

Schooling at Gunpoint: Palestinian Children's Learning Environment in War like Conditions

The Ramallah/al-Bireh/Beitunia Urban Center

Rita Giacaman, Anita Abdullah, Rula Abu Safieh and Luna Shamieh
Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University

December 1st, 2002

Introduction/background

The new school year was scheduled to begin on August 31st 2002 for over one million Palestinian children, comprising more than a third of the total population in West Bank and Gaza Strip. Only seven years ago, the newly established Palestinian Ministry of Education and the Palestinian community began to confront the huge task of reconstructing and rehabilitating the education sector, which had been left in shambles by the Israeli 'Civil Administration' through deliberate obstruction and neglect. Today, two years into the Second Palestinian Uprising (*intifada*), resistance and re-occupation, the education system is near collapse again, leaving yet another generation of young Palestinians without proper schooling, the essential tool that is to prepare them for their challenging role in rehabilitating their society and building its future state.

The past academic year was particularly traumatic as spiralling poverty gripped the nation, and as environmental and infrastructural destruction, home and institutional demolition, death, injury, disability and arrest of loved ones as well as the Israeli military reoccupation of the entire West Bank became the new and ongoing way of life. The school system was not spared this destruction. By the end of the 2001-2002 school year, the Ministry of Education reported that [ref.1]:

- 216 students were killed, 2514 injured, and 164 arrested.
- 17 teachers and staff in the education sector were killed and 71 were arrested.
- 1289 schools were closed for at least 3 consecutive weeks during the Israeli invasion between March 29 and up till the end of the school year.
- Approximately 50% of school children and 35,000 employees in the education sector were prevented from reaching their schools. Scores of teachers and students were unable to commute between the rural villages and the urban centres before and after the invasion.
- High school final year *tawjihi* (General High School Examination) students suffered particular difficulties during the whole year of preparation, and the scheduled examinations were disrupted by military operations and postponed for over a month.

Most of these children, especially in the northern West Bank, spent their extended 2-3 month 'summer break' imprisoned at home under strict military curfews and external closures. Many neighbourhoods, especially densely populated urban centres, refugee camps and poor villages, suffered recurrent military incursions, bombardments, extra judicial executions combined with indiscriminate killing and injury of civilians (nearly half of them children), as well as nightly intrusions of soldiers into private homes, arrests and brutalisation of family members. There has been continuous

destruction of homes, agriculture, and other private and public property like shops, offices, workshops, and service institutions.

Despite all efforts and hopes for better conditions, the new school year took off badly for the majority of children in the West Bank, who have been physically prevented from attending their schools during almost the entire first month of the new school year - except in Bethlehem and Gaza - which are now re-occupied again and/or under continuous heavy military attack. Curfews and closures remain in place and/or were re-imposed on most towns, refugee camps, and many villages in the West Bank. Larger towns were even divided into several 'military security zones' and separated by internal checkpoints. The fears expressed by the Minister of Education were confirmed:

'Besides the threat on the lives of students and teachers accompanied with the destruction of schools and educational institutions, our gravest concern remains, without a doubt, the policy of continuous curfew and tight closures with all the inherent restrictions it creates on the movement of people and goods within Palestinian areas.' [ref.2]

This damage assessment study focuses on the Ramallah/al-Bireh/Beitunia urban area only because of our inability to reach other districts because of continued closures and siege. It can be seen as a case study elaborating the details of the humanitarian damage that occurred during the past academic year in the school environment, and demonstrates the type and extent of the psycho-social and health impact of war on the school community: students, teachers, and parents.

Methodology

This study includes all of the 48 schools that are operating in the towns of Ramallah, al-Bireh and Beitunia on the West Bank. After an initial period of informal investigation and consultation with educators, a piloted semi structured questionnaire/interview instrument was used to solicit responses from the administrators/teachers at the schools. The field work was completed during the month of October. One questionnaire/interview was obtained per school. The data was then coded and fed into the computer. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

The schools

The three towns, including Amari and Qaddura refugee camps, are parts of an urban area that was physically separated in the past, but has over time come to form an urban complex that is spatially inter-connected. For all practical purposes, these towns and refugee camps can be seen as representing different neighborhoods of one small city. They have also undergone the same experiences of invasion, destruction, curfew, closure and siege during the past academic year 2001-2002.

The triplet towns are populated by about 60,000 inhabitants (PCBS 1997 Census, ref.3). They house 48 schools, 2 located in Amari camp, and the rest are found in the three towns. Of the total 5 (10%) are located in Beitunia, 20 (42%) in Ramallah, and

23 (48%) in al-Bireh. These schools cater to the primary, preparatory, and secondary educational needs of children with ages ranging from 6 up to 18 years.

Thirty seven of these schools (77%) provide primary schooling for children under the age of 12, either with or without the preparatory and secondary levels. We found that 17 schools (35%) are governmentally operated, 14 (29%) are private for profit operations, 13 (27%) are private non-profit operations, mostly religious or parish schools, and 4 (8%) are operated by UNRWA that caters to the educational needs of refugees living inside and outside the camps. Thus in this metropolis, 56% of the schools are operated on a private, profit and non-profit basis, reflecting the large share of private educational operations in this urban center. Three of these schools provide education to disabled people on a non-profit basis.

At the time of the survey, the schools housed a total of 19'130 students, with 54% of the student body composed of females and the rest males, raising questions as to a higher level of attrition from schools among boys. The results may also be suggestive of observations that some have made, but have yet to be substantiated, of well to do parents sending their male children abroad to study because of the current conditions, while keeping their girls in local schools because of the local moral code.

There is a high percentage in this group of schools that educate both boys and girls in the same classes, with 25 (52%) reporting that they are mixed schools, 20 (42% and 10 of each type) offering schooling for only girls or only boys, and 3 (6%) that include boys in the first few years of elementary schooling and then continue as entirely girls schools. Of the 25 mixed schools, 22 (88%) are operated by the private sector. The Ministry of Education operates 3 mixed (boys and girls) schools, at the primary and preparatory levels. That is, the governmental school system completely separates boys from girls who are 15-18 years old, and largely separate those who are younger.

Proximity to Danger

Only 8 (17%) of the schools reported that during the past academic year their physical locations happened to be in relatively safe areas of the urban center. The rest were located within what was perceived as danger zones where clashes occur, or where military attacks take place: at different points in time throughout the year, 8 (16%) were close to a fixed Israeli military checkpoint, 22 (46%) were located close to a moving military one, 16 (33%) to an Israeli settlement, and 17 (35%) to a building taken by the Army and used as a military outpost. Six of the schools (13%) reported that at some point, the schools themselves were occupied by the Army and used as military control center. Six (13%) additional schools also reported that the schools themselves were turned into army detention centers, perhaps because they are conveniently located near Israeli settlements.

Gunfire, Shelling and Damages

With 28 (58%) of the schools reporting that the schools were not directly affected by gunfire, we found that the remaining 20 (42%) were directly affected: 10 reported that they were shot at when the school was convening and with children inside, while the remaining 10 were subjected to direct gunfire, but after school. One

additional school reported that it experienced indirect gunfire that incidentally hit the school. Shooting directly at schools was reported as having happened more than once, and ranging from once (4 schools) to up to 10 counted incidents (one school). However, 4 schools reported that they were shot at so many times that they were not able to assess the exact number of incidents.

Among the schools that were affected (20, almost half of the schools), physical damage ensued to varying degrees. Reports indicate a wide range of damage: destruction of retaining walls, broken glass, broken walls and doors, destroyed school furniture, school loudspeaker systems, computers, libraries and books, solar heaters and water containers located on school rooftops. In one school, the damage was so severe that the school relocated altogether. Another school was so badly damaged that it was shocking to witness that it was still being used as a school this year, at the time of our fieldwork visits.

Of the total schools, 12 (25%) reported that they experienced serious clashes in the immediate vicinity of the school during the past academic year. Of these, 4 reported one episode, 5 reported 2-5, and an additional 3 not less than 5 and up to more than 10 episodes. In one case, a student from a lower elementary school in Ramallah was hit by an Israeli Jeep as it was chasing a Palestinian car near the school.

Five of the schools (10%) reported that the school premises were directly shelled during the past academic year. An additional five (10%) schools reported that they were shelled, but incidentally, and not because the attack was intentional, while 2 reported having been shelled directly and indirectly. The rest, or 75% of the schools, did not report any direct or indirect shelling at all. Of those shelled (a quarter of the schools), three quarters reported that they were shelled once or twice, and the rest up to 5 times. Serious destruction of premises invariably ensued, interrupting the academic process, and adding budgetary burdens to an already resource starved school system. We noted that many of the schools were still in major need of repair and reconstruction during our field visits, a testimony to the need to address the destruction of the school infrastructure financially and otherwise. Of the total, 14 schools (30%) reported that students were detained at school for extended periods as a result of shelling in nearby areas or because curfew was suddenly clamped down.

Military Invasion and Occupation of Schools

A high of 48% of the schools (23) reported that they were invaded and some occupied by the Israeli Army during the past academic year. Of those, 14 were invaded once, 7 were invaded twice, and two were invaded three and four times respectively. All suffered serious destruction as a result. During such invasions, the reported experience varied: some schools reported that they were occupied for more than one day. **Reports indicate a high level of destruction, abuse, and plunder of premises:** entry of several tanks and other large army vehicles into the school premises, and, needless to say, destroying much that was in their way, including playgrounds and paved areas; barbed-wiring the school entirely to prohibit access; occupying the schools as barracks and dormitories for use by the Army; exploding doors, shattering glass, destroying laboratories, bathrooms, libraries, cafeterias, records, visual aid rooms, children's toys, and even electrical wiring; urinating in classrooms, lecture halls, libraries and on the school furniture; stealing of television

sets, computers, films, and even money. Some books were also stolen, and some even reported that Islamic religion books were thrown in bathrooms! We also have reports that on the occasion of an invasion when the school was in session, the Army in their escapades outside the schools used some students as a human shield.

Index of Exposure to Traumatic Events

Constructing an index of exposure to traumatic events (exposure to gunfire, shelling, clashes outside school and invasion/occupation of school) we found that of the 48 schools, only 10 (20%) reported not having been exposed to any one of these events, with 20 schools (41%) reporting exposure to one such event at least once, 9 (19%) schools reporting two types of events at least once, 7 (15%) 3 types of events at least once, and 2 of these schools reporting having been exposed to the four types of events at least once.

The schools' locations influenced the severity of exposure to these events. In this survey, we found (as we had expected from the impressions gained from the field work), that Beitunia's schools were most affected. All five schools situated in Beitunia reported having been exposed to one or more types of attacks at least once. In the scale of severity of experience, the al-Bireh schools were second, with 20 out of 23 (87%) schools in the town reporting having been subjected to these events, compared to 13 out of 20 (65%) Ramallah schools. With Beitunia located very close to a military camp, and literally split in two by the road leading from Jerusalem/Tel Aviv to Ramallah, and with al-Bireh also providing entry to the towns via at least three main roads to the north and south, compounded by the presence of Israeli settlements in its outskirts, all explain these variations in severity of onslaughts, especially as Israeli settlers frequently combined their activities with those of the Army, or even independently by attacking civilians and schools throughout the year.

Interestingly, **boys' schools were more affected than girls' schools or even mixed schools**, perhaps because boys' schools tend to be situated on the outskirts of town. All ten boys schools reported having been exposed to at least one form of attacks at least once, compared to 6 out of 13 (46%) of the girls' schools and 19 out of the 25 (76%) mixed schools.

Governmental schools were also more affected than others, with 15 out of 17 schools (88%) having been exposed to at least one attack at least once, compared to 20 out of 27 private schools (74%) and 3 out of 4 (75%) UNRWA schools.

Suitability of School Premises for Children's Protection in War

Shelters

Of all the schools, only one reported that the school premises contained an adequate shelter, 34 (71%) reported that although without shelter, children are housed in 'safe places' (usually with few windows, away from roads and surrounded by walls, but with no provisions or emergency equipment and materials) at school during emergencies, **and the rest (13) have neither a shelter nor a safe place to protect the children during emergency.** Reports also indicate that the absence of shelters relates primarily to the previous inability to imagine that in fact, war

conditions would grip the country in this severe way, combined with the fact that premises are older and have been constructed without planning for shelters to begin with, as well as the lack of budgets to pursue such a scheme at the moment.

Most reports for those with safe places or shelters, or 28 schools (78%) indicated that the safe place or shelter can house everyone in the school, with the rest stating that space is also a serious problem. Some consequently resort to using the Gym, which is not very safe, or hallways, relatively safe buildings, or even leaving students where they are but asking them to lie on the floor during a shelling episode.

Infirmaries, First Aid, Injury and Trauma Management

The large majority of schools, 46 (96%) reported that the premises do not contain a first aid room, infirmary or any other kind of space to care for the sick or the injured. What they do have are meager first aid boxes or cabinets, and fire extinguishers that are hardly suitable to handle this current emergency. On the other hand, 40 (83%) reported that there is a trained first aid person at school who can also handle shock and gas suffocation, 41 (85%) schools reported that teachers have been trained in evacuation procedures during the course of last year, and 37 (77%) also reported that students were trained in evacuation procedures last year. These results indicate a minimal level of preparedness to handle war conditions, but with a maximal initiative to manage despite circumstances. Judging from the data we have, it appears that the private for profit schools are the least prepared or responsive to these conditions and that UNRWA and governmental schools the most.

Dangers/Difficulties in Accessing the Schools

Students

Of the total, **a high of 41 schools (85%) reported that their students faced a variety of difficulties in reaching the school during the past academic year.** Of those, 30 (73%) reported that the biggest problem students faced were the checkpoints that they had to cross to reach school, with some reporting that they must cross more than one checkpoint to arrive. In the case of one school, 80 students withdrew because of the checkpoint problem.

Some schools pointed to the problems faced by disabled students as being severe: we have reports of incidents involving 5 disabled students who were beaten up at one checkpoint, 4 disabled students who were subjected to rubber bullet gunfire, and three who were detained at the checkpoint until dark. These are highly traumatizing experiences, leading to serious hesitation to cross, and setting the stage for dropping out of school altogether.

Others reported incidents where students were beaten up at checkpoints, in front of parents, and leading to a struggle between parents, crossing children, and the Army at the sites. Student exposure to ‘rubber bullets’ (rubber coated metal bullets which are dangerous as they especially destroy the eyes, and can kill if entering the skull or if shot from close range) and sound bombs were also reported, where, in one case, a student was burned and hospitalized as a result of a direct hit by a sound bomb. In one extreme case, 17 students coming from nearby villages could not get back home

because of a sudden blockade and invasion, forcing them to remain at the school for 1 week, and being cared for by the school administration; then having to move out because the school was in a clash zone, and into another school, and then another, for a period of several days, with minimal food and supplies.

Almost 30% (12) of the schools reported that the partial occupation of the towns posed a serious problem in accessing the schools as well, and the rest provided various answers including having to reach school from back roads because of the presence of tanks on the road to school, the suddenly spiraling costs of transportation resulting from having to take convoluted roads to reach their destination, and the unavailability of transport in some affected areas, necessitating them to walk a good part of the journey. **About half of the schools reported that such problems affected 10% or less of their student body, a quarter reported that these problems affected 12-25% of their student bodies, and another quarter reported that 30% and up to 90% of their student body was affected by these problems last year.** We found that **al-Bireh schools were more seriously affected by the crossing problems than Ramallah or Beitunia.**

Teachers

Teachers too have had serious problems accessing schools to work. **Of the total schools, a high of 45 (94%) reported that some of their teachers have serious problems trying to get to work.** About half of the schools have 1 and up to 5 teachers facing these difficulties daily, while the other half report that such difficulties pertain to 6 and up to 40 teachers, with a range of 10% and up to 61% of the faculty facing difficulties getting to school. On the average, crossing problems affected 6.5 teachers out of an average of 26 teachers per school, or a full 25% of the teacher population in this urban area.

We were also told that **lost teacher workdays ranged from three and up to 88 days last year, specifically because of the daily problems of access, and bringing the average lost days of work per school to 23 days per school.** That is, blocked access of faculty seems to be a substantial impediment to the routine flow of the academic process, affecting a high proportion of the faculty, and raising questions as to the impact of this problem on the quality of education, as well as the financial/ budgetary dimension of operating schools.

The type and range of problems teachers face in getting to school are almost identical to those reported for students. There were problems with delays in reaching the schools because of checkpoints and tanks; problems with being exposed to shooting, tear gas and stun grenades; problems related to even having been beaten at a checkpoint by the Army; being detained for a period of time at a checkpoint; or not being able to access the school altogether when the going got tough; and simple and pure humiliation exercised as a matter of routine, it seems, by the Israeli Army. Serious physical difficulties, exposure to daily traumatic events, combined with the loss of dignity are key features of the daily lives of teachers in this urban area.

Sudden Shifts in Student Enrollments

On the whole, 33 (69%) schools reported important shifts in student enrollment this year compared to last year, and beginning during the past academic year. About 40% (19) of the schools reported a decrease in the number of students attending the schools beginning last year and continuing this year, 29% (14) reported an increase in the student body, and the rest reported that the number remained more or less the same. **It appears that attrition affected mostly students who are 12 years or older**, a reflection of the natural move from primary to preparatory and secondary levels of education and the need to commute from villages to the city to get to schools, or perhaps from one neighborhood to another.

Schools reporting attrition noted that about 1/3 of the females who left school, on the average, left because they got married, when there was not one single case reported of attrition as a result of marriage for boys. Given the seeming endlessness of war like conditions in the country, it is worth the while to investigate this point further, as it is suggestive of the phenomenon of early marriage for girls, but not for boys.

In explaining these sudden shifts in student enrollment, we find that **private schools tended to report drop outs because of increasingly difficult parent financial conditions**, pushing them to change their children's schools, while governmental and UNRWA schools reported an increase in the number of students coming from private ones, again for the same reason. In one particular private school, overnight, the school lost about 20% of its student body because of parent financial problems. Other explanations of this shift in student enrollment include movement of students to schools that are close to their domiciles, either in another part of town or in villages, parents moving students away from schools that are located by clash points or army posts, or migration of families out of the country altogether.

A high of 24 schools (50%) noted out-migration as one of the important reasons for the children leaving school, counting at least 422 students who the administration of schools knew had definitively out-migrated with their families. Out-migration seemed to be affecting private schools to a larger extent than public ones, with almost three quarters of the private schools pointing to out-migration as one of the reasons for attrition, compared to a third for governmental schools and none for UNRWA schools. Moreover, views gathered from school administrations indicate that most of those who out-migrate are either well to do, or from the middle classes. These results of course make sense as it is usually the upper/middle class who has the money and the access to travel out of this difficult situation, while the poor remain here as a matter of no other alternative. These results are worrisome in more than one respect, especially as an indication of a possible serious brain drain of professional educated urban dwellers out of the country altogether.

And so by the beginning of this year, some private schools had lost what seems to be a good number of students, while some governmental and UNRWA schools were reported as becoming over-crowded, adding to the burdens of an already burdened faculty, administration and students, and requiring attention by policy makers and planners.

Interruptions and Lost School Days in Siege and Curfew

All schools reported that they have lost school days at different times during the past year, and not only during the March April invasion, but also because of the off and on curfew state that has predominated since the March invasions and continues up till the time of writing this report, where we have been placed under curfew for three consecutive days with no end in sight. The average loss in this survey was found to be 36 days, with a minimum of 4 days (for a school housing interns only) and a maximum of 90 days (the Deaf School). **The average number of made-up school days was found to be 16, leaving about 20 days that were completely lost, that is, almost an entire month of schooling if we count weekly days off, and about 10% of the school year.** These results represent the minimum average lost teaching time, as in some badly affected schools it was impossible to estimate lost teaching time because the school records were destroyed by the Israeli Army during an invasion or occupation.

Methods of Coping

To cope with these interruptions and delays, all schools began to make up classes, when possible, during off days and holidays. Others extended the working day, cramming extra classes into the extra hours. Many resorted to canceling physical education, computer and art classes in order to make up for the lost classes in what is seen as essential subjects (language, math, science and social studies), taking possibly important methods of coping away from the students. Recesses were contracted. Class projects were cut in some instances, while some others cut down on examinations, or speeded up their lectures so that they can complete the required curriculum, all raising questions as to the utility of completing the curriculum without the required understanding and learning by students.

Given the student life conditions during the course of the year, and some serious exposure to traumatic events not only at school, but also because of the shelling and destruction and occupation of homes, one must seriously consider these methods of coping as limited to mechanically completing the curriculum, while neglecting and perhaps undermining the students' healing and learning processes in trying times.

Clearly, the problems entailed in rethinking our approach to education with interruptions during war are huge, especially if one takes into consideration the last 1-2 years of high school when students must sit for the General High School Examination (*tawjihi*) that can in fact determine their future, and the need to have completed the curriculum by then, irrespective of conditions. On the other hand, **the question remains as to whether curricula completion is more important than the process of healing and learning**, and the level at which schools need to address the problem of necessarily completing curricula because of considerations that are beyond their control, as is the case with graduating students.

The school systems evidently used the experience of last year to prepare for this academic year by setting in place coping mechanisms to better handle emergency. Those were already in the process of being developed by the summer of 2002. By the time of field work **in October, a high of 41 schools (87%) had plans ready for compensating lost time in seemingly better ways than the impromptu emergency**

measures taken to catch up during the past academic year. Some of the measures implemented immediately at the beginning of the school year include an increasing reliance on studying at home; utilizing specifically developed student work sheets; relying on the help of parents for student assistance; cutting down on holidays and time off; adding sessions to the working day. Again, focus is centered on what is called essential subjects, while omitting physical education, vocational training, library and the like, relying on popular community education, distance learning through computer/internet based contact with students, and, more recently, defying curfew and attempting to get to school, especially in the case of the last 2 years of school, where the situation is pressing.

The school systems worked to organize emergency management operations as well. A high of 42 (89%) schools reported that at the beginning of this year, they had already in operation special emergency committees with the specific responsibility of managing exceptional circumstances. The tasks of these committees include: organizing evacuations without chaos; phone linkages with parents; the provision of emotional support to students and calming them down; first aid operations; working with students to handle mental health problems and worries; general daily supervision and reconnaissance; to pre-empt surprise attacks and problems; coordination with official and unofficial bodies for cooperation; and to control and cooperate with parents.

It has also been brought to our attention that **coordination among all schools in this urban area in fact began early on in September, an attempt not only to collectively deal with problems, but also to assist each other in facing possibly even more trying times.** Indeed, it does appear that the school systems and their staff have exhibited a remarkable amount of resilience and ability to adjust and cope with impossible situations, and have effectively used the experiences gained last year in forward planning in order to minimize damage to children and save the education of schoolchildren this year.

Consequences: academic process, students, parents and teachers

Negative Effects on the Academic and Learning Process

Other than destruction of premises and property that the schools have encountered during the year, several other untoward effects ensued that can have a lasting imprint on the academic process as well as the consciousness. The school administration and teachers faced a serious burden and extra workload in attempting to get children to safety, either within the school premises, or by calling parents to get the needed help from them, or by having to deal with an increasing number of difficult cases attending school, as well as setting up make-up schedules during days off and holidays. In addition, they were themselves also traumatized and worried about their loved ones who were elsewhere during an attack, and sometimes, not within reach by telephone.

In cases when traumatic events took place while schools were in session, the consequences were apparent on the entire school community. Reports indicate that fear and confusion ensued, especially with constant calls by parents to ascertain the safety of their children, interruption of classes and moving the children into relative

safety until the incidents subsided, and then sending them home, or resuming classes, depending on the situation.

Administration and teachers also had to face the problem of the shattered infrastructure, in some instances calling for school relocation. In view of the severity of the situation and the new imperatives of the times, developmental plans were abandoned, as schools were barely able to cope with managing daily events and picking up the pieces. Moreover, serious budgetary problems ensued because of the need for repair left by this destruction. In one school, parent and communal assistance allowed for repair, only for the school to be invaded and occupied once again, thus leading to despair.

The ramifications of these circumstances were severe, with the majority reporting these events as having serious consequences on academic life. The process of learning was greatly disturbed, given the destruction that took place in schools, children's and teachers' traumas, daily difficulties in reaching schools and completing the school day, relatively high absenteeism, frequent interruptions of the academic process, sudden and unexpected attacks, increasing financial strife, and the lack of preparedness of schools to handle these situations, among the daily life problems that the schools faced. Thus the majority reported that successive interruptions proved to be very difficult for the children to manage. Our reports indicate that often, resuming classes entailed starting all over again from the beginning, as students seemed to have forgotten everything they learned before a traumatic event: they had to live through the violence that is taking place around them, the interruptions, and at the same time learn effectively and cumulatively, a task that was not possible to achieve. In addition, reports indicate that development plans were cancelled, and some schools even had to close for a period of time in order to rehabilitate the premises after a serious attack.

All schools reported a serious decline in academic achievement by the end of the academic year, pointing to traumatic events at school and at home as causes.

Traumatic events of course extended to children's homes and included: frequent shooting and shelling all night, being subjected to house searches by the Army, arrest and injury of loved ones, and specific neighborhood invasions. In one case, we were told that this year's 7th grade scored by far the lowest level academic performance of all 7th grade classes in years, pointing to the events of the past year as well as lost and interrupted study time as causative factors.

Children's Mental Health and Impact on Performance

When prompted to respond to the question of the impact of such events on the children's mental health, principals and teacher reported that **several students were clearly traumatized, with fear and feelings of being physically threatened and violated dominating their state, a state that could not have possibly allowed them to concentrate on their studies.** Many fell into serious worry episodes, either fearing coming to school, or fearing getting back home, or both. In cases when attacks took place while school was in session, there were reports of some students fainting in shock and fear. Others also reported episodes of continuous crying for no immediate or apparent reason, crying at night, unexplained bouts of screaming, enuresis, an unusually high level of hyperactivity, and fainting. Some older students apparently handled trauma by making up stories about themselves, such as the martyrdom of a

brother, the need for a medical operation, or a catastrophe hitting the family, all proven to be imaginary, perhaps in order to draw attention to their need for assistance.

The impact of exposure to trauma was reflected in the younger children's drawings and play. We were told that many younger children began to only draw 'gloom', in black and white or red (for fire) colors, tanks, army, and clashes; or acted out in play Israeli Army versus the Shabab (the young men) confrontations, funeral processions for martyrs, and even the so called 'suicide bomber' themes during recess. These themes seemed to have dominated their consciousness.

Some principals reported that students began to rush out of class immediately after hearing any noise outside, thinking it must be shooting, with some even reported as getting into the hysterical behavior mode, with the school not being able to control this type of behavior. Others reported that students began to imagine that the Army is always at school, making it difficult for them to concentrate. Students were also reported as fearing being seated by windows, reacting fearfully to any evidence of previous Army presence, as in a flashback, extreme sadness and negative change in facial features. Reports also indicate that symptoms of psychological distress among these children include frequent headaches and other aches, children spacing out after exposure to trauma, and even nervous collapse among some students. It appears that some students reacted so fearfully to such events that they began to attempt escape through classroom windows irrespective of safety. In one school for the blind, reports of great fear, especially during sleep, and refusal to sleep alone dominated the interview. This particular school was shelled badly, and one can imagine the reaction to such traumatic events by blind girls! But above all, a sense of hate and a wish to revenge dominated the feelings of students last year.

The impact of children's exposure to these types of traumatic events on the ability to concentrate on studies cannot be under-estimated. Reports indicate that teachers and principals noted an increase in the students' inability to concentrate or absorb the material at hand, with a high of 41 schools (88%) noting that this was a major problem, and the rest reporting other similar problems such as noting that students are constantly distracted, or a concentration fixation on the general living conditions and what will happen next, or the presence of anxiety and confusion among the students. Schools reported that some students could only focus on the possible dangers in the streets, and worry about getting home more than on what is happening in class. Some reported students as being simply stunned, and not being able to learn at all. Over half of the schools noted a decline in interests to study altogether, and a drop in homework completion. Here, students were characterized as not having the needed energy to study, or wanting to talk non-stop rather than listen. Older students who were about to graduate from high school began to seriously worry about the imminent possibility of never completing their studies, and the bleak future that lies ahead.

Insecurity and Violent Behavior

A terrible aspect of these children's experiences is loss of the needed sense of security and safety at school. In some cases, students began to refuse to attend school without their parents attending with them. Some respondents reported that daily attendance rates declined, and many left high risk zone schools altogether. In one particular school that was very badly affected, a large number of students dropped out: last year,

enrollment reached 400 students. This academic year, only 11 students are attending. In other cases, notably with older children, students reacted to these traumatic events by exercising self control, and overcoming their fear through agency: they would follow other school children to throw stones at the nearby army post or jeep after school, or even simply leave classes and go out to join others in the raging clashes just outside. This act is seen as a response to violation and an attempt to redress the onslaught on community and loss of dignity.

When asked, administrations reported a noticeable increase in violent behavior among students in half of the schools, and a contrasting increased cooperation and good relations in the other half. The highest reports of increased violent behavior came from Beitunia and the lowest from Ramallah, perhaps reflecting the severity of onslaughts in these neighborhoods, and implying that increased exposure to violence increases violent behavior. **Reports of increased violent behavior were more frequent in boys and mixed schools (two thirds each) compared to only one tenth for girls schools, with no differences among the types of schools operating in the area (governmental, public, private).**

We also found that half the schools reported an increasing difficulty in dealing with the children inside and outside class, again corroborating the above findings. Examples of changed behavior include: an increase in violent play, constant fighting, cursing and beating.

In contrast, increased active cooperation among students was also noted, as well as increased collective play, and a noticeable rise in children caring for others. In one particular school, reports indicated a rise in children's spirit of solidarity and support, which was apparently very evident in recess but not so much in class. In this case, children were noted as exhibiting happiness and great satisfaction at seeing and interacting with each other after having been denied schooling for long stretches of time because of curfew. They appeared to be fighting much less, and behaving much more in sympathy to each other, supporting those who have been traumatized by violent attacks especially in their homes, in their neighborhoods or elsewhere, caring for them and even pampering them in seeming compensation.

Parents Under Stress

The parents were not spared either. Other than the constant calls to ascertain children's safety when an incident took place, parents tended to immediately rush to school when an attack occurred or was thought to be about to occur, in order to pick up their children before the school day ended. This brought in more worries and fears among those children whose parents did not appear at the time. With time, schools began to prohibit parents from such actions, but were not always successful, as many parents were caught in the circle of fear. Parents began to exhibit serious worries about their children attending school, being denied the needed assurances of children's safety, which have of course been obliterated for objective reasons.

Some parents cooperated with the schools well in bringing down the level of fear among students, and in assisting in sending children home safely during a particular incident. Others were simply not capable of cooperation or self control, given their mental health state. Parents were also reported as worrying about even getting their

children to and from school, as the roads were often unsafe, depending on the time and the neighborhood. Some stopped sending their children to school for periods of time, when the danger was perceived as too great and not worth the while. Others began to visit their children regularly during the school day to ensure all is well.

By the end of the year, some parents simply withdrew their children out of the urban schools, moved to villages, or out-migrated altogether. In one particular private school, we found that 10% of the children that attended last year had out-migrated with their families by the beginning of this academic year.

When school administrations were asked about their opinions regarding how parents were treating their children in these trying times, **a high of 27 schools (63%) reported their impressions were that the children were treated badly at home, and the rest (37%) reported that the children were especially cared for during these times.** It is important to note that **none of the UNRWA schools reported supportive parent behavior.** They explained this problem, as others did, in terms of spiraling poverty and severe life conditions given the particularly heavy Israeli Army attacks on refugee camps, leading to neglect, calling on children to stop studying and trying to find work instead, excessive irritability with their presence, not being able to appreciate the mental health dimensions of children's problems, and excessive harshness in dealing with children, including physical abuse it seems. **Ten out of the 13 private for profit administrations (77%) also reported problematic parent behavior towards their children. In contrast, 5 of out 12 private non-profit schools (42%) and 8 out of 14 governmental ones (57%) reported problematic parent behavior towards their children.** While these results are merely suggestive, especially as they reflect only the perceptions of administrations, it is worth the while to pursue this specific issue in the future, especially as it relates to UNRWA and for profit private schools.

Indeed, when asked about signs of violence against children at home, 18 schools (38%) indicated that they have evidence suggesting the problem exists, once again, in all UNRWA schools, in almost half of the for profit schools, four tenth of the governmental schools and in less than a tenth of the private non-profit operations. **All girls' schools seemed to have higher reports of violence against children at home with two thirds reporting signs of violence against the girls, compared to a third of boys' schools, and a third of mixed schools.** When prompted to provide detailed examples, schools gave us a range of physical abuse measures: severe beating of children, beating of girls by brothers, even, in one case, mutilating her face, father beating wife and children each time he gets into anxious attacks, father beating son and disfiguring his face, father beating child when the school reports a specific problem with the child, verbal abuse, evidence of having been beaten with metal string, attempt of father to beat his son at school in front of the other children, and evidence of having been beaten up by parents on the faces of girls, even some cases of rape. These tentative results are very worrying, and reiterate the call for attention to be paid to physical abuse at home, especially among girls.

Teachers Under Stress

As for teachers, there is no question that the past academic year proved to be very difficult and traumatizing. They had to face the problem of frequent interruptions of

classes, the cancellation of the school day, the increase in workload, and the problem of managing traumatized children, as well as the daily life problems that ordinary citizens were facing at home, especially shelling and bombing in the area of their domicile and the crossing problems. These events reflected on teachers' behavior.

We found 33 schools (73%) reporting changes in teachers' behavior during the past year. Those were described in both negative and positive terms. Some teachers were described as being chronically exhausted, with a noticeable decline in their performance. Others noted that some teachers began to exhibit quicker irritability, a reduced threshold for withstanding pressures, and even sometimes more signs of violent behavior in class than previously, in addition to increased aggressiveness towards other teachers. Reports indicate that some in fact resorted to using sedatives/tranquilizers to be able to manage work and life in these circumstances. Some teachers were reported as having been gripped by so much fear during specific attacks that they escaped out of the school area during an incident, leaving others and the children behind! These severe stressors also reflected on attendance, with 9 schools (20%) reporting a higher level of teacher absenteeism last year, compared to the previous years, over and above absenteeism due to the inability to cross and reach the schools.

In contrast, we also have reports of teachers perceiving the events as the ultimate challenge of survival, increasing their sense of belonging, commitment and responsibility, surpassing personal interests and moving to embrace public ones. They were described as working very hard to cover other delayed or absent teachers without complaining, exhibiting a strong sense of understanding among each other, providing special care to the children, preparing loads of self learning packages and distributing them to children whenever this was possible. In short, they fulfilled their responsibilities as educators in ways that can only be termed exceptional and certainly beyond the call of duty.

Administrations were also very supportive by re-working schedules to suit better crossing times, by continuing to pay teachers full monthly salaries even when attendance was impossible, by asking the affected teachers not to attend school when particularly dangerous conditions prevailed, by providing temporary housing close to the school, and even by meeting the teachers at the checkpoint with the school bus.

Needs in Emergency

When asked about what they thought could be done to increase children's safety while at school, a wide range of responses was obtained that we then categorized into manageable for the purposes groups. Of the total, **32 schools (66%) emphasized organizational aspects as a priority.** Such organizational elements included planning out role distribution inside the school and outside with community, to help in evacuating children in case of need, improving directives issued by the Ministries of Education and Health to handle emergency, including a call for more visits by the MOE to the schools, coordinating transport of students out of schools with parents and community, and coordinating first aid activities with the relevant groups within the community.

Twenty six schools (54%) stressed that assistance in medical and health matters in emergency are a priority. Those included the setting up of school infirmaries, the acquisition of first aid boxes, training of staff and students in first aid, and training on how to increase safety at school in these circumstances, as this was not very evident. **Twenty (42%) emphasized the need to acquire what is necessary for the overnight stay of faculty and students when needed.** Such needs included food, water, lights, carpets and covers to allow for sleep, as well as medications and fire extinguishers.

Nine schools (18%) emphasized the need for having a shelter, as well as sand bags to protect the children and the faculty during an attack.

Five schools (10%) focused on the need for the help of counselors and psychologists at school to handle problems at hand. Finally, 2 schools reported that no one is safe anywhere, even in homes, and that no matter what is done, children's safety cannot be assured.

When asked about other needs to suit these difficult times, the flood gates opened, and the discussion extended to the ordinary wish list that one would imagine in a resource starved and contextually constrained environment: computer laboratories, resource centers, documentary films, extra telephone lines, activity centers and entertainment for students were among some of the demands. Interestingly, some called for public education in order to reduce the panic attacks that ensue as a result of an incident, and in order to reduce rumors that negatively affect community at large.

However, **among the immediate and pressing demands is financial assistance to rehabilitate the schools,** especially among the schools that were badly affected by violence last year. Those in particular stressed the need for **physical reconstruction in order to make the schools more hospitable to children and safer.** In addition, the schools also emphasized the **severe financial conditions of students' families,** and the financially difficult conditions of the schools as a result, **requesting financial assistance to help students who can no longer afford an education to continue to attend school.** Finally, as the schools were increasingly coming to the realization that this stage of emergency seems to have no end, shelters equipped with what is needed for overnight safe student protection remains one of the important priorities for the schools in this urban area.

Concluding Remarks

Contrary to what is being transmitted by the Israeli propaganda machine, the Israeli Army's so called 'targeted attacks' in fact primarily affected the civilian population and their institutions, especially children. This study demonstrates the various elements of the humanitarian damages that have been accrued by the school community, administrations, teachers and above all, children, as a result of the unilateral war that Israel is waging against the Palestinian civilian population.

As this school survey demonstrates, the ramifications of the Israeli onslaught of the past academic year on school children surpass the infrastructural damage of their habitat, both at school and at home, and have had a deep negative influence on children's ability to learn, their sense of security, their mental health status,

their dignity, and indeed, their consciousness. These children have been violated in every way, and are growing up dominated by a sense of hate, a sense that can only pre-dispose to what is called 'a tendency towards violent behaviour'. Indeed, violent behaviour is not a genetic predisposition, but is socially constructed. In the Palestinian case, the construction of violence begins and ends with Israeli Military Occupation.

References

1. Losses and damages assessment figures released by Ministry of Education July 28, 2002
2. Ministry of Education Appeal on the occasion of opening the new school year, released August 27, 2002
3. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 1999, Population, Housing and Establishment Census, 1997, Census Final Results- Summary (Population, Housing Units, Buildings and Establishments) Ramallah and al-Bireh Governorate, Ramallah, Palestine