Teaching With Theatre Under Adversity
Samira Alayan/Achim Rohde

In summer 2007 three teachers from the Teqoa Secondary School near Bethlehem (Palestinian Territories) spent one month in Braunschweig as scholarship holders of the Georg Eckert Institute. Their visit was an opportunity for the GEI to learn more about the Palestinian school system and the conditions under which schools in the occupied territories operate. It also proved a starting point for an ongoing cooperative project between the GEI and the Palestinian Ministry of Education. The GEI already assembled a substantial collection of Palestinian textbooks and curricula in its library, but access to the “field” has proved difficult, due not least of all to the circumstances on the ground in the Westbank.

Teqoa Secondary School is a small and poorly equipped public school in the rural outskirts of Bethlehem. 700 pupils have to fit into a space designed for a maximum of 400. Classes often consist of more than 40 children who are crammed into a small room, with bad or next to no lighting and ventilation. There is no central heating. Instead, paraffin and gas heaters are being used in winter. There is no meaningful recreational space. In addition, the school is plagued by violent conflicts between pupils, Israeli settlers from a nearby settlement and the Israeli armed forces. Many facilities are still damaged from years of conflict. Morning assemblies are crowded military like gatherings in the school yard where the national anthem is played, religious scripts are read and prizes for competitions are given out. From the school yard, one can see a ring of Jewish settlements scattered on the surrounding hills. The only road that leads to the school from the nearby village of Teqoa is used also by Palestinian pupils from a neighbouring mixed school (boys and girls) and by Jewish settlers. As in many other areas in the Westbank, this has been a main source of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis in recent times. An Israeli tank is posted along the road which daily follows the children on their way to and from school. In sum, the children from Teqoa have many real life experiences with violence and live under constant fear of attacks by settlers or soldiers. As a result, many pupils have developed stress symptoms, find it difficult to concentrate in school and hardly manage to follow the curriculum.
Against this background, the three teachers visiting the GEI in 2007 planned to develop new approaches to classroom teaching that would use theatre techniques to overcome the weaknesses of frontal teaching and rote learning that are still dominant in Palestinian schools. Moreover, they profited from the expertise and the infrastructure at the GEI in order to develop state-of-the-art teaching schemes using the Palestinian textbooks stored at GEI. As part of their program at the GEI, they participated in a week long workshop conducted by the Initiative Grenzen-Los e.V. that runs a youth theatre unit in Berlin Moabit. This training course enabled them to develop a written outline of an art project they planned to conduct in their school. But due to the centralized and hierarchical structure of the Palestinian school system, they could hardly implement any such project without the consent and active cooperation of the Ministry of Education. Therefore, in the course of 2007/08 the GEI established a working relationship with the Palestinian MOE and successfully organised a teacher training workshop in cooperation with the Ministry and the Berlin based Initiative Grenzen-Los. The workshop was held in November 2008 in Bethlehem, some 20 teachers from various schools in the area, including the three teachers from Teqoa Secondary School, participated. It was conducted by two experienced and highly motivated trainers from Initiative Grenzen-Los, Mr Ahmed Shah and Mrs Anne Lemberg.

Due to the positive feedback of both participants and Ministry officials at the end of that workshop, we decided to continue this project in 2009 and hold a second teacher training workshop this fall which will build on the experiences of last year. Through this cooperation, the GEI has gained an access to the “field” of Palestinian schools, established a functioning working relationship with the Palestinian MOE and thus paved the ground for future cooperative research projects.

Schulbuchrevision und Friedenspädagogik in vergleichender Perspektive
Eine Konferenz in Beijing
Eckhardt Fuchs