The Stone and the Pen

Palestinian Education During the 1987 *intifada*[1]

BY YAMILA HUSSEIN

When soldiers or police stop students because they have books, invade buildings looking for "classrooms" or question teachers and warn them that they must not teach, there is no possible security rationale: it is education itself that is the criminal activity under scrutiny.

Birzeit University,
Criminalization of Education[2]

A HISTORIC MOMENT

The first two years of the 1987-1993 Palestinian *intifada* — a concerted popular uprising for national rights, self-determination, and independence from Israeli occupation— marked an unprecedented era not only in the Palestinian resistance trajectory but also in the history of Palestinian education. During the 1987 *intifada*, Palestinian education — formal and informal—effectively became illegal as Israel closed schools and universities indefinitely and Israeli soldiers harassed and arrested students and teachers for participating in "underground" classes or even for carrying books.

Ironically, it was through a military decree closing *all* educational institutions "*until further notice*" that Israel created a fleeting space for the Palestinians to assume responsibility for their own education. For the first time since it occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel lost control over official Palestinian learning and teaching precisely because of this decree, while the Palestinians, also for the first time ever, gained some agency in deciding what their children should learn, who would teach them, and how.

Lacking the power to force Israel to reopen schools, recognizing the centrality of education to their political and personal future, and experiencing the closure as a punishment for their resisting Israeli occupation, the Palestinians responded to the closures with three simultaneous strategies that evolved organically as events unfolded. For Palestinians education is a right, a weapon for liberation, and a venue for becoming part of the modern world. Furthermore, blocking their access to education has the intensely negative political implication of hindering the possibility of a just and lasting peace. In fact, the Israeli attack on cultural and educational institutions harmed positive trends associated with education. In the words of the Palestinian Council of Higher Education, this assault "merely widens the circle of hatred and hinders the chances for developing constructive communication and understanding."[3]

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In response, Palestinian society launched an international campaign to rally support from abroad; it organized resistance activities including demonstrations, sit-ins, and school break-ins; and it initiated alternative education projects both at the institutional and the popular level — later forbidden by the occupation forces. The very void the closures created allowed them to seek out and experiment with alternative modes of education from which future lessons can be learned. This alternative education (institutional and grassroots) underscored the fact that Palestinians need an education of their own, and it demonstrated the community's capacity to develop it. The insights these efforts yielded and the aspirations they embodied have carried in them the seeds for future action.

PALESTINIAN SCHOOLS 1967-1987

Even before education was declared illegal in 1987, Palestinian schools in the West Bank and Gaza suffered from inadequate structures and facilities, overcrowding, and insufficient and unsuitable equipment. For twenty years of military rule, from 1967 to 1987, Israel totally neglected Palestinian schools and deprived them of any chance to develop their organizational structures, pedagogical conceptions or teaching methods, let alone to adapt to the changing needs of the modern world or revise the outdated non-Palestinian curriculum.

Once Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 and assumed control over Palestinian schools, it created what Sarah Graham-Brown describes as a schizophrenic status.[4] School textbooks, national exams, and certification continued to be administered by the Jordanian (West Bank) and Egyptian (Gaza) governments, while Israel took on granting of licenses to schools, the approval of teachers and

administrators, and significant alterations to the curriculum.

While maintaining tight control over private and UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) schools for Palestinian refugees, Israel ran every aspect of government schools: maintenance, hiring, firing, salaries, budget, staff, students, school-year duration, and holidays. All schools had to follow the Jordanian or Egyptian Israeli-censored curriculum and all educational institutions were subject to military harassment. Israel deleted and banned references to Palestinian culture and history, or any idea that contradicted Israel's political agenda.[5] Over thirty-five school textbooks were banned between 1967 and 1987.

Teachers and students were denied their right to organize on a professional basis and unions were outlawed. If suspected of being active in such unions, teachers and students were subject to punitive measures ranging from forced early retirement to imprisonment and forced exile. Israeli soldiers often raided schools, sometimes opening fire and arresting students and teachers, and transforming schools into military bases. Israeli control over the educational system also took the form of frequent closure of selected schools and higher education institutions for long periods or total closure of all schools for several days. During 1986-1987, for example, all Palestinian universities were closed for varying periods, some for four months. With these disruptions, and more to follow during the *intifada*, some students needed as long as ten years to complete their four-year degree. Not surprisingly, the long simmering discontent at Israel's systematic neglect, coupled with its assault on the Palestinian educational system, came to a head during the 1987 *intifada*, when in early 1988 Israel closed all educational institutions in the West Bank indefinitely.

CLOSURE

Palestinian students never knew when or whether they could go to school on any given day between 1988 and1990. In addition to Palestinian calls for two to three general strike days each month, the Israeli-imposed military seals and curfews over whole regions and school closures led to a dramatic loss of school days during the *intifada*. During those years, Palestinian schools were allowed to convene for as little as 17% and no more than 50% of their school year. For example, the Tulkarem Refugee Camp School convened for thirty seven days during 1989-1990, and Birzeit University, closed for the fifteenth time in its history in January 1989, only reopened fifty-one months later in 1992.

Israel adopted two main strategies—selective and collective—for closing educational institutions during the *intifada*. Selective closure, used in Gaza, either closed all schools for short and definite periods or individual schools for longer or indefinite periods. Although harder to document, selective closure was equally disruptive of education in Gaza. Collective closure consisted of an indefinite comprehensive policy that would shut all schools and/or universities in one region indefinitely, through repeated extensions of definite closure orders which could last for months in a row. This method was also applied in the West Bank. Closure orders—usually with no mention of when schools would reopen—were orally issued to individual school administrators, announced on TV and radio and disseminated in written memos such as this one:

> Greetings,
> The Schools of this district will close until further notice as of the morning of Thursday, 4 February, 1988.

This decree was signed "with respect" by the Israeli Director of Education, who functioned under the Israeli ministry of defense. It denied over 300,000 school-age West Bank Palestinian students access to their nearly 1,200 schools. Government run Palestinian schools in East Jerusalem were all simultaneously closed by the Israeli police. Subsequent orders closed all schools intermittently—including kindergartens at one point—for approximately eighteen months during 1988-1990. The six West Bank universities and sixteen colleges—then enrolling over 22,000 students—were closed for up to four years.

As Palestinians saw it, at issue was a policy of *ignorization* which aimed at destroying their culture's academic capacities. The closure of educational institutions was perceived as collective punishment that impeded learning, depleted the community's intellectual resources, and asserted Israeli control. It put Palestinian educators, parents, and youth in the untenable position of having to choose between struggling for self-determination and getting an education. As a teacher from the Ramallah area put it, the closure attempted to divide Palestinians "between those who want to struggle and those who want to study. They [the Israeli military] don't understand that we will do both."[6] Precisely because Israel knew full well that education is of very high value for Palestinians, it was extremely persistent in its policy of closures and targeted education as a means to subdue Palestinian resistance.

This assault required a response in the spirit of other aspects of Palestinian resistance during that period: direct confrontation including demonstrations, sit-ins and school break-ins; rallying international support through an educational campaign; and self-reliance through alternative education projects. Direct confrontation was eventually marginalized and dropped as a strategy given the high risk for Palestinian children, who were wounded and killed in shockingly high numbers. Approximately 47% of patients admitted in one Jerusalem hospital[7] and 37.6% of the 390 Palestinians who died during the first year of the *intifada* were eighteen years old or younger.[8] Meanwhile, the international campaign generated harsh criticisms of the Israeli government from the European Community, the U.S. administration, and numerous academic and educational bodies, including some in Israel. Increasingly, Palestinian institutions, educators, parents, and the political leadership positioned the growing alternative education initiatives at the heart of the Palestinian response to the closures.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Alternative education initiatives were a quick, organic, and vigorous response to the initial (February 1988) blanket order closure and were functioning effectively in a number of localities during the spring and summer of 1988. They followed two parallel paths: a) Substitute Schooling organized and run by some private and UNRWA schools through learning kits delivered to children at home, and b) Popular Teaching, organized by community members in homes, mosques, churches, and under trees. Either model contributed to the *intifada*'s objectives of total disengagement from Israeli-controlled systems. For large segments of the population, these alternatives had real potential for developing into a strong, indigenous Palestinian education system. That the Israeli military did eventually reopen the schools in May 1988 — closing them again two months later — was seen by many as proof that Israel was concerned that the Palestinians were creating a Palestinian educational system which Israel could not control.

SUBSTITUTE SCHOOLING

Substitute Schooling was initiated by some UNRWA and private school administrators and teachers in an attempt to fill the vacuum created by the closures. Public schools, under the full control of the Israeli government, had no leeway and actually were prohibited from engaging in any alternative education activities. In Ramallah, for example, Israel explicitly threatened government schoolteachers with dismissal for teaching during closure on the grounds that providing education was illegal. Over 9,000 public school teachers were forced onto "unpaid leave"; they received no pay or, at times, half their salaries while schools were closed on the grounds that they had not been teaching, although it was Israel itself, their employer, who had ordered all schools closed.

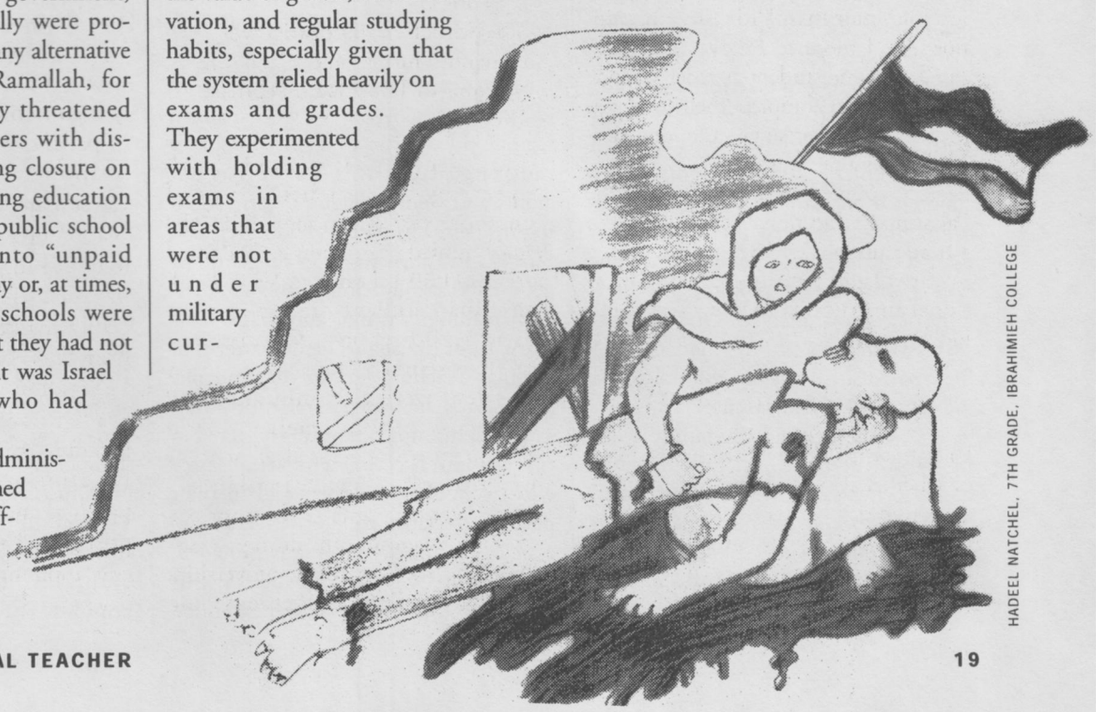
Private and UNRWA administrators and teachers designed home-study kits, ran off-campus classes, and held exams when and where possible. UNRWA implemented a "crash plan" for its refugee students that was similar to the learning kits. It also proposed the development of a distance-learning program to be broadcast through Jordanian and Egyptian TV and radio (Israel had prohibited any Palestinian broadcast), though, unfortunately, this proposal never materialized.

These private and UNRWA schools trained their teachers and supported them in preparing worksheets and home-learning, providing self-study packets for all their classes. The kits were intended to substitute for classroom instruction and support the continuity of studies. They were modeled after the conventional Israeli-mandated curriculum. Khalil Mahshi, then director of one such private school, explained that teachers prioritized the learning objectives and material, study activities, practice assignments, self-evaluation tests, and exercises to be handed in for teacher feedback and grading.

One of the main challenges of Substitute Schooling was distributing materials and collecting student assignments without attracting the attention of the military, particularly after the Israeli forces decided that this form of instruction violated the closure order. Additionally, these teachers worried about younger students who had not yet perfected their reading and writing skills, along with other issues such as the value of grades, student motivation, and regular studying habits, especially given that the system relied heavily on exams and grades. They experimented with holding exams in areas that were not under military curfew and where they faced less risk of being caught. Taken together, these efforts attempted to deliver education within the current structure. They strove to sustain normalcy and minimize disruption, not to reform the curriculum.

POPULAR TEACHING

In sharp contrast with Substitute Schooling, Popular Teaching projects were grassroots attempts to develop a new model of community education. Delivered by community members, they experimented with pedagogy that created "a radically different educational atmosphere."[9] Their goal was to *Palestinianize* the curriculum within a vision of national identity and the national struggle for independence. Free from institutional constraints, teachers and students were not focused on exams, grades, or certificates. Instead, this grassroots education offered teachers and students their first opportunity to disregard the outdated, Israeli-censored Jordanian curriculum. Unlike the standard curriculum, Popular Teaching was in touch with the realities of the children and teachers, their fears, dreams, needs and resources. Integrating Palestinian history, poetry, drama, and music into their curriculum, some Popular Teaching projects used newspapers, political leaflets, and graffiti to teach history,



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math, language, and literacy, as the following example illustrates.[10]

In the village of Kobar, near Ramallah, a group of twelve to fourteen young women and one man converted a few old houses into classrooms and went door to door to invite children to attend classes. None of these young people had ever trained as a teacher, though one university student from the village who happened to specialize in education met with them weekly to provide advice and guidance. Most of these "teachers" were also members of Kobar's Popular Committee,[11] and their weekly discussions within the Committee relating to the *intifada* would eventually make their way into their "classrooms." Thus, though such teaching had to occur in an ad hoc way, the very fact that it emerged from the community's experience and responded to its needs enriched the teaching and learning. Even shortage of space had its advantages, as sometimes students were grouped regardless of age and gender. Some groups were formed by subject matter, the older children helped teach the younger ones, and issues of gender became subject for discussion. In many ways, the strength of Popular Teaching was precisely the flexibility made possible and indeed necessary by the lack of a pre set curriculum and textbooks.

Lessons grew out of specific circumstances; whatever came to hand was used as texts for teaching, including popular culture and the arts. For example, because the military harassed informal groups caught teaching and learning, children had to take turns standing guard to signal when military jeeps were approaching. This guard duty led to geography lessons that made the children more familiar with their environment and allowed them to deepen their knowledge of the area and connect it with history, politics, and questions of national identity. On one occasion, when two siblings had to help their parents in their agricultural work, the school held a day-long class in the fields. While helping the family work the land, the children studied math, biology, and farming. They discussed peasants' special connection to their land, sang and recited Palestinian poetry, and learned the folkloric *dabkeh* dance. On other occasions, the teachers used excerpts from newspapers and the latest communiqués issued by the *intifada* leadership to study Arabic grammar and spelling and to discuss social, political, and historic issues.

Such lessons were rooted in necessity but also showed the students the importance of inquiry and the ways learning and action inform one another. As Paulo Freire would have put it, these young people were teaching the children to read the word and the world.[12] The teaching of the poem "Identity Card" by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish[13] — whose writing was banned by Israel — provides a rich example of this. Widely known as a popular song, this poem became the basis for studying language, poetry, math, history, identity, and politics. In the following excerpt (second stanza), for example, every word and phrase became text for larger discussions of pride, work, voice, and identity.

> Record!
> I am an Arab
> Employed with fellow workers at a quarry.
> I have eight children.
> I get them bread,
> Garments and books
> from the rocks.
> I do not supplicate charity at your doors
> Nor do I belittle myself
> at the footsteps of your chamber
> So, are you angry?
>
> Mahmoud Darwish,
> "Identity Card" (1964)

Kobar's residents like to tell the story of Ahmed, a ten-year-old who changed from a kid who never liked school to a motivated student. Now he got up, alone, and went to "school" early, looking his best. His parents had never seen him do his homework so diligently or get excited about helping other children with reading, writing, and math. This story is not unusual. The direct relation Popular Teaching had to the students' lives clearly increased their motivation as well. This motivation was reflected in the students' consistent attendance when schools were open and in their positive response to alternative education when and where it was provided. However, as we shall see below, this motivation dwindled as the extended and intermittent closures continued and Israel banned alternative education.

THE "NO TEACHING" POLICY

The Israeli government was increasingly expressing concern about the rise and growth of organized indigenous popular structures that threatened the core of occupation by leading the Palestinian people in a process of disengagement from Israel's administrative systems and towards civil disobedience. The Israeli military forces considered all forms of organized learning a violation of the school closures they imposed, and they declared all forms of organized popular activities illegal.

Israeli army officers told educational institutions administrators that "under no circumstances" were they allowed teaching "in houses or anywhere else."[14] Israel barred UNRWA from serving thousands of refugee students in grades one through nine, warning administrators that distributing learning kits to children was an intolerable "unilateral action" breaching the closure order. Similarly, the head of the Friends Boys School in Ramallah was ordered to stop distributing the learning kits. Israeli soldiers raided and shut down rooms and buildings — including kindergartens — where educational activities took place, and they harassed and detained students and teachers, and confiscated books and equipment.[15] This was the initial reason why classes were held in churches and mosques, given their relative sanctity, and outdoors, in mountains and under the shelter of trees, for an easier and safer dispersal of the "class" in case the soldiers invaded. Not surprisingly, the concerted campaign against Popular Education only intensified following the banning of Popular Committees in August 1988.

This assault on alternative education occurred in the midst of larger repression. In a televised interview on July 1988, the Israeli Central Command formally banned Popular Committees, and a few weeks later Israel declared them illegal organizations under the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance. Though this ban did not name all subcommittees functioning under this umbrella, it was well known that Popular Teaching and its members

belonged to the larger informal network of Popular Committees and were therefore subject to the policies of the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance.[16] Hundreds of Popular Committee members were arrested and others forced into exile. Both the severity and the ambiguity of this ban led Palestinians to conclude that individuals providing informal education could be sentenced to up to ten years in prison. Such threats of prison, large fines, and expulsion were serious enough to frustrate these decentralized and unprotected initiatives.

Palestinians blame the weakening of both Substitute Schooling and Popular Teaching on the intermittent closures, the pressure on government school teachers to not engage in "illegal activities," and the banning and the continuous harassment of any form of teaching and learning. By early 1989, alternative education had become no more than scattered efforts and could no longer hold the promise of saving children's learning. Palestinian schools still operated at the whim of Israeli decision makers and the public could not resuscitate alternative education.

Despite all its significance for community-building and political resistance to Israeli rule, alternative education was also one of the weakest *intifada* projects and among the first to dwindle. Alternative education continued to be seen mainly as a stopgap measure to fall back on until schools were reopened and instruction went "back to normal." However, "normal" had become an Israeli policy of arbitrary opening and closing of schools. "Normal" also meant postponing, again, the question of curriculum reform. Interrupting regular schooling and alternative education, the closures and harassments resulted in serious limitations and challenges for alternative education. With alternative education ultimately crushed by the Israeli military, school age students were deprived of any form of continuous organized learning until 1990.

A PEN OR A STONE?

As the above suggests, the lengthy and recurrent closures of educational institutions had a powerful impact on Palestinian society and education;[17] their implications are salient until this day. Significantly, an especially high price was paid by rural and poor children, who tend to be the least academically prepared in a country whose public schools, unlike private and UNRWA schools, did not provide Substitute Schooling programs. Since private schools in the West Bank usually serve the elite of society, many of their students were able to go abroad during the *intifada*. Yet, precisely because this privilege was not available to public school students, the closure, with all its dire implications, also created a fleeting public space in which education became openly an act of resistance. These students could neither go abroad nor maintain a semblance of continuity through Alternative Schooling. Instead, they saw their education become a shared undertaking that their communities strove to implement on their own terms.

Threats of prison, large fines, and expulsion were serious enough to frustrate these decentralized and unprotected initiatives.

In this context, both Substitute Schooling and Popular Teaching rapidly emerged as proactive strategies that situated learning — and not schools — at the heart of the matter. Their energies were directed towards building an alternative education, both as an act of resistance and as pragmatic attempts to rescue formal education. As such, their direct audience was children and their parents, not the military occupation. In the absence of a centralized national authority, alternative education in both its forms was still able to develop at differing levels and adjust to local considerations in its organization of teaching and learning. Even Substitute Schooling, for all its acceptance of imposed Israeli materials and standardized exams, existed outside the law and was therefore a form of resistance. The more indigenous, grassroots Popular Teaching was free to experiment with a Palestinian curriculum and innovative pedagogy. For all its weaknesses, its very decentralization allowed for diversity, innovation, and creativity. However, the absence of institutional support, on top of assaults from outside, also contributed to the inability of Popular Teaching to evolve from its initial spontaneous stage to a more proactive, sustained, and organized effort that might have served the entire West Bank.

Ultimately, Palestinian society did not succeed in designing a strategy to defend both its right to schooling and its right to resistance, and it ultimately failed to establish a comprehensive and sustainable educational program that would offer a competent alternative to an Israeli-controlled curriculum. Both Substitute Schooling and Popular Teaching fell short in this respect. Whether such initiatives would have succeeded in developing an indigenous educational system is a moot point. However, their attempt to *Palestinianize* the content of education is important *as a first step*, and all the more so given Israel's policy of emptying school textbooks of any reference to Palestinian culture, history, or aspirations.

Based on the premise that an independent state necessitates a literate nation, the Palestinian people had historically emphasized schooling as one form of resistance, survival, and safety, as well as a requirement for liberation. The Palestinian nation, which once had one of the highest levels of education in the Arab world, and for whom educational accomplishments and degrees were (and still are) one of the things they could excel in, faced three generations of illiterate first graders and high school graduates with no access to college. Now denied access to their schools and universities through military blanket closure during the *intifada*, they faced the serious threat—and reality—of widespread illiteracy. This threat clearly endangered Palestinian national interests: Palestinian society could not afford illiteracy, but neither could it afford military occupation — the antithesis of its national aspirations. The Palestinian society found itself trapped in a whirlwind where the right to education (in either traditional or alternative forms) and the right to

struggle for national independence became mutually exclusive.

Unable to release their schools from this trap in spite of numerous attempts and various strategies, Palestinians watched as the education of their children and youth suffered devastating effects, as did the *intifada* itself. The general message from Palestinian society was that students were to commit to *both* schooling and the *intifada*, and some teachers tried to convince students that their education was a contribution to the popular movement to overthrow the occupation. But in practice, given Israel's pummeling of any and all efforts to sustain literacy, this argument did not hold. Students learned that, under occupation, the real choice is, after all, between the stone and the pen. As one secondary school student put it:

> They [the Israeli military] want to make us ignorant. They want to reduce us to being backward and less than them. They know how highly we value our education. We know it's very important— we want to know about the world and especially about our situation. We want to understand everything. This will help us to formulate the best way to struggle and to communicate our struggle. We don't have guns and weapons. We must use education.[18]

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NOTES

1 Unless otherwise noted, this article is based on primary data, namely English language reports published as these events were unfolding: *Punishing a Nation* by al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization; *The Criminalization of Education* by Birzeit University; and *Palestinian Education: A Threat to Israel's Security?* Published by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, JMCC.

2 *The Criminalization of Education,* 12.

3 The Palestinian Council of Higher Education/Jerusalem, representing all universities and institutes for higher learning in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A statement issued September 22, 1988.

4 Sarah Graham-Brown, *Education, Repression and Liberation,* 64.

5 See, for example, Meron Benvenisti, *West Bank Data Project: A Survey of Israel's Policies.* The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research: Washington, D.C.:, 1984; and B'tselem [The Israel Information Center for Human Rights] Information Sheet, *Banned Books and Authors,* October 1989.

6 JMCC, *Palestinian Education,* 17.

7 International Committee for Palestinian Human Rights (ICPHR). *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Palestine,* June 1989.

8 Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, (eds) *Intifada*: The Palestinian Uprising against Israeli Occupation. 1st edition. (Boston, MA: South End Press, c1989), 317. See also James Graff, *Palestinian Children and Israeli State Violence.* (Toronto: Near East and Educational Foundation of Canada, 1991).

9 Mahshi and Bush, "The Palestinian Uprising," 478.

10 Example based on interviews I conducted in the village of Kobar (summer of 2001) with twelve women who had founded and participated in the village's Popular School in 1988.

11 At the beginning of the *intifada*, people organized in Popular Committees to sustain the *intifada* by responding to community needs as they arose including food, health, security, internal conflict resolution, media and information. These Committees took immediate action after the closure, recruited volunteers to teach, and organized and conducted Popular Teaching. For more information see Facts Information Committee. *Towards a State of Independence: The Palestinian Uprising, December 1987-August 1988.* Jerusalem: Facts Information Committee, 1988; Fasheh, Munir. "Community Education: To Reclaim and Transform what has been made Invisible." *Harvard Educational Review 60,* no. 1 (1990).

12 Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.*

13 For more on the poet see **www.mahmouddarwish.com.** His poem, "Identity Card," can be found in **www.barghouti.com/poets/darwish/bitaqa.asp**

14 Birzeit, *The Criminalization of Education,* 15.

15 Jerusalem *Post,* November 25, 1988.

16 The Palestinian Human Rights International Committee (PHRIC), *Update* August 23, 1988.

17 See Tamer Institute for Community Education. *Assessment of Achievement in Arabic and Math for Fourth and Sixth Grade Students in the Central Region of the West Bank—Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem.* Jerusalem: Tamer Institute, 1991.

18 JMCC, Palestinian Education, 17.