Education Under Occupation: Challenges in Education Access for Students in Palestine Amidist Ongoing Conflict

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Abstract

Access to education for students in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank has been severely limited due to conflict and violence. The following essay explores the historical and contemporary issues that impact access to education for Palestinians. Through a discussion of historical precedent, non-state actor intervention, and the current geopolitical challenge, recommendations for policy interventions are provided.

Keywords

Access to education, global education policy, geopolitical conflict

Suggested Citation

Bonello, E. (2024). Education under occupation: Challenges in education access for students in Palestine amidst ongoing conflict. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 83-91

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Education Under Occupation: Challenges in Education Access for Students in Palestine Amidst Ongoing Conflict

The people of Palestine have faced ongoing and persistent oppression through an occupation that impacts their daily lives. Amidst the complex realities and historical context of the region, a crucial aspect that requires immediate action is access to education for Palestinian students. As populations around the globe continue to experience the terrors of colonialism, the persistent and ongoing occupation and conflict in Palestine has intensified in recent months. According to the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at the time of writing this, there are 3.1 million people in Gaza and the West Bank who need humanitarian aid (OCHA, 2023). Among the various challenges faced by Palestinian people, one of the most pressing issues is access to education during conflict.

The prolonged and complex nature of the Israeli occupation and implications of the violent attacks on Gaza that occurred in October of 2023 have created a crisis that hinders the fundamental right to education for young people in the region. The following essay seeks to explore the issue of access to education in Palestine through an exploration of the contemporary issues faced by students. Furthermore, the issue will be discussed in relation to the evolving situation in the region and recommendations for education policymakers and activists will be provided.

Some key terms that will be discussed include occupied territories and Palestinian refugee. In the context of Palestine and Israel, the U.S. State Department describes occupied territories as the regions of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. These regions are under the jurisdiction of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (United States Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) defines Palestinian refugees as, “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict,” (UNRWA, n.d.).

This essay will describe the implications of conflict, the way in which conflict impacts the large youth population of Palestine, and how non-state actor intervention has harmed Palestinians. Beyond the visible scars of conflict, the barrier to accessing education is deeply rooted, affecting not only the present but also the future generations of Palestinian people. The issue at hand is not just an educational concern, it is a matter of human rights and fundamental access to education. By exploring this issue and recognizing its nuance, this essay advocates for a comprehensive and equitable framework to address access to education during conflict. The brief aims to encourage policymakers and stakeholders to work collaboratively to forge a path toward a resilient education system, fostering hope and empowerment for Palestinian students in spite of the terror and unfavorable situation they are in.

Problem Statement

Access to education for students in Palestine is one of the many issues created by the current occupation and the increasing tension, violence, and destruction of land. For Palestinian students in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza, their ability to access reliable education has been extremely limited or completely restricted amid increasing tensions, violence, and war. Schools in occupied territories are subject to violent attacks (Tahhan, 2022), demolition by Israeli Defense Forces (Davidson, 2023), and most recently, bombings during times of conflict (Al Jazeera, 2023). In October 2023, tensions between Palestine and Israel rose, resulting in increased violence in both regions and a more dire need for addressing education for Palestinians. Specifically, a Palestinian militant group and governing authority of the Gaza Strip known as Hamas (Robinson, 2023) stormed communities in the southern part of Israel in an act that the group considered necessary and normal in response to Israeli occupation (Al Jazeera, 2024). Because of this violence and instability, the Palestinian education system

faces many challenges that inhibit its ability to provide access to a vulnerable population of young students.

One of the main reasons why this issue is important to examine is because of the large population of young people in Palestine. Globally, the Palestinian society is considered to be significantly younger than that of other nations. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Palestinian Youth make up approximately 30% of the population. Of the youth population in Palestine, 38.1% are adolescents 15-19 years old (UNFPA, n.d.). This makes the issue of access to education even more pressing in Palestine, as a large portion of its society is currently in their formative years. Furthermore, to mitigate impacts of the war and ensuing violence, Palestinian students need to be able to find safety, security, and consistency in their lives. Education is one way to provide this much needed relief and inspiration to students.

One of the greatest contributing factors to the lack of access to education for Palestinian students is Israel's confinement and entrapment of civilians. Palestinians and other human rights activists argue that the Israeli government sees the Palestinian people as "enemies" and imposes confinement as punishment (Hefetz, 2023). The confinement that Palestinians face has literal implications, such as the use of hostages and prisoners in and outside of occupied territories, and the confinement of sharing ideology through education. Therefore, it is important to understand and address the role of education, as it can serve as a way to discuss and mitigate violence, peace, and freedom (Pherali & Turner, 2017). Furthermore, this issue is important to address as an established and efficient education system in Palestine could bring much needed normalcy and consistency to a group of people who have rarely experienced peace. Currently, Gaza is under an ongoing blockade by the Israeli government that has banned the import of things like food, water, construction materials, and other essentials (Mercer, 2011). The blockade of resources to Gaza severely undermines the ability for Palestinian students to access education as new facilities cannot be built and facilities destroyed due to conflict cannot be rebuilt.

This issue is important to address as historically, education holds a significant place in Palestinian society. For Palestinians in occupied territories, education is an important facilitator of hope, life, and dignity for those experiencing oppression (Pherali & Turner, 2017). To fight for a more just and equitable world, education must be recognized as a vessel for liberation. Furthermore, Pherali & Turner (2017) argue that education is linked to violence, peace, and freedom through three distinct interactions: education as a victim and/or perpetrator, education as a means for revolution and liberation, and education as a means for peacebuilding. Given the historical context of Palestine, and the oppressive impacts of colonialism on the region, it is important to recognize the liberatory power of education and the need to establish access to education for people in Palestine.

Contemporary Issues

Enrollment and the Geopolitical Challenge of Education

Education is highly valued in Palestinian culture. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 95.4% of children in the state of Palestine were enrolled in basic education as of 2018. However, this enrollment rate masks the challenges of access to school. For example, UNICEF also finds that nearly 25% of boys and 7% of girls have dropped out of school (UNICEF, 2018). There are many factors that contribute to enrollment or the inability for students to attend schools. One study found that a major barrier to accessing education for Palestinian students is the closure of borders within the region (Di Maio & Nandi, 2013). After the Second Intifada, Israeli forces set up border checkpoints between Palestinian settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and the rest of the region. According to Di Maio & Nandi (2013), these checkpoints often close, restricting the movement of both students and teachers and confining Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza. Many additional

security measures were put in place by Israel and the IDF, specifically targeted toward Palestinians, that restricted their movement in Israel and within occupied territories.

Di Maio & Nandi (2013) argue that security measures, such as checkpoints and their associated closures, result in an increase in the probability of child labor, thus reducing school attendance. This is because Palestinian students who cannot attend school typically engage in labor to help support their families. In this case, access to education is being physically restricted by limiting the available schools that Palestinians can attend. This is particularly harmful given the lack of resources due to violence and blockades on the Gaza Strip from Israel. Di Maio & Nandi (2013) note that schools in Palestine are typically of lower quality than schools in Israel. These facts demonstrate that despite the high enrollment numbers reported, there are many geopolitical challenges that Palestinian students face in accessing education.

Implications of Conflict on Education

The impacts of conflict, violence, confinement, and war are major contributing factors that significantly impede education, posing substantial barriers to access education for students in Palestine. In their study of students experiencing war in Yemen, Muthanna et al. (2022) find that some significant impacts of conflict include displacement, identity crises, and poor mental health for students, all factors contributing to inadequate access to education. Specifically, Muthanna et al. (2022) point out that war impacts infrastructure, such as roads, communication, electricity, and water supplies. However, displacement from school is only one part of the issue; war also displaces entire populations of people who are forced to move from their home because of conflict. Specifically, this impacts Palestinians who face constant bombings at the hands of Israel. In light of the increased violence in October 2023 and bombardment of the Gaza Strip, this finding is even more troubling for students in Palestine, as the conflict is increasingly impacting their ability to access education.

Despite experiencing the terrors of war and conflict, Palestinian students demonstrate the ability to resist oppressive structures and exhibit resilience. In Nassar's (1997) analysis of the 1967 war in Palestine, it was argued that the unique challenges and circumstances that Palestinians have faced through history has resulted in a culture of resistance for society. In particular, Nassar (1997) uses the Intifadas as examples for how Palestinians demonstrate resistance in a, "…quest for justice and independence," (Nassar, 1997, p. 77). Furthermore, Nassar's (1997) analysis revealed that as the first Intifada unfolded in 1987, organizers directed masses of people to organize committees to support essential needs during the resistance movement. Included in the committees were issues such as agriculture, health, and education, demonstrating that even in times of conflict, the Palestinian people still value education and seek out its access.

It is important to note that many articles and statistics regarding Palestine may no longer be relevant, given the increased violence as of October 2023. Specifically, the attack on Gaza has completely hindered all students' ability to access any form of education. Access is limited in many, significant ways, including the loss of infrastructure like water, power, and roadways. Furthermore, access to school is limited because of the displacement of Palestinians as they flee or are forced out of their homes due to the conflict. According to a situation report issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, approximately 378 Palestinian schools have been destroyed and over 4,000 students have been killed in conflict as of January 2024 (OCHA, 2024).

Children as Victims

Palestinian children are set on the front lines of the conflict and their experiences as victims and activists severely limits their access to education. Within both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestinian children experience violence, exploitation, and collective punishment (Spitka, 2023). Resonating with Nassar's (1997) finding of resistance within the Palestinian people, Spitka (2023) argues that Palestinian

youth commonly become engaged in activism at an early age. This is because Palestinian youth living under Israeli occupation typically feel like their childhood has been stripped away through experiencing violence, harassment, and conflict (Spitka, 2023). These experiences include passing through checkpoints, shootings, evictions, demolition, and the continuous disruption of geopolitical unrest in the region. The geopolitical unrest and destruction of schools in Palestine have impacted more than 1.3 million Palestinian children (Eliandy et al., 2023). This argument situates the large population of Palestinian youth as particularly vulnerable, thus emphasizing the need to develop education policy to address access to education. In their discussion of Ukrainian adolescents experiencing trauma from political conflict, Lopatovska et al. (2022) argue that an important element of mitigating negative effects of trauma and disruption from conflict is to reassert normally. One way to provide a sense of consistency is through schooling and education.

These findings demonstrate the critical challenges that Palestinian students face in accessing education. In light of these alarming statistics and narratives about the experiences of Palestinian students, policymakers and leaders in Palestine need to prioritize the development of education policy that recognizes the context of violence, conflict, and disruption for students. These policies should aim to improve physical access to schools, but also consider the psychological impacts of conflict.

Discussion

Geopolitical Context and The Impact of Conflict on Young People

Overall, this essay has demonstrated the tension and violence in Palestine has been caused by intricate and deeply ingrained geopolitical conflicts in the region. The geopolitical context in Palestine is primarily centered on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These deeply rooted issues caused by the British Mandate, creation of the state of Israel, and the ongoing occupation of Palestine severely impact access to all essential resources and services, including education. The geopolitical context and tension in the region impact daily life for Palestinians and inhibit fundamental rights. Although solutions have been proposed, such as the two-state solution, and conflict has ebbed and flowed, the geopolitical climate of the region impacts Palestinians the most. Israeli occupation and security forces, through their use of violence force and fortified checkpoints, severely restrict movement and confine Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This tactic of confinement as punishment against Palestinian civilians limits access to education and is one of the main contributors to the lack of access to education.

Furthermore, the impact that conflict has on young people in Palestine cannot be overstated. Harassment at the hands of IDF soldiers at checkpoints, violent evictions, demolitions, and bombings, and living an entire life under an illegal occupation has put Palestinian students and young people in a vulnerable state. As the impacts of the 2023 conflict continue to unfold and more Palestinians die at the hands of oppressive and violent regimes, providing education to young people in Palestine can act as a catalyst to promote democratic participation and liberation.

Recommendations for Policy Intervention

Short- and Long-Term Intervention

As demonstrated by this essay, the people of Palestine are in desperate humanitarian need. Every day, Palestinians wake up and wonder if they will see their family, if they will have a home, or if they will even live to see the next day. Ultimately, access to education is not of utmost importance and urgency right now for people who are fighting for their lives. However, as the conflict continues and humanitarian questions are asked about newly and previously displaced Palestinians, the issue of education should continue to be considered and the issue of access should still be addressed.

In the short term, education policymakers and leaders in Palestine should prioritize immediate interventions to mitigate challenges to accessing education. These measures include allocating emergency funds to address issues to infrastructure and the literal barriers to accessing

education. Furthermore, targeted humanitarian aid and assistance on the part of the U.N. and other non-state actors should be deployed to Palestinians, and in particular, students who have been adversely affected by the conflict, enabling them to access educational opportunities with less disruption. On the geopolitical front, another short-term intervention that can address the issue of access to education is regional and international cooperation for a ceasefire and end of the Gaza blockade and bombings. Students cannot access education if school buildings are being bombed and simply attending class could be a death sentence. Furthermore, the blockade on the Gaza Strip is severely limiting the ability to rebuild facilities and bring in needed resources, such as textbooks, learning materials, and technology. Although an immediate ceasefire would not relieve the decades of political strain on the region, allowing for civilians to access fundamental rights to freedoms such as life and education are pivotal for liberating Palestinians.

In the long term, education policymakers and leaders in Palestine should prioritize intention and investment in a sustainable education system. Long-term interventions for this issue may not be realized until the pressing geopolitical tensions are addressed first. However, it is important to consider long-term investment in education for Palestine in order to be prepared to address the issue throughout all phases of the conflict. In an ideal world where geopolitical factors have less influence on the region, policymakers should advocate for increased budgets and financial support for education as Palestinians rebuild to ensure a sustainable future. By financially supporting education, efforts to rebuild schools, enhance infrastructure, recruit quality educators, and provide essential materials and supplies to students. Another long-term intervention to address educational access issues in Palestine is a fully committed ceasefire and peace negotiation between leaders in the region. However, given the complexity of the issue, this type of peaceful resolution may be idealistic.

Avoiding Past Mistakes

Looking toward the future and possibly to a resolution of the conflict in Palestine, policymakers should avoid making mistakes to education policy implementation. In particular, it is important to acknowledge the potential vulnerability of Palestine to the impacts of global education policy implementation. Palestine may also be vulnerable to harmful interventions from non-state actors such as the UN, the International Monetary Fund, or the World Bank, who could put the country in a downward financial spiral through predatory loans. Additionally, Mundy et al. (2016) argue that these organizations, "…heavily [promote] the use of market-like mechanism... to ensure educational efficiency" (Mundy et al., 2016, p. 12). In Herbert's (2023) examination of global education policy implementation in South Africa and in Sahlberg's (2023) critique of market-like competition, both authors demonstrate the dangers associated with market strategies in education and argue for policy implementation that recognizes and addresses historical contexts and local needs of a community. Furthermore, Herbert (2023) argues that insensitive implementation of global education policy can sometimes be justified during times of crisis, like in Palestine.

An additional mistake that policymakers should avoid when addressing educational issues in Palestine is producing a reform movement that focuses on national identity rather than democratic principles. For example, Idrissi et al. (2023) explore how in response to decolonization and movements of Arabization in the wake of the Arab Spring, policymakers in Morocco created reform that focused on social cohesion in an attempt to increase civic education and democratic participation. Given the similarities between the Arab Spring and current events in Palestine, policymakers should be intentional in approaches in order to avoid creating similar issues as in Morocco. To avoid this, policymakers should consider using Dyer's (1999) backward mapping approach to best understand the needs of Palestinian students. As explained by Dyer (1999), "…policies once implemented in developing countries may have comparatively greater and more enduring impacts… these countries are less able to afford the inefficiencies implicit in the failure to implement policies" (p. 46). This argument is especially pertinent

to Palestine, as policies that are beneficial to other countries may not address the specific and unique needs of Palestinian students. Therefore, policymakers should instead use a backward mapping approach that involves listening to individual stakeholders in Palestine and addressing specific issues, rather than haphazardly implementing large-scale policy initiatives.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and potential opportunities associated with access to education in Palestine. The examination of the historical context of the region and ways in which conflict impacts young people and their access to education demonstrate the complex challenges that students in Palestine face. Although education is not on the forefront of minds regarding this conflict, it is important for policymakers and the global education community to understand its nuance and impacts on Palestinian students in order to create paths for freedom and liberation.

It is imperative to view access to education as not only a fundamental right, but also as a catalyst for broader social and economic liberation for Palestinians. By implementing policies that address the diverse range of challenges faced by students in Palestine, an educational landscape can be created that empowers students, provides a sense of security and routine, and lays the foundation for a more resilient and peaceful future.

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