Reclaiming Diversity in Education

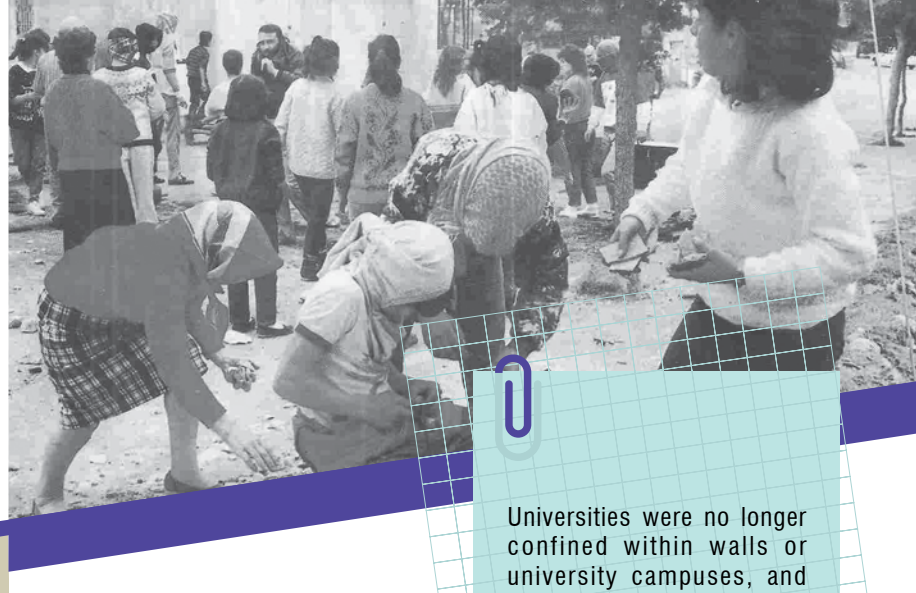
What happened to the underground schools and universities of the first Intifada?

By Alessandro Petti

In 1987, in an attempt to suppress the first Intifada (the Palestinian civil protests against the military occupation), the Israeli government banned people from gathering together and closed all schools and universities. As a consequence, Palestinian civil society grew through the organisation of an underground network of schools and universities in private houses, garages, and shops. Universities were no longer confined within walls or university campuses, and teachers and students began to use different learning environments in cities and villages. These gatherings and assemblies reinforced the social and cultural life among Palestinian communities. Learning was not limited to the hours spent sitting in classrooms; mathematics, science, literature, and geography were subjects that could be imparted among friends, family members, and neighbours.

In order to resist the long periods of curfews imposed by the Israeli army, these self-organised spaces for learning also included self-sufficiency activities, such as growing fruits and vegetables and raising animals. Theoretical knowledge was combined with knowledge that emerges from action and experimentation. Learning became a crucial tool for gaining freedom and autonomy. People discovered that they could share knowledge and be in charge of what and how to study.

The classical structure, in which "expert teachers" transmit knowledge and students are mere recipients to be filled with information, was substituted by a blurred distinction between the two. A group dynamic opened this new learning environment to issues of social justice, inequality, and democracy. The first Intifada was, in fact, a non-violent movement that aimed not only to change the system



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of colonial occupation but also to create new spaces for social change. For example, youth and women now had the opportunity to challenge traditional and patriarchal sectors of Palestinian society. Within these processes, education was perceived as an essential tool for liberation and emancipation. The knowledge produced within the group structure was no longer distant and alienating, but rather grounded in the present political struggle for justice and equality.

At the beginning of the nineties, this open and community-based system

Top photo: During the first Intifada, people from Beit Sahour, like all other Palestinian communities, came together to resist Israeli occupation

Bottom photo: Attempting to replant an olive tree uprooted by Israeli bulldozers.

of learning was not considered by the newly established Palestinian Authority. The national Palestinian educational curriculum continued to be based on the Jordanian national system, ignoring these challenging and rich experiences.

However, most of the leaders of this underground network became key figures in the Palestinian non-governmental sector. Many considered that the state-building process of the last years had become centralised, bureaucratised and, in some cases, authoritarian. The non-governmental sector is the space where these experimental practices in health, environment, human rights, and education have continued to develop.

Most NGOs in Palestine today, much like the PA, are internationally funded. Although donors operate in support of the local population, they are in fact not accountable to the people, often pursuing the cultural and political agendas of the donor states. Philanthropy has thus become one of the main vehicles for Western intervention in the politics and culture of Palestine.

Bearing these dangers in mind, the network of NGOs still seems to be an important tool for developing various policies. In particular, non-governmental spaces are able to react more efficiently to the needs of marginalised sectors of society that are not represented by state policies. A new type of common space – not yet adequately understood and theorised – has thus emerged through NGO culture.

One very interesting example of this kind of communal educational space is the international school of Le Petit Prince in Bethlehem. The school was established by a group of parents and teachers who were concerned about the education of children in Palestine. They imagined a school in which each student is a source of knowledge and an active learner, not just a recipient of information. They imagined an educational approach in which teachers are not instructors but co-learners, where students and teachers engage in projects together that privilege play, critical reflection, and creative-arts practices.

The school is not following or reproducing a specific educational model, nor is it presenting itself as model. The pedagogical approach is an original combination of critical thinking in a contextual local learning environment with an openness to the world that is obtained by the integration of three languages and cultures: Arabic, French, and English.

Courtesy of school of Le Petit Prince in Bethlehem.

The school is based on a number of principles. The students have three specific pedagogical pillars: the family, the teachers, and the space of the school that was conceived for inspiring creativity and independence in learning. In this environment, students, teachers, and parents together play an active role in the life of the school. The parents' participation in active committees is a fundamental contribution in shaping the school.

In addition, the activities of the school do not invade the relations and activities that students have with members of their families. No compulsory homework is given to children in the early years. However, fundamental books and complementary activities are recommended for students and families.

A limited number of students per class makes the learning environment interactive and familiar. Students are invited to learn from each other, and working in groups is considered fundamental. Knowledge is not separated from action; students learn by experimenting, and play is considered an instrument for learning. The curriculum is adapted to the children's potential by the pedagogical team and is based on fundamental books that teachers and students read and discuss together.

Instead of a standardised system to categorise the level of every student, teachers produce a detailed evaluation twice a year that includes each student's progress to be discussed with parents.

The cultural and social environment of the school is diverse, all faiths are respected, and gender-power relations acknowledged and challenged.

Despite the enthusiasm of teachers, parents, and, more importantly, students of the school, a fundamental question remains: How can a dialectical relation be created between this non-governmental, experimental, and dynamic, yet fragile and transitory method of education and the more stable and formal, but also more static and closed system. Or rather, how can a relationship between these two different but complementary systems be created in order to ensure that the experience of Le Petit Prince not become simply an interesting but isolated experiment?

These experiences are an invitation to reactivate critical and communal learning environments in order to influence educational institutions and to contribute to the way universities and schools understand themselves, aiming to overcome conventional structures – learning environments that are not confined within the traditional walls of academia, but which cut

across different forms of knowledge to integrate aspects of life and dialogue with the larger community. The aim of these experiments is essentially to reclaim plurality in education and diversity in ways of learning.

In addition to being an architect and a researcher in urbanism, Alessandro Petti is interested in critical pedagogy and is a co-founding member of Campus in Camps, an experimental educational programme in Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem.