents – are for the large part constrained by the occupation authorities who do little to respect or protect education and other related rights.

Despite the ostensible post-Oslo transfer of powers, the PA has not taken on full sovereign control.

In practice Israel continues its jurisdiction throughout the OPT through an extensive system of curfews and closures. Aimed at protecting civilians under military occupation, the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and its related Protocols comprise the applicable body of international humanitarian law (IHL), although application is disputed by Israel. Obligations in relation to education are enshrined in both IHL, human rights law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which Israel has ratified:

- Schools are guaranteed protection from military attacks and attacking schools is classed as a war crime.
- In situations of military occupation, the occupying power must facilitate institutions devoted to the care and education of children and ensure provision of free and compulsory education at primary level, with accessible secondary and technical education.
- Education should be non-discriminatory and gender-equitable with access for children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and unaccompanied children.
- Education must strengthen respect for human rights, promote peace, build on a child's potential and support their cultural identity.

It is difficult for schools to escape violence when surrounded by it. A teacher frames the obvious question: "How can schools be non-violent when there is violence all around ...? If world powers use force to achieve their aims, can less be expected here?" Efforts to forbid corporal punishment, humiliation and collective punishment in schools have only been partially successful.

It is not just violence or its ever-present threat that affects children, but also the daily process of dealing with checkpoints, waiting in queues or elaborate diversions to attempt to bypass military checkpoints. Boredom due to stringent safety restrictions and movement controls adds additional stress to children's lives and can lead to aggression against younger children.

Hope is in short supply. A Save the Children survey found that only two out of 120 children asked thought they would see a Palestinian state in the next decade. Amidst such despair, children and their families see education as their one hope and a way to keep safe. Education is a key strategy for keeping children out of violent clashes, since having young people at school helps reduce the risk of confrontation with Israeli troops and settlers. When no place is safe for a child, schools and teachers represent some type of authority. Schools are generally seen to be safer than nearly anywhere else – yet little is being done to openly discuss or address violence in Palestinian society and its impact on school life.

Conclusion

Given that the Palestinian education system only started to be developed in 1994, following a century of outside rule, there is much to be proud of. However, over the past decade the OPT has slid back and forth along the continuum of acute conflict to post-conflict, through chronic crises and then back to an acute stage. This analysis of Palestinian education concludes, as other studies have done, that fulfilling Palestinian children's educational and other rights is crucially dependent on an end to the occupation. Going to school continues to put students and teachers at risk as they cope with the violence in their everyday lives. Strict movement controls, humiliation at checkpoints and loss of land and livelihoods have led to a feeling that even education has little hope to offer the average child. But Palestinians also know that to give up on education would be to give up on hope all together.

While drawn from a specific context of prolonged occupation, several lessons from OPT may be applicable in other situations of chronic crisis:

- The inclusion of education in a peace agreement is vital in clarifying authority. Palestinian negotiators ensured that education was among the first sectors handed over in the Oslo Accords, significant as it is one of the largest and most visible services of any governing authority.

- When a formal system has broken down, non-formal education can be an important strategy in maintaining learning. During the first intifada, 'popular education' was an attempt to make up for a collapsing education system, made possible through grassroots organisations, charitable societies and NGOs.
- Criticism of curriculum content is likely to reflect the wider political environment. The Palestinian curriculum on the whole withstands the harsher accusations of those who claim it incites hatred; however awkward in parts, it could arguably have done more to promote an understanding of the 'other'.
- If harsh controls affecting education are external to the system, little can be done to stop these actions and focus shifts to mitigating the consequences. In Palestinian education, the human suffering, infrastructure damage and interruption of services have largely been outside of educationalists' control.
- An accumulation of risk factors can lead to a situation that jeopardises children's development and should be addressed in the school environment. Palestinian children themselves say they need to develop skills to stay safe, focus on personal improvement and strengthen relationships with others. They also say that

education is their main means to improve their situation.

Susan Nicolai is an education advisor for Save the Children UK. Email: s.nicolai@savethechildren.org.uk.

*This is a summary of her forthcoming book, **Fragmented foundations: education and chronic crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory**, International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO, 2006, soon to be available online at www.unesco.org/iiep/PDF/pubs.*

*For more information about the lives of Palestinian children, see **Eye-to-Eye** www.savethechildren.org.uk/eyetoeye*