

# Education in Palestine: Coping with Challenges that Undermine Overall Development

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## Summary of a Palestine Center Briefing by Jacqueline Sfeir and Ibrahim Masri 17 November 2004

Decades of Israeli occupation and Palestinian resistance have led to the steady deterioration of the Palestinian education system, said Dr. Jacqueline Sfeir, director of Bethlehem University's Education Development Center during a briefing at the DC-based Palestine Center on 17 November 2004. The most detrimental effect on the education system has been the recurrent and extended periods of school closures. Between 1987 and 1990, during the first Palestinian Intifada, or uprising against Israeli occupation, schools were closed 17 out of 28 months, explained Sfeir. Students were allowed to pass through the system despite the lack of necessary knowledge and skills. As a result, today's teachers and parents lack the necessary coping skills to deal with children who are now living through a traumatic psychosocial period ' the second Palestinian intifada.

Sfeir discussed the impact of the 2000 Palestinian Intifada on the Palestinian education system, after which Save the Children psychosocial specialist Ibrahim Masri presented findings from a separate research study into the effectiveness of classroom-based intervention (CBI) in Palestinian schools.

According to Sfeir's study, by 2003 Palestinian children lost 15 out of 35 weeks of school due to Israeli closures, curfews and restrictions on movement. 'What we are facing is a serious situation where not only knowledge and skill are affected but overall development,' Sfeir said. With 45 percent of the population under age 14, the long-term consequences are significant.

The study found that the impediments of closures and curfews, the inability to plan and the recurrent break in the solid structure of a child's life is further complicated by teachers who themselves lack proper education and coping strategies. Not only are children having difficulty understanding the current curriculum, it is beyond the comprehension of teachers.

Education professionals and officials are trying to cope with and respond to the challenges. However, the state of the Palestinian education system has gone beyond simply trying to keep schools open.

'We must work under mediation plans that are extremely well studied and adjusted to the needs of the Palestinian community as it stands now,' Sfeir said.

Using a method of classroom-based psychosocial intervention similar to models tested in U.S. inner cities and post-disaster areas but customized to the special needs of Palestinian society, Save the Children launched a national project in conjunction with the Palestinian Ministry of Education to provide support and activities that targeted children, parents and teachers, said Masri. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) also joined the effort along with 250 community centers. Within three years, 150,000 children were involved in the program.

'What we found is a situation of ongoing traumatic stress disorder. It varies from one child to another and from one place to another,' Masri said. 'We saw parents helpless and hopeless in helping their children.'

After training 63 professionals, the CBI was tested in 13 schools. Later, 1,477 counselors and professionals began working with children in over 1,200 West Bank and Gaza schools.

The results were encouraging. Children felt better, happier and more confident. Families saw an improvement in their children's behavior saying that children were more cooperative at home and more optimistic. Teachers said the children had become more focused, were ready to learn and were less aggressive. Masri said the best impact was on children age 6-11 and with girls ages 12-16. Masri said the CBI would need further modification to address the specific needs of the older male group.

Overall, Masri believes that the 'Palestinian' CBI model has had a positive impact on children, parents and teachers and will reduce the long-term effects of the current national crisis.

The above text is based on remarks delivered on 17 November 2004 by Jacqueline Sfeir and Ibrahim Masri. The speakers' views do not necessarily represent those of The Jerusalem Fund or its educational arm, The Palestine Center. This 'For the Record' summary was written by Samar Assad, senior analyst at the Palestine Center, and may be used without permission but with proper attribution to The Palestine Center.

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