

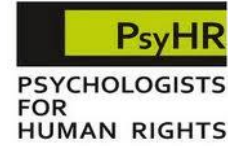


Ideas of Education: Family Perceptions of School and Childhood in the North of Gaza Strip

REMEDIAL EDUCATION CENTER



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Ideas of Education:

Family Perceptions of School and Childhood in the North of Gaza Strip

(October 2012)

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Cartography: OCHA, 2011

Table of Contents:

1.	Acknowledgements	5
2.	Acronyms	8
3.	Preface	9
4.	Overview	12
5.	Quantitative Research	21
	- Introduction	22
	- Methodology	25
	- Contents	31
6.	Qualitative Research	48
	- Introduction	50
	- Methodology	53
	- Contents	55
7.	Conclusion	82
8.	Annex I	87
	Salaam Children of the Olive Tree _ Feda	
	Murannakh	99
9.	Annex II	
	Recommendation	

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Acronyms

CRIC	Centro Regionale di Intervento per la Cooperazione
HRQoLI	Health Related Quality of Life Index
ILS	Israeli Shekel
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
oPt	occupied Palestinian territories
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PsyHR	Psychologists for Human Rights
REC	Remedial Education Center
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Work Agency

Preface

The society of Remedial Education Center (REC) is a benevolent non-profit society established in 1993 in co-operation with the Department of social services and Education at UNRWA in the Gaza City. In 1997 the society obtained a license from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of social Affairs in the Gaza City.

REC's establishment depended upon personal and volunteering efforts from the local community, ruled by volunteers and professionals all interested and specialized in the field of education, psychology, social and managerial sciences. The main interest of the society is the educational work with vulnerable children living in marginalized areas (specially with learning difficulties and mental retardation, and normality) of age between about 4-17 years and the adults around them.

REC offers its services annually to more than 350 children registered in the society and to more than 7000 children registered in the governmental primary schools, kindergarten and local NGOs. It implements its services through 62 local professional employees. REC established networking with local and international organizations.

REC used child- centered communication approach focusing on play, symbolic, creative, non-verbal and expressive techniques as well as going at the child's space, age and stage towards realizing promoting educational and subjective well-being of the children. Moving from these aims, REC adopted the following criteria:

- Integrating learning and playing techniques such as play bus activities in schools. The play bus activities within schools were vital to children and teachers in debriefing their stress. The children enjoyed the school much more; it has become a safe place for learning, playing and entertainment.
- New techniques in remedial education based on playing and learning
- Change of teacher's role from transmission to facilitation in class and from using the stick to playing games. Emphasis with teachers realized on emotional and personal capacity for warmth, humor, playfulness, forming relations and working with feelings. In addition, values and ethical commitment stressed on children's rights, needs, confidentiality, and participation.
- Expression of children's needs through playing.
- Construction of pedagogical materials by the children..
- Critical thinking and problem solving.

- Shows of clowns for children in hospitals, schools and kindergarten.

Starting from 2011 REC entered in a new phase of its mission.

Moving from the consideration that it is mandatory increasing the quality of the education in School of Salaam children of the Olive Tree, the new challenge of REC had been the parents' involvement in the educational process and school life. In fact, the idea that the parents are key stakeholder of the School, need to be addressed.

In order to understand the State of Art of parents' perception of Salaam School, REC decided to implement a research program in cooperation with historical partners, such as CRIC, and starting a new cooperation with Psychologists for Human Rights and the Department of Human Sciences, University of Milano-Bicocca. The most part of the research activities had been self-funded by REC. A great economical support was provided by Salaam I Ragazzi dell'Olivo, Milan committee that is one of the most important supporters of REC's activities.

Finally, the lesson learnt from the research results, will allow Rec to implement practical and evidence based actions to achieve the new challenges.

Overview

In June 2012 the sixth year of the intensified blockade of Gaza Strip imposed by Israel has begun. The five-year closure has had and currently has disastrous effects on the life of the 1.6 million of people inhabiting this 365 square meters land in every aspect: social, economical, political, educational, human. Since the beginning, the blockade was strengthened or eased off according to the current political situation, and in many cases it has taken the form of a collective punishment, as denounced several times by UNRWA and Amnesty International, among many others¹. With the population growth and a further structural deterioration of a system already in need of upkeep, in less than a decade the Gaza Strip will not be a liveable place anymore².

The blockade was imposed on Gaza on the aftermath of the Hamas takeover in June 2007, intensifying a closure put in force since the early 1990s. The measures applied encompass movement restrictions for people and goods, leaving the Palestinian population trapped in a big, unhealthy jail. The almost total closure of the borders towards Israel prevents people to leave the country without a special permit issued by Israel and generally granted just

¹ *Israel Chokes Gaza Despite Announced Easing*, Mel Frykberg, *IPS*. 15 July 2010, and <http://www.amnesty.org>.

² *Gaza in 2020. A liveable place?*, UNCT oPt, August 2012.

in special cases or for humanitarian emergencies. The partial opening of *Rafah* crossing in the last months has just lightly improved the situation, because unexpected closures and denied permissions have allowed the transit of just a percentage of the people wishing to leave Gaza. Because of this, it is really difficult to travel outside the Strip: the restrictions have bad consequences, preventing Gaza inhabitants to travel abroad to attend trainings or study or to keep a job in Israel, and strengthening the distance and the separation from the Palestinian community in West Bank. It is a clear violation of the human right to move. The blockade is not imposed just on people but also on goods: at the very beginning the import of most of the basic goods were prohibited, such as food and fuel. Export also was severely restricted. Although in the last years Israel has eased off the embargo, until now the transit of a lot of items is still banned. The supply of electricity is particularly bad, with continuous power cuts that leave many residents without electricity up to 12 hours each day. This situation has led to a proliferation of tunnels under the border with Egypt: the goods enter Gaza illegally through a system of underground excavations, from small material to animals or cars. The high unemployment pushes thousands of youths to work in the tunnel commerce risking everyday their life: there is not only the threat of collapses and accidents, but also the menace of bombing. Indeed, tunnels are one of the

principal targets of Israeli airstrikes, as they were frequently used in the past to make weapons enter Gaza. The lack of raw material makes hard the maintenance and reconstruction of streets and buildings, and almost impossible the development of an industrial sector. 83% of Gaza factories are closed or work at half or less capacity³. Moreover, the traditional economic system has been devastated by the blockade: the severe restrictions on access to agricultural lands and fishing water⁴ have brought two of the principal Gaza economic activities to their knees. As a consequence, the unemployment rate has considerably grown up and the population of Gaza has become more and more dependent on International aid. Anyway, even the humanitarian support is severely affected by the blockade: the introduction of material and supplies is strictly limited and frequently delayed; humanitarian workers often experience delays and problems in entering Gaza, because of a total lack of transparency in visa and permissions procedures; the local staff is prevented to leave Gaza for trainings or job duties.

In December 2009 operation “Cast Lead” began. Officially justified as a response to the fire of rockets from the Strip leaded by Hamas, it worsened a

³ Palestinian Federation of Industries, 2011.

⁴ “35% of Gaza’s farmland and 85% of its fishing waters are totally or partially inaccessible due to Israeli imposed restriction”, *Five Years of Blockade, The humanitarian Situation in the Gaza Strip*, June 2012, OCHA.

situation already highly unstable. During the twenty-three days of the Israeli military offence, several houses, schools and other buildings were damaged or destroyed; the electricity and water systems were hardly stricken and more than 1.380 Palestinians were killed, including more than 300 children and civilians⁵. The military operation inflicted big damages on an already lean water and sewage system. Because of the lack of raw material, the reparation of the existing structures was extremely delayed, or totally given up. According to OCHA, in June 2012, some 90 million litres of untreated and partially treated sewage were dumped in the sea each day; over 90% of the water from the Gaza aquifer is unsafe for human consumption without treatment⁶. Almost every house has a water tank, since tap water delivery is extremely limited, in some cases just for three/four hours twice a week. Furthermore, operation “Cast Lead” constituted a deep shock for the Gaza population, especially for the children: most of them still show psychosocial problems, learning difficulties and aggressive behaviours. After the ceasefire, Gaza Strip inhabitants have witnessed a long period of continued violence, with missiles and rockets fired from the Palestinian side, and Israeli airstrikes, military operations, sea and barrier fence clashes that last until now.

⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org>.

⁶ *Five Years of Blockade, The humanitarian Situation in the Gaza Strip, June 2012*, OCHA.

The educational system is particularly affected by this situation. Gaza is one of the most densely populated regions in the world, with 4500 people per sq. km. The percentage of individuals aged 0-17 constitutes 51% of the total population⁷ making the Gaza community extremely young. Gaza Strip lives a severe lack of schools and educative services that has a disastrous impact on the students and prevent a full respect of the right of education. UN estimates that at the moment some 250 additional schools are needed⁸: 85% of schools in Gaza run on double shifts⁹, with an average of 30 students per class, with peaks of 40. Most of the school buildings are in bad conditions and require upkeep; usually there are no playgrounds and classes equipped for extra-curriculum activities. The extreme overcrowding of schools and the double shift system have negative consequences on the quality of education: the school day is shortened, there is no time nor staff for extra-school activities and it is quite impossible for the teachers to adequately follow up all the students. Furthermore, the movement restrictions do not allow the school staff to attend trainings or workshop outside Gaza and then to keep the educational system up to date. Within this frame, few or no support is given to disabled or difficult learner children: usually, there is no planning about

⁷ *Gaza in 2020. A liveable place?*, UNCT oPt, August 2012.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ One group of students attends lessons early in the day and a second group later.

their integration inside the school and no specialized figures. A politic of inclusion is quite absent. As a consequence, in many cases children with difficulties are withdrawn from school and keep at home. Palestinian people is considered one of the most educated among the Arab countries, and this is the trend also in Gaza Strip with a literacy rate of 96% in 2011¹⁰: despite that, the lack of possibilities to study abroad and the high unemployment rate make the students very pessimistic with respect to their future careers.

It is more than 10 years that REC – Remedial Education Center works in the Gaza Strip in the field of education. Its mission is to improve the quality of educational services, with a particular focus on children with special needs and learning difficulties. In partnership with other national and international NGOs, in the last years it has implemented different projects in the north of Gaza Strip, working on capacity building, research and development, counselling, leisure and recreational activities, awareness programs. With its school and kindergarten – *Salaam children of the olive tree* – it offers good quality education and inclusion activities for the children of Jabalia and Gaza city. REC tries constantly to improve his educational offer individuating new methods and researching new ways to attend the children’s right to have a

¹⁰ *Gaza in 2020. A liveable place?*, UNCT oPt, August 2012.

good education. This work and the research that made it possible are part of the project *Psycho-social Support to traumatized children and their families in North Gaza strip*: the aim is to get a better understanding of family awareness and needs in order to strengthen its participation in children's education. The research has been commissioned by REC to the Italian organization Psychologists for Human Rights¹¹ and carried out by Dr. Silvia Reitano with the support of Dr. Guido Veronese, psychologist and president of PsyHR.

This work focuses on Quality of Life (QoL), education and how the involvement of families could be the basis of some new good practices in the development of the school offer. It starts from the idea that a basic knowledge of families' point of view on education and of their general life conditions is essential to promote an effective participative process. In order to reach this goal, a research has been carried out: 1) to investigate how the harsh conditions in which inhabitants of Gaza Strip live affect their daily life and visions of the world; 2) to investigate the families' VISION on childhood, on relationship with schools, teachers and in general concepts of children education; 3) to investigate families' awareness on children's psychological distress (different causes: war, occupation, economical problems, family

¹¹ <http://www.psychologistsforhumanrights.org/>

problems), on adults' psychological distress and on how the two are correlated. The research has been conducted in the Northern area of Gaza Strip, especially in the Jabalia area (Jabalia al-balad and Jabalia camp). Its aim is to collect information about how the relationship between families and school is perceived on the ground and which kind of resources are available in order to cope with family problems and distress linked to the difficult situation of the Gaza Strip. The research is divided in a quantitative and qualitative enquiry, and the results are analyzed and compared in order to create a wider image of the families' perception of education, school and childhood.

The quantitative research has been conducted in the month of May and has involved around 120 families through the submission of a questionnaire. The families have been selected randomly among the parents whose children take advantage of REC services in Gaza. The data were collected by the local staff and then analyzed by Dr. Guido Veronese. He is the author of the chapter related to the quantitative analysis.

The qualitative research has been conducted between June and August among about 20 families selected randomly among the parents whose

children are enrolled in Salaam school and 10 teachers of the school. The research was based on the use of semi-structured interviews at a later stage analyzed from a narrative/ethnographic point of view. Some families have been interviewed twice. The research and part of the following analysis were conducted by a Palestinian field assistant and me. Her role covered not only a support for the translation but encompassed also the preparation of the interviews, a constant follow up of the work and the final analysis.

The final chapter is dedicated to a crossed analysis of data and conclusions drawn from the quantitative and qualitative enquiries. The two instruments – a statistical investigation and a narrative interpretation of reality – can interact and complete each other in order to offer a conclusion more complete and close to the external situation. In any case, due to the small sample investigated, the few time dedicated to the research and the inevitable distortions linked to the encounter/collision between two different cultural words, the authors are aware that this is just one of the possible readings of the reality and, consequently, that is basically an *interpretation*.

Quantitative Research

Introduction

Direct and indirect exposure to violence is common among Palestinians, especially among those living in the Gaza Strip; political

violence has resulted in the imposition of restrictions on the movement of Palestinian goods and people across borders and within Palestine territories: this restrictions have seriously compromised households welfare, resulting in a loss of income, decreased quantity and quality of food, and blocked access to health care. Since 2000, poverty has risen dramatically, with more than 38.8% Palestinians currently living below the poverty line (less than \$2 person/day).

Table 1 Palestinian socio demographic indicators

Indicator	Year	Value	
<i>Total population</i>	2012	1.644.293,00	
<i>Sex ratio</i>	2012	103,2	
<i>Total Fertility Rate</i>	2008-2009	4,9	
<i>Crude Birth Rate</i>	2012	37,3	
<i>Crude Death Rate</i>	2012	3,8	
<i>Natural Increase Rate</i>	2012	3,48	
<i>Percentage of Youth (15-29 years)</i>	2011	29,6	
<i>Percentage of Elderly (60+ years)</i>	2011	3,7	
<i>Labour Force Participation Rate (15+ years)</i>	2011	Both sexes	43
		Males	72
		Females	16,6
		Both sexes	20,9
<i>Unemployment (15+ years)</i>	2011	Males	25,8
		Females	44
<i>Hospitals</i>	2010	76	
<i>Doctors per 1.000 abitanti</i>	2010	1,7	
<i>Beds per 1.000 abitanti</i>	2010	1,3	

Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

The study assesses the quality of life of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and examines its determinants. An adapted Health Related Quality of Life questionnaire was used on a sample of 120 adults whose children take advantage of REC services in Gaza. Correlation analysis and multiple regressions were conducted in order to determine association between demographic and social circumstances or lifestyle conditions. In particular, it investigates how the influence of a number of contextual and personal factors and the interaction between them affect quality of life of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, who have experienced longstanding politic and military conflict throughout their lives.

Methodology

We conducted a cross-sectional survey on Salaam School student's families; we based our study on the Palestinian HRQoL questionnaire: it combines information on families and social support, mental health, school and education, environmental issues, political and economical functioning. Answers were organized on a 5-point Lykert-type scale, ranging from 1 (little unsatisfied) to 5 (strongly unsatisfied). Some items were reverse-scored and

standardized so that higher scores indicate more anxiety and distress. Every Index was created using the sum score of specific items; the reliability of each Index was estimated with Cronbach's Alpha (α) that measure internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group: a "high" value of alpha, next to 1, is used as evidence that the items measure an underlying construct. To make indexes to be compared we organized each index' sum score on a 3-point scale, ranging from 1 (low score) to 3 (high score).

1. Dependent variables

Family relations This measure includes 8 items describing how family dynamics – cohesion, support and safety – are perceived by the respondents. The Family Relations Index was created using the average score of the 8 items ($\alpha = 0.51$).

Social relations It includes 4 items measuring the level of support received by the social network - clan, friends, neighbourhood and community residents. The Social Relation Index was created using the average score of the 4 items ($\alpha = 0.821$).

School and education It consists of 12 items divided into two groups after the Cluster Analysis: school commitment, that explores parent's involvement in children school life – follow up with homework, talk about the school day, attend special event at school, volunteer to go to class field trips; and school functioning, that measures their opinion about the use of physical punishments at school, the availability of educational services and the level of satisfaction about teachers' work. The School Commitment Index was created using the average score of the 7 items ($\alpha = 0.727$) and the School Functioning Index is resumed by the medium score of the 5 items ($\alpha = 0.47$).

Psychosocial issues Respondents were asked to rate their level of anguish, sadness, anger, frequency of nightmares and negative feelings in order to measure their mental health. The Psycho-Social Disease Index results from the average score of the 7 items ($\alpha = 0.822$).

Health It consists of 2 items and measure the medical care functioning, the Health Index is the medium score of the 2 items ($\alpha = 0.036$).

Environment Made up of 8 items regarding the disquietude caused by the family context and the general environment Gaza inhabitants live in. The Environment Index was created using the average score of the 8 items ($\alpha = 0.669$).

Work and economical situation It results from 5 items measuring the ability to meet daily needs and to provide life basic necessities to the family; the Work and Economical Index was created using the average score of the 5 items ($\alpha = 0.773$).

Political issues It consists of 8 items, in which respondents rate their level of fear and affliction caused by internal fighting, occupation violence and lack of freedom; the Political Issues Index results from the average score of the 8 items ($\alpha = 0.752$).

2. Independent variables

(Socio-demographic characteristics) Respondents were asked to report their gender, position inside the family, number of children (age and gender for every child), occupation, income and educational level.

3. Data analysis

First of all we examined socio-demographic characteristics; we used the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient " r " to measure the strength of the linear dependence between variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient between two variables is defined as the covariance of the two variables divided by the product of their standard deviations; it ranges from -1 (perfect negative correlation) to 1 (perfect positive correlation). Positive correlation indicates that both variables increase or decrease together, whereas negative correlation indicates that when one variable increases, the other decreases, and vice versa.

Differences in averages and analysis of variance tests were used to assess differences in distributions among socio demographic and economic characteristics (age and gender, number of children, income, occupation and educational level) and domain scores: we used two-tailed t-test and F-test. The t-test assesses whether the average results of two groups are statistically different from each other: it tests whether the difference between the groups is statistically relevant or random; t-value will be positive if the first average is larger than the second and negative if it is smaller; the degrees of freedom

t(df) of the t-test are determined by the sum of the persons in both groups minus 2, and they are used to estimate variability. F-test is used to assess to what extent the expected values of a quantitative variable within several pre-defined groups differ from each other; F-value will be positive if the first average is larger than the second and negative if it is smaller; the numerator of the degree of freedom F(df) of the F-test is equal to the number of groups minus one, while the denominator is number of groups \times (number of subjects minus one). P-value¹² was fixed at .05: this means that in 5% of cases we would find a statistically significant difference between the averages even if there were none.

Finally, indices scores together with age, gender, number of children, income, education and occupation, were used as predictors of the estimated overall Quality of Life index and the domains (familiar, social, psychological, scholastic, economical, environmental and political) specific scores, using multiple linear regression. Eight enter multiple regressions were performed to identify determinants of the eight estimated QoL domains. As the regression line is linear ($y = c + a \cdot x_1 + b \cdot x_2 + \dots + k \cdot x_k$) the regression coefficients are constants (a,...,k) that represent the rate of change of one variable (y) as a

¹² The P-value is the probability of obtaining a test statistic at least as extreme as the one that was actually observed, assuming that the null hypothesis is true.

function of changes in the others (x_1, \dots, x_n); they are slopes of the regression line. R^2 was used to measure the statistic validity of nine models; R^2 is the proportion of variability in a data set that is accounted for by the statistical model, it is a measure of how well the regression line approximates the real data points; it ranges from 0 to 1: R^2 of 1 indicates that the regression line perfectly fits the data.

Contents

1. Sample characteristics

The average of age is 38 for males and 34 for females; families have 4.6 child on average, in detail: women aged 18-25 have 3.5 children, women aged 26-35 have 4.3 children and those aged 36-

45 have 5.2 children. The percentage of school-age children is 47%, of 6.5 years old on average: 41% of them attend SalaamSchool, 33% attends UNRWA schools and 21% attend

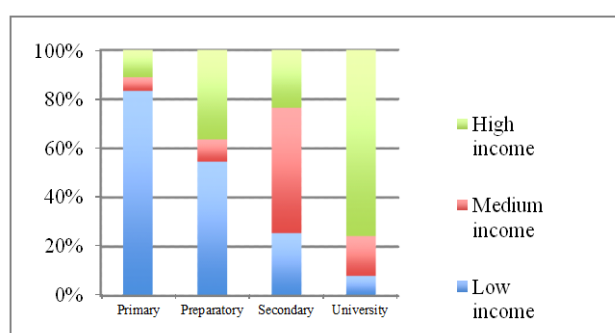


Figure 1. Association between income and level of education

public schools. A positive association between total number of children and number of daughters has been observed ($r = 0.807$, $p < 0.01$): we postulate that

social desirability and economic reasons push couples to procreate as many sons as possible. Income level is extremely meager: 30% of people is on a low income (0 to 1000 Shekel per month, about 250\$) and more than half of the respondents earns no more than 2500 Shekel per month, about 620\$; the average household income is about 2100 Shekel per month, about 500\$. Table 2 shows that income is positively associated with educational level ($r = 0.480$, $p < 0.01$) while it is negatively correlated with the number of children: the more children there are, the more the household income is low, as shown in Table 3 ($r = 0.-323$, $p < 0.01$). Educational level is pretty high: 42% of respondents have Diploma and 32,2% of them attended University. In terms of occupation: 88% of women are housewives, 36% of men are employees, the 25.5% of them are workers and the 16.4% are unemployed.

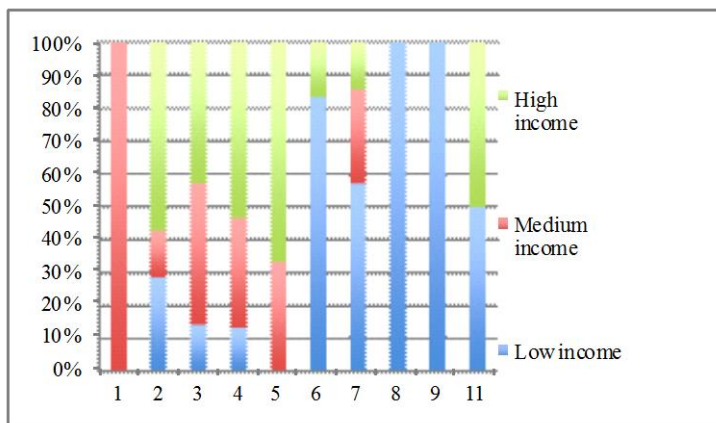


Figure 2 Association between income and number of children

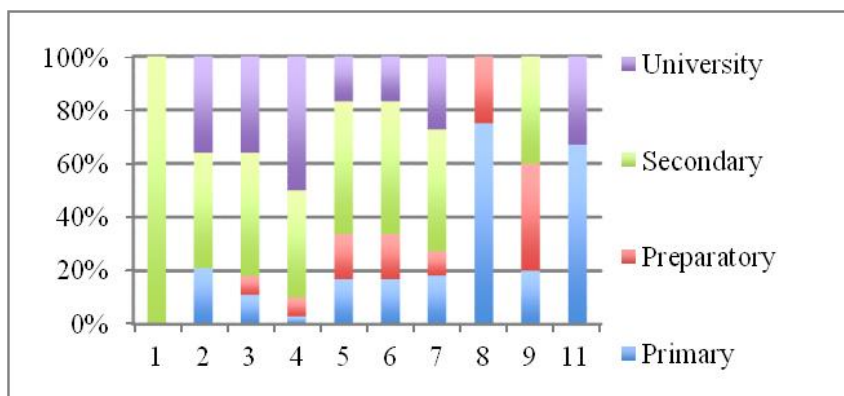


Figure 3 Association between level of education and number of children

2. Quality of life assessment

Family and social relations *Family and Social Relations Index* average scores measure 2.09 (SE= 0.733) and 2.32 (SE= 0.596), respectively. The social network is

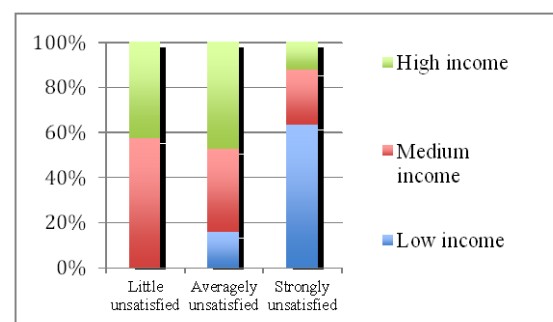


Figure 4 Association between social support and income

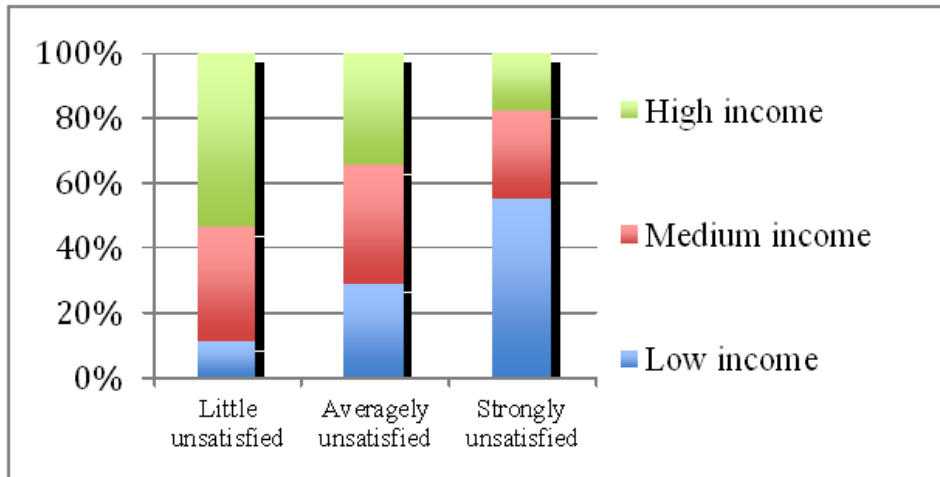


Figure 5 Association between family relations and income

not considered to be a helpful support as the family is: strongly discontent percentages are higher in social relations than in family consanguinities (39.2 vs. 31.7). The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to examine the links between social support evaluation and educational level or occupation. Findings reveal that the educational level affects significantly the evaluation of social support ($F(3,116)= 7.635, p<0.000$): those who attended university have more confidence in social support ($M= 10.43, SE=3.69$) than those who have a lower level of education: primary school ($M=15.44, SE=3.71$), secondary school ($M=12.59, SE=3.42$) and those who are currently studying ($M=16.33, SE=3.05$). Similarly, occupation plays an important role in defining social support assessment ($F(5,114)=3.852, p<0.003$): students and unemployed report a higher discontent ($M=16.00, SE=2.94$ and $M=14.00,$

SE=2.83, respectively) than employees ($M=11.14$, $SE=3.29$) and than those who have a qualified work ($M=10.11$, $SE=3.89$). Furthermore, there is a negative interaction between the number of children and the social relations evaluation: smaller families show to have more confidence in friends, clan and neighborhood than larger ones ($t(77,501)=3.556$, $p<0.001$). There is also a significant effect linked to the level of income ($t(117,613)= - 4.536$, $p<0.000$): the more the income is high, the more the social functioning is acceptable. However there is no significant interaction between gender and social disease. Moreover, women show more discontent about family relations ($t(111,925) = -2.82$, $p=0.06$): the Family Relation Index sun score is higher for women than men ($M=25.55, SE=4.68$ vs. $M=23.07$, $SE=4.73$). There's also a statistically significant effect linked to the level of income ($t(114,179)=-3.917$, $p=0.00$): the more the income is low, the more the family is considered unsafe ($M=26.08, SE=4.5$ vs. $M=22.77, SE=4.72$). Findings also reveal that there is a negative interaction between educational level and family relations evaluation: those who attended university have more confidence in family support ($M= 22.51$, $SE=4.82$) than those who have primary education ($M= 28.22$, $SE=2.92$) and those who are currently studying ($M=30.33$, $SE=1.53$), ($F(4,115)=6.202$, $p=0.00$).

Psychosocial disease The Psychological Disease Index average score is 2.06 (SE= 0.416). The analysis reveals a significant effect linked to the level of income ($t(117,837) = -4.488, p = .000$): respondents with less than 2100 Shekel per month are more psychologically impaired ($M = 21.58$) than those with

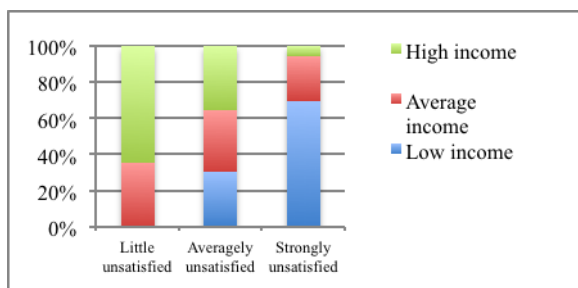


Figure 6 Association between psychosocial conditions and income

higher income ($M = 17.46$). ANOVA was conducted in order to examine the links between the presence of psychosocial diseases and education or occupation.

Findings reveal that also occupation is a element of stress affecting parents' mental health ($F(5,114) = 3.896, p = 0.003$): those who have qualified works show less distress ($M = 16.72, SE = 5.61$) than housewives ($M = 21.13, SE = 4.78$), unemployed ($M = 22.10, SE = 5.76$) and students ($M = 23.25, SE = 2.5$). There is also a statistically significant effect linked to education ($F(4,115) = 9.38, p = .000$): illiterates are more affected by psychological issues ($M = 25.17, SE = 4.05$) than those who attend secondary school ($M = 19.59, SE = 4.89$) and university ($M = 16.84, SE = 4.67$).

School and education The *School Commitment Index* and the *School Functioning Index* average scores measure 1.98 (SE= 0.388) and 2 (SE= 0.41), respectively. The analysis shows that there is an interesting interaction between number of children and level of satisfaction about school functioning: higher dissatisfaction is found in families with 5 children and more (M= 20.64, SE= 4.48) rather than in families with less than 5 children (M=17.08, SE= 4.73), ($t(94,643)=4.105$, $p=.000$). There is also a statistically significant difference between males and females ($t(107,155)= 2.734$, $p=.007$): men consider school functioning less acceptable (M= 19.51, SE= 4.76) than women (M= 17.23, SE= 4.11). There are no statistically significant effects linked neither to income nor to occupation. ANOVA was conducted in order to examine the links between school commitment and education, occupation or age. Respondents appear to be more involved in their children school life the more their educational level is high ($F(4,115)= 2.649$, $p=.037$). Occupation and age are not statistically influential.

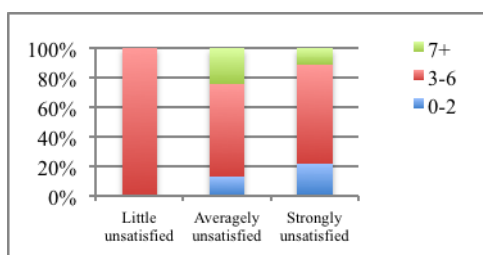


Figure 8 Association between school functioning and number of children

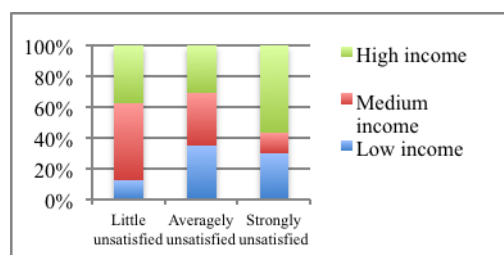


Figure9 Association between school functioning and income

Environment and health The *Environment and Health Indexes* average score measure 2.43 (SE= 0.5) and 2.18 (SE= 0.56), respectively. Findings reveal a

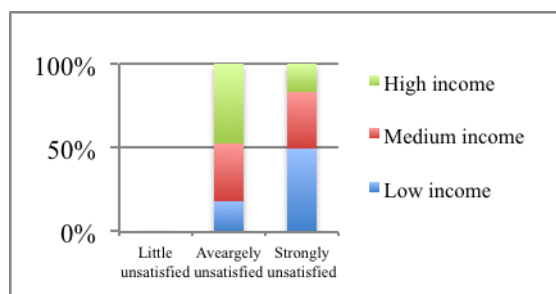


Table 2 Association between environment and income

significant effect linked to the level of income on environment general evaluation: respondents with an income of less than 2100 Shekel per month seems to be less worried about

the conditions of the place they live (M= 25.04, SE= 4.89) than families with an higher level of income (M= 28.67, SE= 4.04), ($t(107,19) = -4.404$, $p = .000$).

There is also a negative association with educational level, as determined by one-way ANOVA analysis ($F(4,115) = 6.89$, $p = .000$): respondents with university education are less troubled about their surroundings (M=25.68, SE= 5.17) than illiterate, people with primary school education (M= 31.5, SE= 4.00) or students (M= 31.33, SE= 3.05). There is no significant association with

number of children and occupation. The interaction between the evaluation of the functioning of health services and educational level or occupation is statistically insignificant, neither income is influential: health system is evaluated the same way by the poorer and by those who could benefit from better medical care.

Work and economical situation The *Work and Economical Situation Index* average score is 2.21 (SE= 0.63). Findings reveal that the level of income has a significant effect on respondents' evaluation of their general wellbeing: low-income families (with less than 2100 Shekel per month) are more concerned of not being able to meet daily needs (M= 17.36, SE= 3.9) than respondents with more than 2100 Shekel of income (M= 10.79, SE= 3.37), ($t(117,983) = -9.895$, $p=.000$). Moreover, couples with less than 5 children report less anxiety about providing the life necessities to their family (M= 13.03, SE= 4.46) than those with more than 5 children (M= 16.68, SE= 4.79), ($t(85, 474) = 4.112$, $p=.000$). University education also leads to less dissatisfaction about economical issues (M= 11.19, SE= 4.35) compared with illiterate, people with primary school education (M= 19.17, SE= 3.88) or students (M= 19.33, SE=

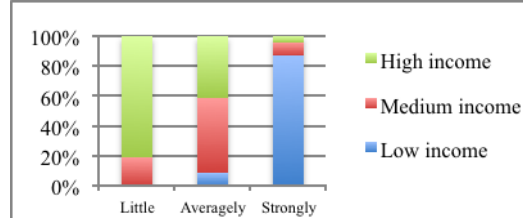


Table 3 Association between general economical situation and income

3.51), as determined by one-way ANOVA analysis ($F(4,115)= 13.026$,

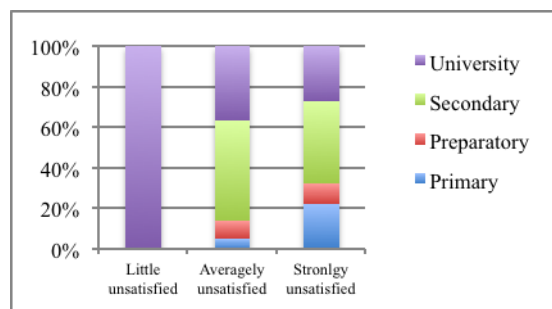
$p=.000$). No significant differences are found between males and females.

Political issues The *Political Issues Index* average score is 2.6 ($SE= 0.5$).

ANOVA was conducted in order to examine the links between political issues/awareness and educational level or occupation. Findings reveal a higher discontent about the political situation in unemployed ($M=34.4$, $SE= 4.65$) and low qualified worker ($M= 31$, $SE= 4.11$) than in employees and high qualified workers ($M= 28$, $SE= 4.23$) or

housewives ($M= 28.64$, $SE= 5.53$), ($F(5,114)= 2.558$, $p=.031$).

Education also plays an important role in defining



distress

linked to political issues: university education leads to minor distress and politic discontent ($M= 27.86$, $SE= 7.76$) than primary education or illiteracy ($M= 32.89$, $SE= 4.1$), ($F(4,115)= 2.585$). There are not statistically significant links with level of income or number of children.

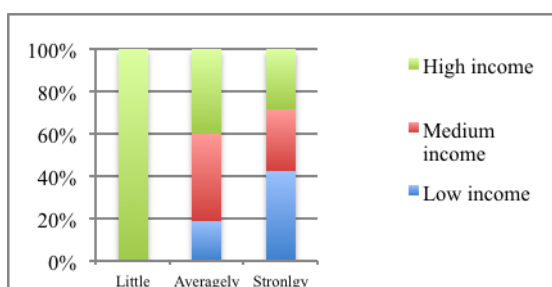


Table 5 Association between political issues and income

Table 4 Association between political issues and level of education

3. Multiple linear regression

Multiple linear regression attempts to model the relationship between two or more explanatory variables and a response variable by fitting a linear equation to observed data. In other words it is a method used to model the linear relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. The dependent variable is sometimes also called the predictant, and the independent variables the predictors.

From Figure 1 it is evident that education and income play an important role in defining Salaam families' Quality of Life. Years of schooling are significantly associated with all indicators except school functioning evaluation and health related issues: for every additional year spent at school, if other predictors do not change, family and social harmony increase by 1.1 points and 0.86 points respectively, ($p < .05$). This means that the change rate of family solidity and perceived social support improves by 1.1% and 0.9% respectively per every additional school year. Further to that, data collected reveal that the more years spent at school, the more psychological, environmental and eco rates improve by 1.3, 0.98 and 0.73 points, respectively, ($p < .005$), that is: for every additional year at school the score

linked to psychological, environmental and economical distress increases of 1.3, 0.98 and 0.73 points respectively. We suppose that education gives individuals cognitive competences to cope with everyday harsh circumstances like negative feelings, disquietude caused by the urban context and by economic tensions, providing more opportunities and strategies for positive adjustment. Higher education also leads to lower school commitment by 0.83 points ($p < .005$). It means that the most parents are educated, the less they appear to be interested in their children's school life.

The financial situation seems to be correlated with all indicators except health, school and political issues; an increment per unit in income results in a decrease by .001 points in family and social support discontent ($p < 0.05$). So, the slope of -0.001 in family and social network distress rates predicts 0.001 points less for every additional unitary income. As the income raises, psychosocial and environmental distress drops by 0,001 ($p < .005$). It means that, for example, respondents with an income of 1000 ILS have, on average, a psychosocial and environmental discontent that is 0.001 points higher than respondents declaring 1100 ILS of income. For every additional point in income the distress linked to the economical situation drops by 0.002 points

($p < .001$), that is: distress caused by living conditions and lack of economic resources is 0.002 times lower for each additional unitary income.

Finally, there are significant differences between men and women: men are, on average, ($p < .05$), 1.8 points more troubled than women about school functioning and they're also 2.3 times ($p < .05$) more worried than women about political issues. This means that men's score in school functioning and politic domain is 1.8 and 2.3 points higher than women's. We hypothesize that women bother more about domestic life while men are more worried about political issues and outside functioning.

Looking at the overall QoL index, we can see that it increases of 0.005 points ($p < .005$) for every additional point of income, if other predictions do not change. It means that Salaam parents' wellbeing is 0.005 higher for 1100-income respondents rather than 1000-income respondents. On the other hand, a raise in the education level leads to a 6.013 times quality of life perception improvement ($p < .005$), namely QoL score is 6 times better for those who have secondary education than those who have primary education.

R^2 values range between 0.035 and 0.6 for the domain-specific scores and attain 0.5 for the overall QoL score.

Table I Regression results for selected determinants of QoL domains

Domain	Family		Social		Psycho-social		School commitment		School functioning		Environment		Health		Economic		Politic	
Parameters	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Constant	26.702	3.66	12.805	2.89	26.15	3.83	9.43	2.25	23.12	3.7	25.89	3.6	7.38	1.7	17.31	2.68	41.6	4.8
Age	.004	.056	.059	.044	-.072	.058	.027	.034	-0.98	0.56	.065	.05	-.037	.026	.047	.041	-.06	.073
Gender	1.811	.902	.435	.713	1.197	.945	.144	.555	-1.8**	.911	1.373	.89	-.416	.418	-.143	.662	-2.3**	1.18
Education	-1.1**	.486	-.86**	.384	-1.3**	.509	-.83*	.299	-.748	.491	-.98**	.48	.239	.225	-.73**	.357	-1.7**	.636
Income	-.001**	.000	-.001**	.000	-.001*	.000	-.000	.000	.000	.000	-.001*	.00	-.000	.000	-.002*	.000	-.000	.000
Occupation	.211	.471	-.110	.372	.357	.494	.499	.29	.724	.475	.777	.46	-.024	.218	.115	.346	-.45	.616
Number of child	-.211	.199	.195	.157	-.143	.208	.105	.122	.686	.2	-.115	.19	.074	.092	.236	.146	-.15	.26
R²	.25		.29		.33		.125		.24		.23		.035		.593			

* Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 10% level

Table II Regression results for selected determinants of Palestinian QoL

Parameter	Domain	
	Quality of Life	
	β	SE
Constant	150.914	10.624
Age	-.126	.162
Gender	-1.996	2.621
Education	-6.013*	.001
Income	-.005*	1.368
Occupation	1.998	1.412
Number of child	.691	.577
R²	.5	

* Significant at the 1% level

4. Conclusion

Exploring the Quality of Life index of Salaam families, it emerges that men and women value differently the domestic and the external spheres: men show to be more committed about higher school functioning and politics, while women show more interest and dissatisfaction than man about the family domain. Due to the patriarchal social order that is predominant in the Gaza strip, there is a substantial separation of spheres of influence related to the gender: men generally deal with the public one, especially about job

issues and politics; women have a leading role in the domestic environment and in children's education. The results suggest a sort of gender-determined division in daily activities, inducing women to care about housekeeping and pushing men to bother about family livelihood. Men are more judgmental than women about the school. Furthermore, householders and people with lower educational status are strongly concerned with the political situation. Actually, the men's world beyond the house is fraught with daily risks of violation and distress due to political violence and borders blockade, threats of being held, stripped, detained, not allowed to go out Gaza, humiliated: if we combine men's daily life events with the frustration and despair they must feel for not to be able to find work in conditions of spiraling poverty, these results can become understandable. While women seem to internalize the suffering and dissatisfaction, men show an externalizing style.

Findings also suggest that respondents with low income experience a lower quality of life as compared to high-income families, but this is partially explained by the higher prevalence of stressors in the lives of lower-income individuals and the higher rate of fertility of those families. Education is important in determining most of the domains scores and the overall QoL score: higher QoL reports are connected with increasing education. These results are likely due to the fact that education improves awareness and the

ability to rationalize problems and deal with them, then, to cope better with external stressors. Finally, respondents aged over-18 attending university (3 boys and 2 girls) report the highest score in family and social distress, psychosocial disease and work and economic issues. This may be due to the hard frustration they face concerning work and future, and social support. In general the younger families show highest rates of vulnerability, a probability to have a larger number of kids and to feel a stronger dissatisfaction about daily life conditions. On the other hand, the “older families” show a broader sense of confidence and awareness. The economic conditions continue to play a key role in providing opportunities and mindfulness.

Qualitative Research

Introduction

In Gaza Strip there are 677 schools, including 399 governmental schools, 238 UNRWA schools and 40 private schools. During the academic year 2012/2011 some 450.000 children (6/18) were attending school. Only a 30% of children are enrolled in kindergartens, which in any case are always private structures¹³. This work focuses in particular on kindergarten and primary education schools. The harsh conditions that characterise life in Gaza Strip affect not only the access to school, but also – mainly – the quality of education offered. In order to assess the quality of the services delivered, different elements have to be taken into consideration. The number of children in the classes strongly affects the ability of the teachers to follow them according to their needs. This is true especially for students with learning problems or disabilities, who in most of cases do not receive attention according to their capabilities. The result is that their capacities are ignored and they risk being isolated inside the classes or being withdrawn from school. The professional capacities of teachers are hardly affected by cultural traditions and by the blockade. Since the educational sector is generally considered the most acceptable for women in Gaza, most of the girl entering teaching do not chose it but find in it the only possibility for

¹³ *Gaza in 2020. A liveable place?*, UNCT oPt, August 2012.

studying. This has an influence on the motivation and commitment of the future teachers. Furthermore, the closure of the borders prevents the school personnel to travel abroad and to be up to date on educational issues and methodologies. The high number of students and the bad conditions that characterizes most schools buildings makes the spaces to be overcrowded and often unbearable. The lack of material, space, time and personnel do not allow the implementation of any extra-curriculum activity – such as trips, sports, arts, visual or manual laboratories – depriving the children of a fundamental part of education that could contribute to their good and healthy growth. In Gaza, rather than education, school offers just *schooling*. Different elements linked to the blockade and the occupation affect children education: lack of electricity and water, unemployment, impossibility to move, threat of bombings or escalations. Parents are usually too busy or occupied in dealing with everyday problems to manage to keep an eye on children school education. The result is that they usually leave all the responsibility to the schools, which find themselves alone in dealing with children problems and difficulties.

The hypothesis here is that involving families is a primary tool to improve the quality of school education. Indeed, cooperation with families and parents is a fundamental step in order to create an aware and

comprehensive background useful for the children to live their educational path in the best context possible. First of all, a good communication between the families and the school allows thinking the educational offer together according to the needs perceived by both the parts. Moreover, it allows the parents to be more involved in the school activities and to better understand the behaviour and the necessities of their children. This could be a benefit not only for the children enrolled in the school, but also for all the children inside the family and for the society as a whole. In fact, the knowledge and the awareness of children's rights and needs could be spread by the same parents, who became themselves the keeper of a new attitude and attention towards the children as one of the most vulnerable part of the society. For these reasons, this work tries to investigate parents' thoughts and points of view on childhood and education in Gaza, in order to gather useful information that can lead to the individuation of strategies and methodologies able to foster a bigger cooperation between school and families.

Methodology

The qualitative part of this research has been made through the tool of semi-structured interviews addressed to parents of children enrolled in Salaam school and kindergarten¹⁴. The families involved have been chosen randomly and, when possible, both mother and father have taken part into the enquiry. Some Salaam school teachers have also been questioned, both as professionals and as mothers, in order to cross the results and understand the points of similarity and differences between the two, potentially overlapping, groups. The interviews have been conducted in Arabic with the help of a Palestinian assistant and later copied down, translated in English and analysed.

A sample of question has been used to start the conversation and to head it toward the focuses of interest. Beyond this, the interviewees were left free to speak as much fluently as possible, in order to let them talk spontaneously about their opinions and points of view. The interviewers – my local assistant and me – tried to influence as few as possible the stream of thoughts and to avoid any interference or interruption. Here a clarification

¹⁴ “Salaam children of the olive tree” is a private school and kindergarten in Jabalia lead by REC. The children of the questioned families were all between 4 and 9 years old. Because all the families involved in the research decided spontaneously not to send their children to a free, public school, it is possible to deduce that all of them belongs to a middle class level and shares a common sample of values and thoughts.

must be done about translation. To translate always means to make an interpretation. I am aware that, both during the speech and the translation of the written transcripts, the mediation of the translator created a shift between the opinions of the respondents and my comprehension. Moreover, even the act to translate thoughts into words constitutes a process of transformation and adjustment. That is why this work must be considered not as a literal or statistical analysis, but as a narrative study focused more on contents than on the form. The author do not claim to have caught the truth of reality or to have gathered a sample of ideas representative of all the families living in the Gaza Strip. What this work wants to achieve is to give a partial but important image of how education and childhood could be represented in a difficult contexts as Gaza is.

Contents

Education

Education appears to be an issue of primary importance for almost all the people we talked with. Parents' opinions reflect the data attesting that Palestinians take particularly care of education, something considered necessary for the human being, and a weapon to fight political problems and occupation. Even if not the totality of parents interviewed is educated, every one of them shows a strong concern about the conditions of school and education in Gaza.

“Education builds
the foundations of
houses; ignorance
destroys houses”

Education is considered to be the future of children and the only instrument to allow them to live a life that is better than the one of their parents. As well as for teaching subjects, school is considered fundamental in order to strengthen the personality and define the character of children: indeed, it has a formative function that goes beyond the simple schooling and encompasses personal growth and collective understanding. Indeed, school is thought as a place in which children must learn how to behave and how to deal with other people. Then, both individual and social perspectives are taken into consideration. As an individual, the child has to build his own personality, to construct his knowledge and to learn how to live: the school has the main

role to individuate and stimulate children's skills and talents. As a human being – and then, as a *social animal* – the child has to learn how to behave in front of others, first of all the parents, how to be sociable, cooperative and organized, and how to find his/her place inside the society. Unexpectedly, this social aspect is not directly linked to the relationship between the child and his/her classmates at school: it is mostly related to the relationship with parents and relatives (present time), and with other people and colleagues when adults (future time). Punishment and encouragement are two essential elements through which stimulate the children or stop wrong behaviours. While physical punishment is usually considered ineffective and objectionable¹⁵, especially at school, talking, explaining the reasons why a behaviour is good or wrong, verbally encouraging or scolding are the most used ways to teach how a correct conduct is. Beyond this, it is quite common the method of giving/denying things: to a good behaviour correspond gifts and rewards, whereas a bad behaviour is usually punished with prohibitions or the “seizure” of games or belongings. This method of giving/denying is particularly stressed as the more effective and quick, unlike the effort of time and energies that talking and explaining requests. That is not surprising,

¹⁵ We must keep in mind that, likely, the people who attended the interviews could have been reluctant in admitting mistakes of social condemned behaviors. Most of the respondents denied the use of physical punishment at home and condemned it, but this does not mean that they never make use of it.

considering the fact that the average of children per family in the Gaza Strip is 6.6, which means a lot of youths to take care of.

In parents' opinion, this task to teach a "behavioural education" to the children is shared by both the school and the family, which have to cooperate and work together on the issue. But, later on, parents show to take part really few in school activities and to have a limited connection with the teachers. It seems that everyday problems, jobs and big families to deal with do not allow them to create a real connection with the school. Instead, families use to leave all the responsibility of education – schooling and behavioural – to the schools, except for some issue of particular interest. It follows that parents have great expectations towards the educational system, often without knowing his functioning or without worrying about. It must be said, anyway, that usually the school itself do not provide the conditions in which this kind of cooperation could be developed and put in practice. Overcrowding, lack of personnel and absent training on the issue do not promote the institution of a strong connection between school and families.

If asked, people use to make a strong distinction between educated and uneducated persons. The difference does not lie on the level of knowledge or capabilities they have, but on the ability to deal with other people. That

means, the focus is more on the social aspect rather than on the individual one. Educated people are considered more social and “more easy to deal with”; they are aware of how the world works and of how to act inside it. They know life and can discover the world around them; they have stronger characters. Instead, uneducated persons are viewed as close-minded, unable to stay inside a community and to deal with people different from themselves. Thus, education

seems to give the necessary tools to live inside “And us, as a group and to contribute to its surviving and Palestinians, we have functioning. In Gaza, this abstract image does to take care of not perfectly fit with the concrete situation. education in order to When asked about examples, people use to break the siege we are operate a shift from the level of universality living in”

to the one of locality. They point out that it is not always like this, that often people with high education have close minds and do not like to deal with others, and that uneducated people could be particularly open and intelligent. This phenomenon has been partly explained by the peculiarity of Gaza Strip: most of the people without a school education did not decide to leave school, but had to because of economical or political problems. A lot of fathers who took part in the interviews experienced the first or the second Intifada when they were

young: in those periods, most of the schools remained closed for long times, the economical situation was worse and the political issues held the stage. Then, it was not a choice, rather a constraint. Actually, during the research, uneducated parents appear to be particularly committed to their children education, stressing the importance of school and learning. In their words, they want to offer to their children all the opportunities they did not have in the past, and this starts from a good quality education. A common thought is that a degree or diploma could allow children, in the future, to find a good job, then to be independent and live comfortably. This hope, anyway, clashes with the reality of Gaza, where the unemployment rate is extremely high, reaching 29% in 2011¹⁶. In fact, in different parts of the interviews, people complain about the lack of work as one of the main problems of Gaza, especially caused by the blockade. It seems that the question of employment becomes urgent when talking about teen-agers education and their immediate risk to not find a job: indeed, in this case people appear to be extremely pessimistic about education utility in their children's careers in Gaza, and consider emigration as the only possibility. When talking about primary school children, instead, the future, farther, seems to offer more possibilities: students have to gain knowledge in order to contribute to the change that Gaza waits and deserves. Talking about the girls, the situation

¹⁶ PCBS, 2012.

changes: for most of the interviewees, women and men, education is considered useful for the girls especially because it gives them the tools to grow up and teach their children. Just a minority talks about the possibility for women to study and take up a career in any field different from education. Then, school is a preparatory moment for life, not regarding a future possible career but useful especially to be a good woman and mother inside the society. Anyway, there seems to be some movement about this issue: parents appear to be more persuadable about girls' education, and more and more female students are convinced to work in the future. Perhaps this delicate cultural internal change is linked to a new openness toward the outside world that happened in the last years and that could not be stopped by walls: the diffusion of the Internet, then the contact with other people and cultures, despite the difficulties linked to the electricity shortage, has somehow crack a closure lasting for years.

Education is often considered a tool that could allow Palestinians to improve the situation of Gaza, to break the siege and stop the occupation. The first element is strongly linked to the concrete reality: Gaza needs teachers, engineers, architects in order to fix structures deficiencies, develop the country and build the society. About the liberation of Gaza, and of Palestine, the speech becomes more vague: there is the idea that education

could be a valuable tool to be used to fight the occupation, but the ways in which this could be done remain uncertain. Some references are made to the children awareness regarding their rights, regarding the story of injustice that characterize their country and their life, and the consciousness that life could be different. But nothing more. It seems that the phenomenon repeats itself: like what happens in reference to the school, here also there are great expectations but no clear ideas on how to achieve them. In any case, education seems to be considered particularly important especially for Palestinians also for another reason. In the background of Gaza, all seems to be transitional, evanescent: houses, peace, lives. There are no certainties, nothing that for sure will last. Here, education is viewed as something that could not disappear, something that could not be stolen, confined, destroyed. As a mother said, “we have nothing in our life, just education”.

“Education is like a
weapon, especially

Teachers' point of view is quite similar to [for Palestinians](#)"

parents' opinion. Since they deal with education every day, their thoughts appear to be more structured and clear. It must be reminded that Salaam teachers work for a private school that is led by particular methodologies and principles, such as the attention to each child and the importance of the relationship with parents. Because of this, their speeches are influenced by this way of dealing with school issues, a way they share since they work at Salaam. In teachers' vision, school and family complete each other in education. Both these institutions have to cooperate and work together in order to guarantee for the children a safe and welcoming environment to grow and learn within. Without a strong connection, the efforts put in action in one of the two environments could come to naught. Sometimes the school provides the things that families cannot provide: this means not only schooling, but also support, safe places to stay, quiet environment. Even in teachers' discourse emerges the opposition between educated and uneducated people in reference to the capacity to deal with people and to be a valuable element of the society. Without education, the community would be weak and conservative. Whether educated people have values and can have a strong image of life, uneducated people are weak and use power and force to gain what they want. Anyway, there is the awareness that a certificate does not necessarily mean openness and culture: there are graduated persons that have less knowledge and experience than uneducated ones. This because education does not come "just from school, but

also from life". As far as Palestine is concerned, teachers' express the same hope that education could change the situation of Gaza: the educated children of today could, one day, change the situation and "build a new society of unity and peace".

School and sociality

The Palestinian society, especially in Gaza, is mostly based on social relations between neighbours, colleagues and relatives. Since the family has to be conceived as an extended family, in which dozens of people are linked together by kin-connections, roles and labels tend to overlap. This system, based on the connections and disconnections that take form inside the community, works as an integrated organism in which forms of reciprocal support and mutual help assure survival and wellbeing of individuals. The social relations system does not only offer a wide welfare structure, but encompass also a whole set of constraints and social control elements. Accepted behaviours are socially codified and defined following a precise code of conducts. To detach oneself from it means to be exposed to collective disapproval and social judgment. All this inside a system within which being part of the community is considered essential and constitutes a primary form of aid. Because of this, people take particularly care of other people's opinions and impressions, so that often appearance seems to be more

important than essence. Anyway, this structure is not immobile and static: changes happen constantly, in a process in which internal elements are modified without altering the wider scheme. What is important is the survival of the society, and this goal is accomplished with the insertion of transformations that do not subvert the general balance. Within a similar structure, it is always possible to find spaces of movement.

This system affects a lot the way in which people deal with school and educational issues. It seems that it is quite important to appear as “good parents”, that means people who take care of their children, assure them the best education and grow up good children. Actually, there is not always a real commitment behind this behaviour but a hard effort to offer a performance that could be acceptable by the society. The same fact of enrolling the children in a renowned school – maybe far, maybe expensive – is already a proof of a good parents attitude, even if there is little or no knowledge about whether the school really offers a good quality education or not. That is why sometimes parents have the bias to leave all the responsibility of their children’s education to the schools: they did their part in enrolling them, and paying for them. Later, the school has to do its duty. To have educated children is considered important for their future and allows parents to be proud of them, but it is also a good way to receive social

plaudit and to boast about among the circle of relatives and friends. How a good child is? According to the answers, he/she must be honest, friendly and sociable; he/she must be kind, calm and studious; and, finally, he/she must gain good marks. The great majority of parents stress the importance to have school certificates with marks, even for pre-school children: beyond the pleasure that this could give to the parents and to the child itself, it is openly admitted that having marks allow parents to show them to relatives and acquaintances. In a mother words: "what could I tell to my relatives asking me about my sons' marks? Of course I see the marks at school from the teachers but I didn't take them and show them to my relatives. I think that all parents need certificates with marks for their children. I want to be proud of my sons in front of the people". Starting from this point, it is not uncommon the bias to make comparisons between the children according to their school results: most of parents use to justify this behaviour considering it a way to push and stimulate children in their school duties. This desire to show to the entire world how the children are good does not mean that parents do not care about their real school level, and it is not necessarily damaging the children attitude, rather it could be a form of encouragement. It simply means that social opinion and acceptance are considered particularly important. This fact must be kept in mind in occasion of every potential school project or activity addressed to the families.

To be a good child means also to behave in a good way, namely not to tell lies, not to swear, not to be aggressive or violent. School is considered to have a fundamental role in discouraging this kind of behaviours and to keep “good” children safe from “bad” children. In fact, these behaviours could be *learnt* from other kids. Children use to imitate parents, teachers, and friends. Parents try to avoid their children to keep “bad companies”: about this issue, some prejudices come into play. The most diffuse is the one that refers to the opposition refugees/citizens. According to UNRWA, in the Gaza Strip there are more than 1.1 millions registered refugees¹⁷, hosted in 8 official camps. There is a latent, but often declared conflict between refugees and citizens in Gaza. Complaints usually come from the part of refugees. According to their declarations, at first Gaza inhabitants were distrustful toward the exiles, considered as different people coming from outside bringing only problems with them. They often were considered the cause of Gaza people troubles: overcrowding, lack of jobs, hostility of Israel. In a mother words, “ in 1948 when we moved from our lands and came to Gaza, citizens started to hate refugees, because they thought refugees had taken their land, so they started to stay close to each other and refused any relation with refugees”. From their side, some refugees show to consider citizens close-minded, unsociable,

¹⁷ www.unrwa.org

unable to deal with people and to take care of their children. These are thought to have inherited their parents' bad habits, including aggressiveness, dishonesty, arrogance. They have different habits, different minds: that means, a different culture. It is not infrequent that refugees and citizens avoid contacts between each other, and do not like their children to meet and spend their time together. It seems that this kind of prejudgment comes mostly from the part of refugees, while citizens are keener on not to make differences. Obviously, this discourse does not involve *all* the refugees, but was predominant in the interviews. It seems that these forms of prejudice bring on a sort of split inside Gaza society, in which adults' issues linked to history, politics or affiliation disputes have strong effects also on children's relationships. The further separation that occurs at primary school – with citizens attending governmental institutes and refugees enrolled in UNRWA's – does nothing but worsen this situation. Despite the declared, common goal to find unity in order to improve the situation of Gaza and Palestine, divisions and clashes seems to be spread. This does not concern only this difference of "status" but also political affiliation. Anyway, fragmentation inside groups is something unavoidable and is inbuilt in their very nature.

Teachers, as members of the same society, show to share this system of thought. In particular, in their words, the opposition refugees/citizens appears again, more or less in the same shape but in reference to the parents they deal with: their relationship with citizens is difficult, because of their bias to avoid contact with people outside their circle, and because of their little commitment about children education. Since most of Salaam teachers are refugees, in some occasions their “status” belonging seems to prevail on their working role. Anyway, classes are mixed, teachers do their most to work with children just as children – avoiding any label or prejudice – citizens and refugees studying and playing together apparently without troubles. Political and “cultural” divisions seem to pertain to the adults’ world, leaving untouched the children universe (at least in early age). On the other hand, teachers suffer the fact that people sometimes make appearance prevail on substance. They complain of being left alone by the families in the process of children education: the fact of having put children in a renowned school allows them to become absent and to leave work and responsibility to the teachers. Moreover, parents use to hide problems and family clashes in order to avoid social judgment: this make the teachers’ work harder, because the lack of information do not help in the process of teaching and, in general, in supporting children who often present psychosocial or learning problems. This phenomenon is particularly harmful for children with special needs or with disabilities: the fear of social stigma sometimes pushes parents to deny the problem or to hide it. Thus, teachers have to deal alone with children, and miss

the cooperation with parents that is, instead, essential. As far as marks are concerned, the opinions are various. Sometimes written evaluations could in fact act as encouragements for children, while they could have negative effects on weak students and difficult learners. Anyway, it is quite shared the criticism towards extreme forms of interest in marks, and the bias to make comparison between children: adult's troubles and foibles have an impact on children badly affecting their life and their educational and growth processes.

School and schools

Parents' complaints about schools reflect the deficiencies and problems already analysed in reference to the bad consequences of blockade and occupation in Gaza. Usually the opinion relative to governmental schools is worse than the one relative to UNRWA schools, which are thought to offer more services and of a better quality. In any case, some criticisms strike the both. Schools buildings are often in bad conditions, in need of upkeep and renewal. Usually, there are no spaces and no material for the children: no playgrounds, no libraries nor laboratories. The high overcrowding strongly affects the liveableness of spaces and the quality of education. The necessity to operate on double shift shortens the school day and leaves no time for

extracurricular activities. One of the main complaints is that schools in Gaza focus just on *schooling*: there is no attention to the general education of children, no sports, no didactic works through which students could experience team action, discover their talents or find new interests. There is no way to *put in practice* what they study, just an assimilation of notions following a curriculum generally considered too hard and complex. Parents stress the need to propose diverse activities to the children, in order to stimulate them in different ways and to make them love the school.

Some criticisms are headed towards the teaching staff. Teachers are too few, and usually they are not able to deal with the huge number of children in class. This means that, in many cases, they just take care of good students, having neither time nor resources to address the weakest ones or the difficult learners. There are no specialized teachers, in particular they have no training or experience in dealing with disabled or with children with special needs. Teachers, in parents' opinion, should behave in a way that allows them to be respected by children, but also loved: in fact, "if children love the teachers, they will love school". They must stay in the middle, neither too severe nor too weak. Most of parents stress the fact that, especially in governmental school, teachers do not have enough education and experience to deal with students. The result is that the quality of

education is low and there is little commitment to improve the situation. Moreover, usually there is no contact or communication between families and teachers: in a mother opinion, 'teachers and parents do not cooperate and work together; teachers just give orders, and tell us what to do'. Teachers do not ask clarifications to the families and do not contact them in case of problems or in order to talk about the children's educational level. On the other hand, often parents do not go to school and just show to take care of marks and results. This situation creates a shift between the two spaces: the efforts made at school often are vanished by the lack of coordination with the families. Anyway, parents have no space in the definition of school organization: there are no meetings or parents committees that could allow them to take part in the school activities and give a concrete contribute in the children educational process. There are no occasions in which parents could meet other parents in order to share ideas, concerns or experiences.

The general situation of Gaza has direct effects on school and education. In addition to the bad conditions of buildings and furniture, the shortage of water and electricity that affects also schools, and the extreme overcrowding, other aspects negatively affect the children's right of education. The difficult political and economical situations in which a lot of

"There are no safe places in Gaza"

families live do not allow them to ensure a good follow up of the children: parents usually are too busy to take care of homework or students' duties, often leaving the responsibility to the bigger brothers or sisters. Anyway, the only support coming from the parents is usually the one offered by the mother: according to the cultural habits, she is responsible of children education and she has to take care of it. Fathers usually do not show an interest in educational issues and do not go to school. They just check school final results. Schools miss material and stationeries, playgrounds and laboratories. Because of the lack of schools, often children must make a long trip in order to reach them: this means additional costs of transportation. Furthermore, to move in Gaza is always a risk: even if in the last years no civil structures were directly targeted by Israeli airstrikes, the possibility to be accidentally stricken is always present. Parents admit their fear to let children go to school in periods of troubles or possible escalations, which in fact are quite frequent. A lot of school are placed in dangerous areas or next to the borders. This situation makes students lose a lot of school days, thus affecting their educational growth. The pressure created by the never-ending threat of attacks, the reconnaissance laps made by Israeli military planes and the fear of a new war have bad effects on children: they experience psychosocial problems, lack of concentration, aggressive behaviours. School must provide spaces that not only are safe, but that could also communicate a feeling of

security and welcoming. Moreover, families stress the necessity to have specialized teachers in dealing with problematic students and relevant methodologies to do it. The blockade directly and indirectly affects education. The closure of borders does not allow teachers and school personnel to leave Gaza and to get new information and experience abroad. The high level of unemployment and the impossibility to study abroad create an atmosphere of pessimism and lack of hopes that rebounds hardly on children. Moreover, the shortage of water and electricity affects children's capability to organize their time between study and rest, making hard to keep concentration and to dedicate time for books.

For the teachers, the condition of the schools in Gaza is a main issue, as mothers¹⁸ and as professionals. In addition to structural and spatial problems, they point the focus on the relationship, with students and parents. Usually, in governmental and UNRWA schools teachers do not have a personal connection with children, just a working one: that means, lessons are just a sharing of information, absolutely one-way, and there is no possibility for the children to take part actively or to contribute in the development of the classes. This is mainly due to the high number of students per class, but is also linked to some cultural issues. As we said before, usually, in Gaza, there is not a big choice for girls wishing to study at university,

¹⁸ In Salaam school all teachers are women.

especially in the recent past: they generally take their degree in the educational field because of the pressure of the family and of the society. The consequence is that a great part of teachers did not choose to do this work, but accepted it as the only possibility. Then, sometimes teachers do not like their job, a job that requires a lot of passion, patience and commitment in order to be done properly. In a Salaam teacher words, "they do not care. They just want to gain their salary and perhaps look for a better work". In teachers' opinion, an educator cannot be a good one if he/she does not like his work. The problem of governmental schools is that they are full of teachers without experience and without commitment. Instead, the role of the teachers is considered to be of great importance inside the society: they help and support children in the first years of their life, the ones in which character, personality, and talents take form. The teacher must be determined, but also kind, and helpful: he/she must be as a second mother or father, and has to give the good example because children use to imitate him/her. It is particularly important to keep a good relation with students in order to make them love school, especially because of the hard Palestinian curriculum that bores children, and makes them live the classes as a routine. Children need to express themselves – especially in the difficult situation of Gaza - they need to develop their personality and to discover their talents and passions. Every child deserves to be followed according to his skills and capabilities, and has to feel welcomed and comfortable in the school institutions. In this process, cooperation between teachers and families is essential, especially in case of problems. According to

teachers, school and family complete each other and must collaborate in order to make the children live and grow up in a peaceful and stimulating environment. If there are untold and unsolved problems inside the family, there is no way to help the children. The school must stimulate the families in taking part in school activities and share the process of children's education and growth. In dealing with parents, it is necessary to take into consideration their education, culture and customs: as well as for the children, also parents must be considered in their individuality and it is necessary to study different plans for every family.

As far as Gaza situation is concerned, teacher see everyday how the harsh conditions affect children's life and education. The young people suffer for the lack of freedom and opportunities, whether the children – as one of the most vulnerable groups – manifest chronic problems of psychological nature. Schools, which must be the safest and most welcoming places, often cannot provide the right conditions to ensure a good educational environment. The pressure of military strikes and occupation hardly affect adults, and consequently often make the family environment tense and problematic. Children feel that they are not like the other children in the world, usually grow up faster and are deprived of the most basic rights, such the ones to study, play and enjoy their childhood. According to teachers' opinion, when they will grow up they will be different from all the other people around the world. Politics and clashes between parties are issues that enter really soon in children imaginary:

they use to draw tanks, soldiers, airplanes. Children have aggressive behaviours, are noisy and stubborn. In a teacher's words: "occupation makes the children be like criminals. They learn to hate and become aggressive. There is no view for the future. They always think about Israel". They start really soon to understand that they have no control on their life, it always depends from someone/something else: Israel, Palestinian political parties, electricity delivery timetable, fences and soldiers. This impossibility to make plans for the future affects children hopes and wishes and often provokes incurable harms.

Text and context

Education is not something separated from everyday life: as here we are not talking about schooling, but about the process through which children become adults acquiring knowledge, personality, and a personal idea of world and reality, education must be considered as something embedded in all the phases of life. Because of this, its development is strictly linked to all the factors that occur in someone's existence. The already described bad consequences of closure and occupation in Gaza have a direct impact on children's growth and education. They create an unsafe and tense environment that inevitably affects children and families.

The first element families stress is the lack of security. Gaza is a place in which is quite impossible to predict what is going to happen: there is no war now but a constant situation of tension and military nervousness that does not allow feeling safe and relaxed. There is no *stability*. There are no safe places. A new war could happen tomorrow, Rafah border could be closed, a new strict embargo could be imposed, an airstrike could strike my neighbourhood. I could lose my house, my land, my family. These thoughts are always present in Gaza inhabitants' minds, and have a strong impact of their behaviours and psychological balance. The last generations were all born inside this condition and have experienced it for their entire life: even though the economical and political situation of Gaza Strip has partly changed during the years, the same state of instability has ruled. The clashed occurred between Palestinian political parties have worsened the situation giving an additional source of worry: for most of the interviewees, only the unity of all Palestinians could bring to some improvements. Now people are separated, they do not trust each other, everyone has just enough money and resources to think about his family. Cooperation and mutual help – elements that had great relevance in the Palestinian community in the past – are slowly disappearing leaving the stage to a stronger commitment towards someone's own small kin group. According to people's opinion, pressure of life changes

the behaviours and damages the relationships between people: it leads to define new priorities and to give up with everything is not essential for survival. People feel that they cannot count on anyone for help and support. This feeling comes from the past experience, at all levels: from the big powers that in turn supported and abandoned Palestinians, to the local political parties, to friends and neighbours. In Gaza welfare assistance is minimum, since services are absent or too expensive, and volunteer work is almost non-existent. Children grow up in this environment and learn this way of life: they learn that they are not like all the other children in the world, that there is an enemy and a struggle they will inherit, that maybe all they do in their life will be vain. They are unable to live their childhood and enjoy it, they experience pain and fear too soon and are obliged to grow up too fast.

The constraints people live in and the impossibility to make plans for the future bring a feeling of impotency and the sensation that it is quite impossible to control one's own life. It seems that everything depends on external factors: Israeli decisions, political plans, economical crisis, delivery of services. Closure of borders decides if you can leave or not; local politics and customs decide how you can wear, or speak, or act; water and

electricity delivery decides what you can do, and when. There is no possibility to save money, because all is used for daily needs. There is no possibility to protect children from war and violence, even from a psychological point of view. There is no possibility to leave Gaza, to get a visa, to travel abroad, to be cured abroad, to meet new people and have new experiences. There is no possibility to decide how to direct one's own life. In short, there is *no choice*. Someone said that poverty means not to have the possibility to chose. Usually in Gaza people do not die of starvation, and the lack of money is a direct consequence of occupation: the problem is not economic, but mainly political. Fundamentally, people miss their rights to be respected. First of all the right to take decisions for themselves. This situation is chronic: nothing seems to change, everything repeats itself without possibility to intervene. One of the main worries is not a deterioration of the current situation, but the fact that nothing will change. There is a fear of *immobility*. Someone even hopes to have a new war, in order to give a shake to Gaza. This feeling leads to a general passive attitude: the idea that people can do nothing. Israel is the one who decides everything. Politicians take the decisions. Only Allah could do something to change the situation. People appear to be quite baffled when asked what they would like to change in their life: nothing is in their hands, they said, just God could do something. For someone, if there is no State, it is no worth to fight to improve the

situation. The high dependency Palestinian people have developed in the last years on international aid worsen this phenomenon. The emergency support at first given to refugees has become a never-ending relationship of dependency based on aid, developing plans with no sustainability, temporary projects, subsidiarity and apathy. A temporary situation has become the normality. Most of people say that they have become used to it: to occupation, to water and electricity cuts, to unemployment, to fear. This inhibits any possibility of action, when the struggle for rights and wellbeing becomes a struggle for mere survival.

When asked about their hopes, people usually offer similar answers: to have peace and stability, to end the occupation, to have an independent and united Palestine, to stop the embargo and the violation of human rights in Gaza. On a more basic level, people hope their children to have a better education and study abroad, to have safe places to stay and to have their natural rights respected, to find a solution for unemployment and economical needs. Anyway, people use to talk about their hopes as they would just be dreams, something that is obvious for everyone but extremely difficult to achieve. A lack of future perspectives is immediately tangible: children are the future, and it is “as dark as the sky of Gaza”.

“Occupation
affects hope”

Obviously, as Palestinians, and as Gaza people, teachers show to share the same feelings of distrust and resignation. They can see everyday how the problems of Gaza have effects on children and adults: essentially, their work is based on relationships. Sometimes, they feel to be particularly affected by this attitude: they can taste it continuously in the behaviour of parents towards children's education and future. They especially feel a sense of powerlessness: their role, so important inside the society, often leaded by a strong commitment, appears to be vain in front of the chronic lacks of Gaza. They feel the weight of the great expectations families have towards them, and sometimes the frustration of not being able to meet them. Anyway, they feel reassured by the children who, at least in their early age, seem not to have already lost hopes and desires. Every little success is a source of satisfaction. In a teacher's words, "the most important thing is to live following a human value, whether you are a teacher or a nurse or anything else".

Conclusion

Quantitative and qualitative researches are two different tools useful to offer an image of reality in a specific time. As we have already said, a partial, limited and contestable image: in a word, a *construction*. This because it is not an immediate, faithful mirror of reality but the specific interpretation of a human being, who is influenced by million of variables, such as time, space, external and personal conditions, cultural mental schemes and prejudices. It is a construction not because it is not true, but because it is built *over* reality. The two research instruments – qualitative and quantitative – analyse the world in different ways and aim at different goals, but they can, together, offer a broad-spectrum representation of reality.

Data confirm that families' economical status has a big influence on general situation and wellbeing, but also that education plays a fundamental role in defining people's needs and coping abilities. Education in Gaza takes the shape of a fundamental resource that, if not to solve the situation, allows people to gain a better awareness and to individuate useful strategies to creatively improve one's own life. It gives self-confidence, a broad understanding of life and the capability to deal with other people. The idea that education is important is quite generalized, even among people who had

no possibility to study: the impossibility to attend school in their youth does not reduce their commitment in pushing their children to reach a high level of education and, sometimes, make them try to improve their own education when adults¹⁹. We have seen that education is considered important to train people on how to deal inside the society and how to keep relationships with others: despite this, it seems that it does not lead to phenomena of cooperation or assistance outside the closed circle of kin and acquaintances; there are few cases of volunteering or disinterested help, except for small issues. Especially in the field of education, there seems to be no collaboration and work together between families, and with the school. First of all, this could be explained by the fact that families have big problems to deal with, leaving them little time and energies to think about other people; furthermore, school institutions usually do not provide a context that stimulate this kind of mutual help and confrontation. But data related to people's confidence in family and social circle suggest a further theory. There is a spread feeling of distrust towards others and the idea that nobody could be of help. The bad economical conditions of Gaza inhabitants make them struggle to assure their own family sustainability: the system of reciprocity based on mutual help and support has been eroded by economic uncertainty.

¹⁹ A man, imprisoned for 20 years in Israeli jails, declared to have taken two university degrees during his detention.

The difficult and tense political situation spreads feelings of pressure and nervousness that affect social relations and daily interactions. It follows that the whole social system results to be battered and weakened by occupation and closure. This is also a cause and a result of local politics conflict, which worsens the feeling of division. What war and occupation did in Gaza is not only to put a whole economic system on its knees and to deprive a population of its basic rights. They did bring to a fragmentation of the society and an alteration of its internal balance that make harder and harder to cope with difficulties and react to social injustices, depriving people of the social support and cohesion that were so essential in the past.

Gaza inhabitants experience an internal closure in addition to the external one. In the last years a hardening in social rules and customs have slowed down and obstructed the internal movement and change of the society. The system is quite rigid and misses the flexibility needed to cope with the unstable situation and to handle the available resources on the ground. This is true especially in reference to gender and to the social organization of relationships between men and women. Their role inside the community is rigidly defined, with women usually dealing with domestic and family issues and men leading the public and working sphere. This structure is common in most of Muslim cultures but it is generally pretty

flexible and open to adjustments and changes. In Gaza the system is more static and impermeable to external inducements: this does not mean that it is totally closed – every human group experiences changes and internal movements, even if sometimes it is hard to see – but that the basic structure is more difficult to be modified and that there is less internal space for movement and deviations from the norm. The system rigidity makes it harder to deal with changeable situations and to have an effective impact on them.

Within this frame, education could be a strong resource able to offer the necessary tools to make the society to be more elastic and more adaptable to external conditions. It could show how the possibilities in life could be boundless, even in an environment closed by boundaries and politics. It could suggest ways to act deeply on structural and chronic problems and, in the end, it could help in reaching unity and cooperation. Gaza and Palestinian people are culturally predisposed to this, as data on general education and school commitment show. What must be done is to push for a further improvement of the educational system both acting on external and internal constraints: the end of occupation and closure is fundamental and constitutes a first step in order to allow Gaza community to re-build the society and to have the freedom to decide how their life must be.

Annex I

School of Salaam Children of the Olive Tree

Feda Murannakh

This part is dedicated to families' opinions and perceptions of school and education in reference to REC school, *Salaam children of the Olive Tree*. Since it is the institution in which parents have enrolled their children, they can have a direct and deep experience of its work and functioning.

Salaam Children of the Olive Tree (hereafter *Salaam school*) is a private school that offers kindergarten and primary education classes to children of Jabalia and Gaza since 2006. It offers to Gaza community services aimed at contributing to improve education quality and building a civil democratic society. The school uses new and innovative methodologies in teaching and dealing with children, such as: learning using the "corners" activities for children enrolled in kindergarten; learning through group activities for children enrolled in the school; practical exercises and educational trips allowing children to put in practice what they study. Teachers use to make an individual plan for every child according to his/her school level. They also use to explain lessons by games in order to attract children's attention, to make the lessons easier and to break the borders of curriculum's routine.

The school always tries to keep an open attitude towards the world and to get stimuli and knowledge from outside, in particular to benefit from the experience of local and international experts through training courses frequently organized for its teachers. Moreover, the school is one of the first schools in Gaza that have been working on integration of disabled children within normal classes. In order to do that, the school has its evaluating team composed by psychologists, counsellors and specialized supervisors who follow the children in each step: the registration process and the child's level

first evaluation through exercises and tests like IQ; children progresses and problems and children behaviour during the school year.

Families show to have different opinions when talking about governmental, UNRWA or Salaam school: Salaam school seems to be able to offer to the children some elements other schools in Gaza miss. Parents show to be particularly critical toward governmental schools: in their opinion, they are not able to offer to the children good quality education; they do not provide buildings and furniture suitable for children's classes; there are neither non-syllable activities nor extra curriculum programs; teachers' capabilities and skills must be corrected and improved; classes are too crowded, and this prevents teachers to take care of all the students inside the classroom; there are no entertainment and sports lessons useful for children to externalize their problems, energies and to have fun. On the other side, Salaam school is particularly appreciated because of the attention it gives to the quality of education and to the individual growth of every child; classes are not crowded and this helps teachers to introduce new methodologies and to take care of every child according to his/her school level; school places are clean, organized and kept upkeep. Teachers are mostly considered to be professionals, experienced and able to take care of all the children. Lunch meal is good and healthy, teachers use to explain the nutrients that foods

contain; moreover, they teach children how to eat and how to keep their clothes and places clean. Then, in families' opinions meal time is considered also a moment in which children could acquire new information, habits and good behaviours. Families appreciated the effort of the school to teach children some behavioural issues such as respecting the others, listening to others' words, avoiding bad words and be sociable. They stress that this role of "behavioural guidance" should be shared between family and school in order to follow up the children in a good way and to keep them away from bad habits. In a mother's words "our children spend half of their time at school, so the school is like their second house".

Parents show to appreciate school's activities and services that most of the schools in Gaza don't provide, highlighting the fact that Salaam is the only school in Gaza that organizes educational and entertainment trips. Families have a positive opinion of entertainment trips: children need to externalize the things they have inside, in order to overcome their problems and to have fun. Families stress on the importance of this kind of activities especially for Gaza children. Occupation, internal Palestinian conflict and siege: all these elements put children and their families under pressure and stress. Moreover, most of the families in Gaza cannot provide such kind of trips because of their bad economical situation; in their words "sometimes

Salaam offers to the children things that families are not able to offer". On the other hand they said that entertainment trips need to be more organized: children become really tired and the study mustn't suffer because of this. Educational trips are considered useful because they allow children to put in practice what they study. In Gaza it is difficult to do practical things even for adults because of occupation, which prevents and controls people movements. Bombings and Israeli incursions make more difficult to move and experiment life. In REC opinion, educational trips are a fundamental part of children's education because they enforce children's character and encourage volunteer work.

Salaam also organizes parties for birthdays, mother's day, graduating day and national festivals at school or outside school in order to break the school's daily routine and to let children enjoy their time. Parents like parties and feel that they could be a source of enjoyment and fun also for them; in a mother's words "*parties are for us as parents more than for children*". The difficult situation in Gaza and the closure of borders create a lot of pressure, so parents find this kind of activities as a good way to have fun and leave pain apart, even if sometimes shows are boring and require to be renewed.

Parents stress the importance to have certificates with marks. REC attitude is to give certificates without marks in order to discourage competition and focus attention on individual successes and achievements. Since Gaza society is strongly constructed on social relations and judgement, parents express the importance of marks in order to show children's achievements to relatives and neighbours; in a mother's words "*what could I tell to my relatives asking me about my sons' marks?*" Parents seem to feel the necessity to show their children's good behaviours and achievements in front of other people, and they consider marks to be a tool to improve children's school commitment. Teachers seem to share this point of view. Anyway, Salaam school provides the children with final certificates without marks, starting from the point that it is important not to create differences between children to avoid phenomena of fights, anger or underestimation. It believes that every child knows his/her school level and that it is not necessary to make a comparison between classmates inside the classroom. In teachers' opinion, parents are too interested in marks. And sometimes families don't accept their children's situation: they have the bias to deny problems, especially for the fear of relatives or acquaintances' judgment.

Parents express their hope that Salaam would share its methodologies with governmental schools: most of families have no possibility to enrol their

children in a private school because their economical situation does not allow them to afford expensive fees. They also hope Salaam school would be able to organize some activities during summer holidays in order to keep a continuous contact with children and to offer some activities in a place like Gaza that misses any form of entertainment or leisure.

Once enrolling their children in a private school, families use to leave all the responsibility of them to the school, taking part just a little in school activities and planning. Most of parents enrolled their children in Salaam school because of its good reputation and because it offers a long school day, compared with governmental and UNRWA schools. That is why they have big expectations from the school. When we interviewed the teachers they speak frankly about this point: they always try to do their best with children but sometimes they feel the pressure of all these expectations. Anyway, they stress on the importance of families' cooperation to achieve big results because school can't do everything alone.

Parents think that Salaam school must improve their children's talents and find ways to encourage them even in simple ways. They show to be particularly interested in encouragement strategies, as a way to push children to behave correctly and to study more. Telling nice words is a good way to

encourage children, but in parents' opinion "it is not enough": giving gifts is considered to be a fruitful strategy, but also praising children in front of relatives, neighbours and others. Regarding to this point, families make a comparison between Salaam school and UNRWA schools, which usually give a bag of gifts to excellent students. It seems important for the families to show these achievements to relatives and neighbours; moreover, they constitute a strong encouragement for children. This thing shows how much the society in Gaza is structured on the opinions and the views of others.

Families' opinion about Salaam school teachers is pretty good. Parents show to be really committed about this issue: children use to imitate teachers, so their teachers have to behave in a good way, to avoid saying the bad words, to be kind and to be as a second mother for children. Moreover, loving the teachers let children to love school and subjects. Teachers have to be professionals, good and active; they must take care of every child and have a good relation with them; they have to keep contact with the families. Teachers must stay in the middle, not too severe but also not too weak. Some families consider Salaam teachers to be not prepared and in need of more training courses and experience. They appear not to share their attitude to treat all the children as they are at the same level: indeed, teachers use to consider all children as equal and do not reward or greet particularly the

better ones. In a mother's words *"we get tired teaching our children, it takes a lot of time. Children work hard. We need to show these results"*. Salaam teachers always try to avoid differentiation between children, especially with disabled ones, but this doesn't mean that they never encourage excellent ones: Salaam school follows a strategy through which it tries to take care of children's psychological balance, keeping them on "the safe bank of the river" and allowing them to focus on school and study. Salaam teachers have generally a good opinion of school attitude and strategies. They like to work there because they have the possibility to learn and apply new methodologies in a context where school is not routine. The general environment is quite good: classes are not crowded, and this allows them to take care of each child; they like to have the possibility to offer extra-curriculum and non- syllable activities.

Parents are quite unsatisfied about the communication between them and the school and the ways in which this communication is developed. Concerning Salaam school, some points of dissatisfaction are highlighted: the school usually contacts the families just for asking them to pay the fees or to talk about their children's bad behaviours. In their opinion, the school must talk with the families about children's achievements and good behaviours. In their words, "Salaam school never calls us to talk about our children's

successes or to say that they make good things". Express appreciation towards children's good achievements could be a way to encourage them and to let families to be proud of their children. Talking about their relationship with families, teachers show to face some difficulties in dealing with parents, which sometimes appear to give little attention to their children's school path. Some of them are uneducated and this could affect their awareness about the importance of school and education; some have not enough time or resources to adequately follow up their children. Teachers complain that families don't cooperate with them: some families are not cooperative with the school because they are not educated, they are careless, they prefer to do other things than to follow their children. At Salaam school, usually directors/supervisors mediate the relationship between teachers and families: some teachers contest this school methodology. They would like to have a direct contact with the parents, because of their better knowledge of children's educational level and behaviours. However, some teachers appreciate the mediation of school's representatives, because "*some families create problems and we don't want to be part of this fighting; relationships and roles must be clear between families, teachers and directors*".

Most of Salaam teachers didn't choose to study Education or to be teachers. In the past, in Gaza, university opportunities were limited for girls,

with the Educational sector considered as the only appropriate and socially accepted. This notwithstanding, most of Salaam teachers affirms to love their work because it allows them to be socially useful and to deal with children. Moreover, they like their job because it gives them the capabilities to teach to their own children. Generally, in Gaza, high education is considered useful for women because it makes them able to grow up their children and to help them with school and homework. Teachers highlight the necessity and the importance of their role inside the Palestinian society affected by occupation, internal Palestinian conflict, siege and closure of borders. In their point of view, teachers have to focus on playing in teaching lessons in order to give to the children the opportunity to externalize their problems and feelings. Their role encompasses the creation of a safe environment in which children could grow up leaving outside problems and the stress of occupation. They also feel the responsibility to educate the new generations of the Palestinian society in order to reach unity and find ways to contrast occupation.

Annex II

Recommendations _ part 1

Guido Veronese

Preliminary results of the present work invite to reflect on REC mission and commitment toward its users and workers. Before hypothesizing some recommended actions it is necessary to focus on the lessons learned since the first phase of the project.

- 1) Both Salaam families and the teachers seem to share a common destiny: struggling for dignity, to be recognized in their basic rights such as personal and family development, freedom of movement, economic, physical and psychological safety. The apparent divide between school service providers and users at some level is artificial if related to the general life conditions and satisfaction in Gaza Strip.
- 2) The educational issue cannot be isolated from the contextual/environmental constraints.
- 3) Quality of life, subjective and collective wellbeing must be considered as a REC priority focused to enforce the goal reached in educational field with the pupils in the past years.

- 4) As local Ngo REC must deeply consider the social role that is playing in the Northern Governorate of Gaza.
- 5) Educational work must be included in a cluster of social services strictly connected with each other: psychological, economic support, work, health and spiritual counseling are very important dimensions that can stimulate a more concrete view of the educational issue as a part of personal and societal growth.
- 6) It seems to be crucial to identify risk and protective factors that can affect the commitment of family toward education from a part and the teachers on the other hand. Assessing risk and protective factors in all the stakeholders of Salaam school (children, parents, caregivers, teachers, staff, etc.) is an unavoidable further step.
- 7) Working on functioning and abilities to cope with adversities and uncertainty of the stakeholders is essential. One of the crucial emerging themes both from the quantitative and qualitative study of this research is the risk of the stigma and social judgment. Enforcing problem solving abilities, competencies in planning and fund rising, working on developing competencies and skills contribute to furnish great instruments to deal with the everyday life constrains, to increase self-esteem and self efficacy, to promote health and “good practices” not only strictly aimed to improve the commitment toward education but

also to work on a improved personal and communitarian life satisfaction.

- 8) Poor and illiterate families in Gaza need education opportunities. The risk of a strong education for children is to create a paradoxical generational divide. If from a part parents claim the right of education of their children, at the same time they risk to live in the shadow of their kids educational competencies. Having the impression that the best instruments to deal with of present and future problems are in the hands of kids should be culturally disturbing and *depressogenic*. Some possible consequences should be a disqualification of the school opportunities, a strong refusal to being in contact with the school institutions as a result of a deep sense of inadequacy, finally punitive and violent behaviors toward pupils and teachers.
- 9) On the other hands the teachers' training must be continuous and structured: the environmental and cultural complexity of Gaza ask a constant upgrade of teachers' educational, relational and didactic skills. It means that structured and scheduled training courses, recognized by university and governmental institutions, are fundamentals to ensure the professional wellbeing of the teachers.
- 10) The complexity of the Gaza's educational systems, the unique amount of challenges the teachers have to deal with, make them in a

privileged position in confrontation with other colleagues working in troubled conditions, conflict affected area and poverty. The Gazan teachers' experience could be defined as example of excellence if methodologically well driven. After the implementation of structured, clear methods and procedures, the Salaam school instruments should be presented to other colleagues all over the world as "best practices" aimed to find solutions in uncertain educational conditions.

Future developments

Brief term

- 1) The first recommended step is to involve from the first beginning the teachers in the phase of planning of the future actions. It is not possible at this stage to implement neither standard procedures nor superimposed instruments.
- 2) A structured moment of restitution of the research's results involving teachers, Salaam stakeholders and public institutions representative and REC board needed.
- 3) We suggest to build-up a *task force* of experts able to include all the actors of Salaam schools and stakeholders (small pioneering group).

- 4) The *task force* must be coordinated preferentially by a well known and respected Salaam teacher and by a authoritative representative of REC
- 5) The task force meeting must be scheduled: not less than one meeting every fifteen days (better more).
- 6) The task force must be fully trained in the organizational, planning work and human resources management.
- 7) The *task force* should create a concept note of project, identifying possible actions to be implemented with Salaam families, indicators and system of evaluation.
- 8) The concept note must be presented, discussed -and approved- by the whole board of teachers and stakeholders.
- 9) It's very important to involve from the first beginning some representatives of the Salaam school parents in the *task force*. Taking in mind the composition of the typical family attending the Salaam school. Moving from the results of the present work, the parents' representatives must be balanced: by gender; social class (low/high income/education); residential status (citizen/refugee).
- 10) REC should provide an external monthly supervision aimed to teambuilding, enforce the structure of the task force and control conflict inside the group.

- 11) Periodically the task force must present to the whole Salaam and stakeholders staff preliminary results, process evaluation etc..
- 12) Feedbacks provided from the fieldwork should be used to rethink the actions and re-work periodically the project.

Middle term

- 1) Moving from an ecological perspective looking at the educational domain as a part of general QoL (quality of life) of the family, it is important to implement actions not only education/didactic-driven.
- 2) REC must consider the opportunity to enforce services for the families looking at economical assistance, spiritual support and advocacy.
- 3) In order to promote trust, reciprocal understanding and enforce wellbeing in Salaam family, REC should promote family committees devoted to build *ad hoc* projects moving from the specific needs of the families attending Salaam school.
- 4) The committees must be supported by experts and professionals social workers according with the aims of their projects, to ensure sustainability of them.
- 5) The committees should be economically supported as start-up, establishing deadlines for the self-sustainability.

- 6) Salaam school must be recognized a physical space where the projects will be discussed and implemented. It doesn't mean that every work must be held in the Salaam school building, it is very important that the logo of the school will appear in every space devoted to the planning. The school must become reference for the pupils and parents' life as well.

Long term

- 1) Provide professional family services maintaining a participative and community-oriented perspective;
- 2) Train parents to become professional operators able to reach most effectively as possible the future families attending Salaam School.
- 3) Create an open Salaam school community.

Recommendations _ part 2

Silvia Reitano

Given the data and information acquired during the research, the following activities could be implemented in order to improve the quality of education Salaam school would provide and to involve parents in the school activities.

School and activities

Families suggest the improvement of school services, in particular:

- 1) Organization of classes dedicated to sports. It would be good to have one teacher inside the school with a specific education on the issue, or at least someone who have attended trainings or workshops. In addition to the pre-lessons daily moments, the school could propose one lesson per class each week dedicated to light sport activities. It would be good to find a near place that could offer spaces for children's sport activities (swimming pool, gym??)
- 2) Improve the library. It should be necessary to dedicate one room inside the school as a furnished library. Books must be organized according to children age target and must cover different issues. Stock of books could be received as a donation from foreign countries (Arabic or International for English practice). Activities for the children could be organized by turns inside the library. It could be also possible to organize a system of loan that could allow Salaam children to bring

books back home: this way they will be stimulated to read and also other children in the family could take advantage of the library. If the system works and there seems to be a demand, it could also be possible to extend the library including books for adults on behalf of parents.

About activities:

- 1) Parties organized outside school must be planned not just in Jabalia but also in Gaza city. This could allow families from Gaza to take part in them and people from Jabalia to move from their neighborhood. It could also allow changing the idea that Salaam is just a *Jabalia* school. This could also contribute in improving the relationship between refugees and citizens. A new stock of activities and games must be proposed in order to catch families' curiosity. Parents must be involved not just during the party (e.g. with the various "games" organized for them) but also in the phase of ideating and implementing. Questionnaires about liking could be given to the families after each party in order to understand what they did like and what they did not, and in order to gather availabilities in making other parties/activities.
- 2) Some activities could be organized in order to discuss the issue of rubbish and recycling. Garbage is one of the biggest problems of Gaza, because of structural deficiencies, but also because of the rooted habit to throw everything on the ground and not to take care of the

environment. This contributes to worsen the quality of the places in which people live. Some “workshops” must be organized at school to explain to the children the problem of garbage, the bad consequences that pollution could have on environment and on life, and to propose new good habits and suggestions for recycling in a context with fundamental lack of related services. These lessons must be organized according to children age, but could be offered to all of them, including kindergarten children. “Workshop” must not be just explaining lessons but must contain activities and exercises in order to catch children’s attention and to allow them to put theory in practice. A lot of activities could be implemented: recycling at school, creation of musical instruments, collages, dolls with rubbish... Moreover, it is possible to dedicate one trip during the year to this: e.g. children could be taken to the beach, a good equipping must be given to them (gloves, plastic bags, information for their security), they could gather the rubbish, talk with the teachers about how the environment is damaged by the rubbish (fishes, seaweeds, crabs, families on holiday): everything in practice, with the immediate possibility to look at the reality. Parents could be involved.

Parents' involvement

- 1) Some periodical meetings could be organized during the year in order to offer to the parents workshops or discussion days on issues related to their children life (limited number of participants, they must register to the workshop of interest, so a lot of workshops). The issues of interest must be investigated among parents. In theory, a local expert must be invited to lead the workshop: it could work as a volunteer offering his/her knowledge; it should preferably be one parent. The meetings must deal with different issues related to all aspects that affect children life: education, health, recycling, psychological wellbeing... This could be a good occasion to offer a service directly to the families, and this way involving them more in the school world.
- 2) With the proposal above, also fathers could be involved in the school, offering their knowledge: as pharmacists, teachers, psychologists, engineers... This "lessons" could be proposed, in a simplified way, also to the children during the school time with available parents.
- 3) Some of these workshops could be organized as focus groups with parents, leaded by a counselor/expert/psychologist, in order to allow them discussing about children difficulties, problems and achievements. This could make parents feel that they are not alone in children general education: they could talk directly with experts about

their doubts or problems, and also discuss between each other, strengthening the relation between parents, exchanging experiences and sharing coping strategies.

- 4) At the end of the first school-term some individual meetings must be organized between parents and teachers in order to discuss children school path, problems and achievements. This must be done for each child, with a meeting with the specific teacher/s (not directors) of 15/20 minutes each. These meetings must be compulsory, and this fact must be specified at the moment of enrollment. A week, maybe in the afternoon, could be dedicated to this. This could push parents to follow more their children's school life and create a direct contact between parents and teachers.
- 5) In the occasion of gatherings, meeting or workshops with parents/families, a system of "temporary" baby-sitting could be organized. This means that, if few parents are invited to the school for individual meetings or workshops, a teacher/assistant must be there in order to take care of the children during parents' business. This service must be offered to all the children a mother could bring with her, not just the one enrolled at school. To have two teachers involved would be better, in order to organize two groups of children according to their age.

REC (Remedial Education Center)

The society of Remedial Education Center is a benevolent unprofitable society established in 1993 in co-operation with the Department of social services and Education at UNRWA in the Gaza City.

In 1997 we got a license from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of social Affairs in the Gaza City.

The society establishment depended upon personal and volunteering efforts from the local society . The Society is supervised by an elected board of seven administrative members who are all interested and specialized in the field of education, psychology, social and managerial sciences.

PsyHR (Psychologists for Human Rights)

Psychologists for Human Rights is a organization of social promotion. Its goals are to support the safeguard of Human Rights both in Italy and abroad, to encourage co-operation between communities and cultures, and to promote freedom

CRIC (Comitato Regionale per la Cooperazione Internazionale)

Centro Regionale d'Intervento per la cooperazione (CRIC) is a no-profit association born in 1983. It operates in international solidarity and cooperation, as forms of "exchange and reciprocity" between social, cultural and economic realities most active in Italy and the social actors in the emerging countries in the South of the World.

Unimib (Department of Human Sciences “R. Massa”, Milano-Bicocca University).

The Department *Scienze Umane per la Formazione “Riccardo Massa”* (“Riccardo Massa” Human Sciences for Education Department) was founded in 1999 as the *Dipartimento di Epistemologia ed Ermeneutica della Formazione* (Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Education Department), by a group of professors and researchers in the historical, philosophical, pedagogical, natural science and human science areas, who wanted to promote the study of educational processes in an interdisciplinary light.