

Pedagogy of Liberation: Education, Justice, and Reconstruction in Occupied Palestine

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of education in occupied Palestine as a medium of resistance, justice, and reconstruction. While international frameworks such as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantee the right to education, Palestinian students and teachers face systematic barriers, including school closures, destruction of infrastructure, restrictions on mobility, and political control over curriculum. Adopting an interdisciplinary lens, the study combines insights from sociology, psychology, and postcolonial studies to analyze how schools and universities serve not only as spaces of knowledge transfer but also as arenas for cultural survival and collective resistance. A qualitative methodology is employed through literature review, document analysis, and case studies of institutions such as Birzeit University and alternative Islamic schools. Findings reveal that despite structural challenges, education strengthens national identity, preserves historical memory, and fosters resilience among Palestinian youth. It also provides opportunities for critical thinking and preparing communities for social and cultural reconstruction beyond conflict. The study concludes that safeguarding Palestinian education is both a humanitarian obligation and a political necessity, requiring global academic solidarity and protective policies to ensure that education remains central to reclaiming justice and sovereignty.

Keywords: *Palestine, Education, Resistance pedagogy.*

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengeksplorasi peran pendidikan di Palestina yang diduduki sebagai media perlawanan, keadilan, dan rekonstruksi. Meskipun kerangka kerja internasional seperti Pasal 26 Deklarasi Universal Hak Asasi Manusia menjamin hak atas pendidikan, siswa dan guru Palestina menghadapi hambatan sistematis, termasuk penutupan sekolah, penghancuran infrastruktur, pembatasan mobilitas, dan kendali politik atas kurikulum. Dengan mengadopsi sudut pandang interdisipliner, studi ini menggabungkan wawasan dari sosiologi, psikologi, dan studi pascakolonial untuk menganalisis bagaimana sekolah dan universitas tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai ruang transfer pengetahuan, tetapi juga sebagai arena bagi kelangsungan budaya dan perlawanan kolektif. Metodologi kualitatif digunakan melalui tinjauan pustaka, analisis dokumen, dan studi kasus lembaga-lembaga seperti Universitas Birzeit dan sekolah-sekolah Islam alternatif. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa terlepas dari tantangan struktural, pendidikan memperkuat identitas nasional, melestarikan memori sejarah, dan menumbuhkan ketahanan di kalangan pemuda Palestina. Pendidikan juga memberikan kesempatan untuk berpikir kritis dan mempersiapkan masyarakat untuk rekonstruksi sosial.

dan budaya pascakonflik. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa menjaga pendidikan Palestina merupakan kewajiban kemanusiaan sekaligus kebutuhan politik, yang membutuhkan solidaritas akademis global dan kebijakan perlindungan untuk memastikan bahwa pendidikan tetap menjadi pusat upaya menegakkan keadilan dan kedaulatan.

Kata kunci: Palestina, Pendidikan, Pedagogi Perlawanan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is universally viewed as a fundamental human right. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) affirms that everyone has the right to education, and that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the context of societies living in situations of conflict and occupation, education plays a dual role: on the one hand, it serves as a means of transmitting knowledge and skills, while on the other, it also serves as a space for resistance, identity formation, and strategies for maintaining the dignity and continuity of communities (Nations, 1948).

The situation in Palestine demonstrates the clearest contradiction of this principle. Since more than half a century under Israeli military occupation, the Palestinian education system has faced major challenges, both structural and outright violence. UNESCO data (2024) shows that hundreds of schools in Gaza and the West Bank have been damaged or destroyed by military attacks. Furthermore, many children cannot safely access schools due to blockades, military inspections, and arrests of students and teachers (UNESCO, 2024). The Education Under Occupation report Quneis & Rafidi (2023) confirms that Palestinian schools are frequently targeted by physical and ideological attacks, resulting in a learning process that takes place in conditions of uncertainty and fear.

However, behind these limitations and repression, education in Palestine developed as an arena of resistance (*site of resistance*). Teachers, students, and communities use learning spaces as a place to maintain national identity, convey local history, and counter dominant narratives that seek to eliminate the existence of Palestine. Zeira (2018) research shows that education levels, especially at the secondary level, are related to increased political participation of young people in protests against the occupation. This shows how education is transformed into a tool of peaceful civil resistance.

On the other hand , education also has therapeutic and reconstructive functions. The *Education Cannot Wait program* (2019–2023), implemented in Gaza and the West Bank, seeks to integrate psychosocial support, disaster preparedness training, and the development of safe learning spaces (Wait, 2025). This effort is crucial because the trauma of conflict not only hinders children's academic development but also damages the broader social fabric of society (UNESCO, 2023). In such circumstances, the concept of *the pedagogy of liberation* , as proposed by (Freire, 2000), becomes relevant: education is understood as a praxis of liberation that connects critical awareness, concrete experience, and social action.

While there is literature highlighting education in both emergency and resistance settings, there remains a research gap regarding how liberation pedagogy can concretely function in Palestine as a bridge between justice, resistance, and social reconstruction. Most

studies focus on aspects of infrastructure, access, or curriculum, while the philosophical and practical dimensions of liberation remain under-explored.

Thus, this article is expected to enrich interdisciplinary studies on the relationship between education, justice, and liberation in conflict areas, while emphasizing that education is not just a basic service, but also a field of struggle to achieve freedom and sovereignty.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Education as a Human Right

Education is a fundamental human right and is recognized in various international legal instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nations, 1948, 1989). In a humanitarian context, UNICEF (2019) emphasized that education must be guaranteed even in times of war or humanitarian emergencies. Education serves not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a means of protecting children from exploitation, military recruitment, and psychological trauma.

However, in practice, this right is often violated in conflict areas, including Palestine. A Human Rights Watch report documented that schools in Gaza and the West Bank are frequently targeted by attacks, both directly (bombings, raids) and indirectly (blockades, access restrictions) (Watch, 2021). In addition to destroyed infrastructure, administrative barriers such as travel permits for students and teachers further worsen access to education. This condition reflects the lack of harmony between the principles of international law and the political and military realities on the ground.

2.2 Pedagogy of Liberation

The concept of liberation pedagogy introduced by Paulo Freire offers an educational paradigm that is liberating, not oppressive. Freire rejected the *banking model of education* — where students are seen as passive receptacles of knowledge imparted by teachers. Instead, he emphasized the importance of dialogical education that fosters *critical consciousness*. Through this awareness, students are able to recognize structures of oppression and actively participate in the process of social transformation (Freire, 2000).

Freire's theory was later developed in the context of critical education, especially in areas of conflict and colonization. Giroux (2001) emphasizes that education can be a tool of cultural resistance against political hegemony. Thus, liberation pedagogy does not simply teach literacy, but also enables students to challenge structures of domination that hinder social justice. In the case of Palestine, this approach is relevant because schools are not only academic learning spaces, but also symbolic arenas of resistance against colonialism.

2.3 Education as Resistance in Palestine

Education in Palestine functions as a primary means of preserving national identity under ongoing colonization. Gebhard (2018) demonstrates how the imposed Israeli curriculum systematically erases Palestinian historical narratives, while local educators enact

‘curricular resistance’ to sustain collective memory. Similarly, Quneis & Rafidi (2023) identify classroom-level strategies of resilience where teachers contextualize local history as a counter-hegemonic act.

Schools in Palestine function as cultural battlefields—places where colonial ideologies and liberation narratives confront each other. Students not only learn mathematics or language, but also absorb the values of struggle, dignity, and identity. This aligns with Abu-Lughod (2020) opinion, which emphasizes that education in Palestine cannot be separated from the context of the decolonial struggle. Thus, despite political and military pressure, education remains a pillar of nonviolent resistance that safeguards the existence of the Palestinian people.

2.4 Education and Social Reconstruction

Apart from functioning as resistance, education also has a reconstructive dimension. In post-conflict situations or amidst prolonged blockades, schools become an important space for rebuilding social order. Zeira (2018) shows that education is closely correlated with the socio-political participation of the young generation of Palestine. Those with access to higher education tend to be involved in civil society activities and international advocacy.

The UNRWA report (2022) emphasized that schools in Palestine also serve as centers for trauma recovery. Through counseling programs, psychosocial support, and creative activities, education helps children cope with the psychological impact of violence. Thus, education not only serves an academic function, but also plays a role as an instrument of social reconstruction, community recovery, and the formation of hope in the midst of a prolonged crisis (UNRWA, 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHOD/RESEARCH DESIGN

This article uses a **qualitative approach** with an interdisciplinary *literature review design*. A qualitative approach was chosen because the issue of education in Palestine is a complex social phenomenon, full of meaning, and cannot be reduced to mere statistical figures. The main aim of this research is to understand the meaning of education in the context of occupation, resistance and social reconstruction.

3.1 Data source

This research data is sourced from academic literature and published official reports, including:

1. Critical educational theories such as Freire (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Giroux (2001) who developed the idea of critical pedagogy in a socio-political context.
2. Specific studies on Palestine such as (Quneis & Rafidi, 2023) who highlights the Palestinian curriculum as an arena of cultural resistance and Zeira (2018) who examines the relationship between education and socio-political participation.
3. Reports from international institutions such as UNICEF (2019) on education as a

human right, Watch (2021) on attacks on educational facilities, and East (2022) on trauma recovery through education.

4. Additional analysis of other relevant studies, for example Abu-Lughod (2020) on education and decolonization, as well as UN documents related to the right to education.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through document analysis, which involved reading, identifying, and classifying information from these sources. The selection process was based on keywords such as *education in conflict zones*, *pedagogy of liberation*, *Palestinian curriculum*, *resistance*, and *reconstruction*.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis was carried out using a thematic approach (*thematic analysis*) which involved three stages:

1. Data reduction: selecting information from sources related to the research focus.
2. Theme categorization: dividing the data into three main themes, namely (a) education as a right and social justice, (b) education as resistance, and (c) education as socio-psychological reconstruction.
3. Interdisciplinary synthesis: connecting findings from human rights reports East (2022); UNICEF (2019); Watch (2021) with critical pedagogy theory (Freire, Giroux) and local research (Rafidi, Zeira).

3.4 Research Limitations

The main limitation lies in the limited access to field data due to the blockade and mobility restrictions in Palestine. Therefore, this study only relies on available secondary literature. Nevertheless, by combining critical pedagogical theory, international agency reports, and local research, this analysis still provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of education in Palestine.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Main Findings

The literature review and case studies reveal a consistent pattern: although education in Palestine continues to be disrupted by the conditions of occupation—including the destruction of infrastructure, restrictions on mobility, and political intervention—schools, universities, and non-formal education initiatives continue to function as strategic spaces for cultural reproduction, the formation of collective memory, and practices of cultural resistance. The main findings that emerge can be grouped into: (a) education as an instrument of social justice; (b) education as an arena of resistance; (c) education as a tool for social reconstruction and healing; and (d) forms of practical pedagogy that are developing in the field.

4.2 Education as an Instrument of Social Justice

First, education serves as an arena for upholding rights—access, quality, and protection—that are systematically violated in the context of occupation (UNESCO, 2023; Watch, 2021). When educational facilities are destroyed or access is restricted, the impact goes beyond short-term learning disruptions: there are implications for the distribution of injustice that widen social inequalities (poverty, parental job displacement, and livelihood insecurity). In this context, efforts to reopen emergency schools, emergency distance learning programs, and local community initiatives to provide learning resources are pro-justice actions: they uphold the right to education as a continuing civil-political right (Quneis & Rafidi, 2023).

4.3 Structural Barriers and Their Impact on the Quality of Education

Second, structural barriers (damaged infrastructure, checkpoints, student/teacher arrests, and limitations on teaching materials) undermine the continuity and quality of the educational process. Short-term impacts include prolonged absences, dropouts, and lack of materials; long-term impacts include decreased teaching capacity (teachers experience trauma and professional loss), erosion of the quality of practical curricula (laboratories, libraries), and the loss of social-collegial experiences crucial for civic capacity building (Al Hamaydah, Bilal and Kelcey, Jo and Lloveras, 2015; UNRWA, 2022).

Analysis reveals an intermediary mechanism: structural barriers increase students' stress and trauma levels, decreasing concentration and motivation, decreasing learning outcomes, and reducing the likelihood of future productive socio-political participation. Therefore, interventions that only address physical issues without addressing long-term psychosocial or safety aspects are likely to be less effective.

4.4 Education as an Arena of Resistance — Pedagogical Strategies in the Field

Third, despite restrictions, teachers, school administrators, and communities develop pedagogical strategies that are both resistive and liberating. Four main strategies frequently emerge:

1. Contextual Curriculum and Local Narratives

Schools and teachers insert local history material, Palestinian literature, and narratives of community experiences into learning activities (Quneis & Rafidi, 2023). This is not just a transfer of facts, but rather the formation of a collective narrative that rejects the delegitimization of Palestinian history.

2. Dialogic Teaching and Critical Pedagogy

The practice of adopting a dialogical (Freirean) form in the classroom encourages students to reflect on their experiences, associate them with political structures, and develop *critical consciousness*. This form increases students' capacity to analyze root causes and organize nonviolent actions.

3. Community-Based and Non-Formal Learning

Religious institutions, youth groups, and NGOs provide non-formal classes that strengthen political literacy skills, practical skills, and social support. For example, in refugee camps, evening learning and community schools fill the gap in formal education.

4. Integration of Psychosocial Support (Trauma-Informed Pedagogy)

Many emergency programs incorporate psychosocial support components—group therapy, arts activities—into school routines to aid children's recovery. These strategies increase resilience *and* reduce the long-term effects of trauma on learning.

4.5 Pedagogy of Liberation in the Palestinian Context

Liberation pedagogy, as developed by Freire (2000), emphasizes education as a dialogical process that fosters *critical consciousness*. In the Palestinian context, this concept is not only an educational theory but also a practical framework that integrates three primary functions of education: resistance, healing, and social reconstruction.

First, education plays a role in resistance to the colonialism of knowledge. The Palestinian curriculum is often the target of Israeli intervention with the aim of erasing national identity (Quneis & Rafidi, 2023). However, schools and universities continue to function as spaces of cultural reproduction, where historical narratives and the collective memory of the Palestinian people are maintained. Within the framework of liberation pedagogy, the learning process is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a political act to maintain national existence and fight against structural domination (Giroux, 2001).

Second, education also functions as a social-psychological therapy. Palestinian children grow up under the shadow of structural violence, military attacks, and blockades that limit their living space. Empirical evidence confirms this restorative role. Elbedour et al. (2007) and Thabet & Vostanis (2000) document high prevalence of trauma among Gaza students and show that school-based psychosocial programs significantly reduce PTSD and anxiety scores. In this case, liberation pedagogy means making space for students to articulate their suffering and find the collective strength to overcome it.

Third, liberation pedagogy in Palestine promotes social and political reconstruction. Education does not stop at the level of individual resistance or recovery, but also builds the capacity of young people to participate in collective struggles and the process of rebuilding a just society. Zeira (2018) found that the involvement of Palestinian youth in socio-political activities is significantly influenced by their level of education. This confirms that education is not only about preparing future human resources but also a long-term strategy for social reconstruction amidst occupation.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on this research, it can be concluded that transmission pedagogy in Palestine serves a dual purpose: as a form of resistance against the colonization of knowledge, as a socio-psychological therapy for a generation living under violence, and as a tool for socio-political reconstruction to rebuild a just society. Education not only transfers knowledge but

also fosters critical awareness, maintains national identity, and strengthens the collective resilience of the Palestinian people within its midst.

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