Article

Distance Education under Oppression: The Case of Palestinian Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper draws from both empirical research on an EU-funded project in Palestine and from the lived experiences of Palestinian HE educators. The geopolitical situation is precarious at the best of times in Palestine, where Israel monitors and controls the Palestinians' right to travel, live and work—even more so if they wish to accomplish these activities abroad—and their access to the internet is never free from surveillance. In these circumstances and under these conditions, distance education has played a crucial role in supporting Palestinian students to develop a global voice. This paper captures some of the educational challenges encountered by Palestinian students and teachers generally in their daily contexts and, more specifically, in their experiences of learning and teaching, and the methods used to overcome these barriers. It draws on multiple sources and on studies recently carried out in the field by Palestinian colleagues and will discuss the challenging aspects of learning online from a range of perspectives in each of these studies before offering conclusions and recommendations/implications for other areas of study in situations of oppression. Initial findings indicate that distance education enables a form of continuity in regions exposed and accustomed to extreme and regular disruption. We were also inspired to see throughout responses the values attributed to pursuing education by Palestinian educators and their students. The persistence and perseverance reflect a determination that underlines the importance of education as a fundamental human right, national identity and sovereignty, personal source of hope and strength, and opportunity to open one's world. In our conclusions, we argue for the importance of digital literacy among educators to facilitate the continuity of distance education and finish with some recommendations as to how technologies can ease disruption to ordinary educational service.

Keywords: oppression; Palestine; education under oppression; Middle East; distance learning

1. Introduction

The historical and contemporary geopolitical situation in Palestine and Israel is one of enormous complexity, with partisan views entrenched in ideology, national identity and religious faith. This paper does not aim to contribute a socially just verdict on that history, nor to present a critical interpretation of the discourse and events. Our intent, however naive, is to provide an illustration of the general experiences of access to higher education through impediments to physical and face-to-face (f2f) interaction and via the amenities, barriers and opportunities for distance education drawn from educators' accounts within Palestine. "Lived experience" enables outsiders to gain insight into a country in Palestine whose nationhood is colonised and occupied. While lived experience may be perceived to lack objective neutrality in this tense interplay between two states, we perceive that an ethical responsibility exists in empowering the disenfranchised and oppressed to share their worldview. Moreover, this paper seeks to provide a depiction of the means by which distance education perseveres through technologies, skills and overall hope and determination, and through a dual decolonial paradigm: being done by Palestinians for Palestinians, and with ever a mind to escaping from the literal colonisation by Israel. This

was achieved through collaboration with co-authors and colleagues on a long-standing EU-funded project, the TEFL-ePal project, which from 2019 to 2022 sought to stimulate innovation in TEFL ("teaching English as a foreign language") teaching across Palestinian Higher Education Institutes through the integration of digital technologies.

In writing, two of the authors are very aware of our own outsiderness as Europeans. We do not wish to present what may be construed as a biased account of a complex situation which we have extremely limited knowledge of, but in writing we insist on giving voice to local educators, as participants, and with our Palestinian co-authors. Therefore, we take the view that "we must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented" [1] in presenting the situation as we have recorded it from participants whose voices are otherwise absent. This forms part of our methodology, the focus of which explored the ways in which technology can support distance education, when means of f2f learning have been disrupted or prevented. Naturally, as part of this, teachers' perceptions of education generally and life under occupation were investigated. These insights were collated from Higher Education Institution educators within Palestine, with questions posted to Googledocs and responses generated from representative educators in language learning at ten partner institutions.

Names have been withdrawn for confidentiality, as have the names of the institutions for whom our participants work. Actually, it is difficult to even discuss ethics and "harm" (physical or psychological) in a situation that is so far removed culturally, geographically and politically from UK and global Northern research norms: none of our usual procedures seem to cover the possibilities. We are used to discussing emotional difficulties, but not to the idea that being discovered as having participated in a survey may lead to imprisonment or worse. We have, therefore, been overcautious. We were given permission by several respondents to use their names but have chosen not to. We have even, reluctantly, agreed on the difficult choice to remove two of the paper authors' names for the same reasons, even though this may deprive them of the academic status and satisfaction that publication would otherwise bring.

2. Literature Review

We begin with a customary literature review that surveys the ways in which education has been impacted by continual disruption throughout Palestine's West Bank. We wish to make readers aware that this is designed and written to give context for the country and the place in it for education generally and for technologies to facilitate remote learning.

Using a search engine with the terms "Israeli soldiers Palestinian students" brings up over 24 million hits. We performed this exercise on 12 May 2022, and the key verbs from the headlines of the first ten hits were: "detained, shot, target, storm (a building), arrest, detain, raid, storm, raid, attack". In each case, the Israelis were the subjects of the sentence, enacting the verb on the Palestinians. A case in point is the Palestine Technical University-Kadoorie (PTUK), in the city of Tulkarem, where the segregation wall is only 500 m from the campus and where trouble often erupts, with Israeli military raids onto the campus and the capture, shooting and even deaths of students (see, for example, MiddleEastMonitor.com from April 2022 [2] for a recent example). As we write the final revisions in June 2023, there have very sadly been further scenes of tensions across much of the Palestinian territories.

Defense for Children International–Palestine [3] further substantiate this, noting that Israeli soldiers, police, and private security staff are deployed to protect settler populations throughout the occupied West Bank, and that many Israeli settlers have armed themselves for fear of Palestinian reprisal. This creates a "hyper-militarized environment" [3] resulting in "disproportionate physical and psychological violence against Palestinian children". DCIP documented 134 violent incidents by Israeli forces between 20 August 2019 and 6 March 2020 alone (i.e., just before the COVID lockdowns were imposed), which they claimed impacted at least 9042 students and teachers. Traxler et al. [4] report that tanks parked outside schools are familiar sights to teachers, and it is not even uncommon for schools themselves to be demolished by them. Scott and Jarrad [5] observed that where

photographs left on empty chairs commemorate the death of a murdered student, then teaching and learning must confront that reality, whether that is in the curriculum located in the physical classroom or in distant form: Palestine's education system reflects its own world and aspires to talk to the wider one.

Shraim and Khlaif [6] described how the Palestinian educational system has been severely affected by closures and restrictions, particularly since the second *Intifada* (which means "uprising" in Arabic) in September 2000. Shraim and Khlaif, drawing on Nicolai [7] specify that this has been "exacerbated by the separation wall constructed by Israel since June 2002, cutting through a number of cities and villages, creating a barrier to movement and separating teachers and students from their education institutions" ([6], p. 159). This is supported by Ramahi, describing the intensified military checkpoints and segregation wall from 2000: "The effect on Palestinian education has been devastating. The Wall effectively deprived entire villages from access to schools and learning centres" [8]. That this is still the case is evidenced by, e.g., Amnesty International [9] and UNICEF [10].

The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (PMEHE) Education Development Strategic Plan noted in 2008 [11] that the wall meant that teachers were relocated to schools closer to their homes, which grossly distorted the distribution of qualified teachers among schools, especially in the fields of mathematics, science and English. Worse, dropout rates among students were reported due to difficulties in getting to school safely. Several other problems were articulated at the same time, including– briefly–that girls are disproportionately affected since parents are especially anxious that they should not have to spend so much time travelling to and from school or be subject to humiliation by Israeli soldiers. School schedules were interrupted; attendance rates had dropped amongst students and staff; more time was needed to be spent physically travelling around these barriers; dropout rates increased due to staff shortages; and many students engaged in private education, which reinforces social gaps due to being unaffordable for many. We posit that in the present time, these problems persist.

In the report on its website, DCIP [3] explain that students living under Israeli military occupation "commonly face arrest, detention, violence, and harassment at the hands of Israeli soldiers and settlers" in the occupied West Bank. They also describe how additional barriers in or near Palestinian communities such as checkpoints, military infrastructure and Israeli-only roads all present additional impediments to the enjoyment of their right to a safe learning environment in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified by Israel in 1991.

In 2020, more than seven thousand Palestinians south of the city of Hebron in the West Bank lived without communication lines or landlines during the Corona pandemic. Moreover, most families do not have computers, which increases their children's suffering in distance education due to the Corona pandemic. Sixteen villages are located south of Hebron in an area classified as "C", and the Palestinian Telecommunications Company is not allowed to connect the telephone network to these areas. Area C is under full Israeli security and administrative control under the Oslo Agreement signed in 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel.

Education for the Palestinians, after losing the land, constituted an essential pillar and an important tool in the battle of steadfastness and survival. In most countries, there is a target state, usually the former colonial state; Libyans travel to Italy and Algerians to France. However, the Palestinian student has a goal, not a target country, and is ready to travel to any country until they complete their education in good conditions and achieve their dream. After their education, they return to their homeland to serve their country and their people: a unique opportunity for respect.

Life and education at all levels are affected: "the prolonged settler colonial reality impoverishes, controls, and destroys Palestinian society while building a secular state and ethos in Israel . . . For decades (however), Palestinian higher education has countered and resisted colonial control and has supported the steadfastness of society" [12] This reality has reinforced the role of education as a tool for securing socio-economic mobility for the

Palestinian people, and as a means of redressing the impact of national exclusion [13]. Ramahi notes that "Award-bearing formal education was a means to survival, which may account for why for many years Palestinians have had the highest rate of participation in education in the Arab World" [8]; see also [14].

3. Methodology

Our research was undertaken as part of the TEFL-ePal project, where we were tasked with building capacity in technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as to develop a research culture across the collaborating partner countries. From this, we designed a GoogleDocs forum, which intended to uncover opportunities and challenges in teacher innovation. This was designed into successive questions posted on a bi-weekly basis across 10 weeks (five questions, once every 2 weeks) with invitations sent to all (*n* = 25) teaching practitioners involved in the project. These invitations contained explanations that we sought to understand the context in which teaching happens and that respondents could respond freely and anonymously. This second point was important because, in some cases, the 12 teachers who finally responded were sometimes critical of their organisations and we were duty-bound to treat their responses with confidentiality. We also anticipated the sensitive nature of the responses where geopolitical commentary would be posted. As such, we are unable to identify the participants, though we know that these broadly cover the different types of HEI and that they are exclusively classroom teachers (we use this term instead of HE lecturers as a catch-all, as we assert that "teacher" carries more professional credit in terms of pedagogical knowledge than the term lecturer, which can primarily be associated with subject knowledge), rather than management or leadership. The responses were able to be edited by whoever made them, so care could be granted to be precise with wording and reflections, and we could also ask follow-up questions where we wanted to elicit further information.

Ethical guidelines were followed with the consent provided by participants willing to give answers, and all participants were able to withdraw and remove their answers at any point. Ethical permission was established by the respective HEI ethical committees of the researchers, which themselves are guided by the BERA ethical guidelines.

We attempted to circumvent potential bias in the language of the responses by inviting participants to respond to our questions in Arabic for free expression, with our co-authors from Palestine helping to translate the responses. However, in the event participants responded in English, which may be considered a limitation of the study given they were responding in a second language, but we recognised their right to choose, their expertise as language teachers and their freedom to edit responses for accuracy. Following the initial 10 weeks of the five questions, we then left the respondents to allow edits and changes to be made for a month before returning to them and treating responses to interpretivist analysis between the four researchers (two UK-based and two Palestinians).

Questions were established in advance, and it was decided that there would be no more than five that explored 1. General everyday experiences of life under occupation, 2. Attitudes towards education among teachers, 3. Experiences of education during occupation, 4. How distance learning can enable continuity, and 5. The lessons learnt about distance education that can be shared with others. We proceed in the paper to outline the responses, collated in the boxes presented. Our analysis is provided through discussion of those responses.

Q1. Our first question was "What are your experiences of living under the Israeli occupation?" Responses included:

- Being deprived of our freedom, privacy, respect, and humanity.
- Instability due to strikes, checkpoints, killing, imprisonment, closure.
- Any area that's under occupation will surely suffer many obstacles among which are those on education. like the challenges of travelling to the educational institutions, the cut off of study because of institutions' closure, physical barriers, etc.

- Every person must resist in order to reach his dreams.
- We are raided by the Israelis often. Sometimes our students protest by throwing rocks near the so-called separation wall, but they invade our campus and shoot our students. We have many martyrs.
- My brother and my father were arrested by the occupation authorities. We lived through very difficult moments in the Israeli displacement.
- I had an experience two months ago when Israeli forces blocked all of the internal roads of ***** Town because Palestinians kept raising the Palestinian flag in the town, so I could not go to my workplace and teach my students due to the roadblocks. The next day I had to take a long road. Yesterday, similar experience happened to me. This time, I was taking my newly born baby to the town's clinic, but roads were blocked again for the same reasons. Thus, it took me 45 min to get to the clinic whereas it usually takes seven minutes

Among the wider issues described above, the impact on education in the third bullet point is familiar to everyone globally who experienced the sudden closure of educational facilities due to the pandemic. That this happens routinely, and often without reason or justification, in Palestine may be revelatory to all of the parents, teachers, pupils and everyone else affected by the pandemic. It reminds us of the crucial role that technologies have to play in educational provision and access during periods of disruption, illustrated starkly in the final response above. Another response, translated from the Arabic, gives a somehow even more violent insight: "Among the policy of the occupation is ignoring the Palestinian people, cancelling the Palestinian culture, obliterating the Palestinian identity, fighting heritage and stealing it. All segments of the Palestinian people have suffered from violations and the practices of the occupation against them, for example, the continuous deployment of barriers to dismember the Palestinian people geographically and socially".

Barriers here, whether the separation wall or checkpoints, refer to the physical. But we must also understand them as symbolic of permanent disruption, and yet not for the first time in our responses, we found a determination for education to persist. Education will persevere as it enables the "fragmented existence" [15] of Palestine to maintain a semblance of sovereignty and also everyday normality, even though, as our participant declares: "These practices also affect the psychological state of students and teachers and hinder studies, whether in universities and schools, especially among female students".

For those of us in the global North, much of this is scarcely comprehensible: the inability to travel freely, the possibility of being shot dead, of imprisonment, of the sudden removal of internet access, of the closure of schools and universities at the whim of an occupying force. But this is commonplace in Palestine (see, e.g., [16,17]), even if somewhat avoided or underexplored in the research literature. A recent paper has sought to demonstrate how "this gap in the research in relation to Palestine . . . has left unresolved the problem of how to explain the continuation of the Israeli settler regime beyond its unequivocal overt and superior mechanisms of legal and brute power" [18]. Shipler [19] noted how Israel has incrementally taken more and more of Palestine to create "an archipelago of disconnected enclaves separated by checkpoints of soldiers bent on reminding Palestinians who's in charge". Royle [20] noted the immediacy and relevance of Foucault's discussion of power and agency in this context. All aspects of life in Palestine are under constant surveillance; indeed, Ilan Pappé described Palestine in 2017 as the "biggest prison on Earth" [21].

Ujvari's [22] paper demonstrates how Israel's "overt" and "brute" power extends through all aspects and facets of Palestinian life: how even something as simple as road signs in Palestinian areas still have "Hebrew placed on top, followed by Arabic and English, respectively, giving Hebrew greater dominance compared to the other languages in these areas", (p. 378) and "despite the fact that Palestinian towns outnumber Israeli settlements, signs that refer to Israeli settlements are three times more than those that refer to Palestinian towns and cities" (p. 380). Often, the Arabic name is merely left off signage, especially in Jerusalem. As Ujvari notes, this can be interpreted as an attempt to uproot the city's

Palestinian identity (see also [23]). This draws on Bourdieu's "symbolic power" and demonstrates the "spatial exclusion of the Palestinian memory through various visual and linguistic manipulations, tactics, and mechanisms" [24].

Alongside these small but overt glimpses of the machinations and abuses of the Israeli regime, there are also enormous disenfranchisements of the Palestinian people. Of these, it is their education that this paper is most concerned with, and we now turn to this crucial aspect, and focus in particular on the necessity for digital and remote learning. As stated at the beginning, this (remote access) is particularly acute in a nation that faces intensive disruption to normal everyday life that others take for granted: hostility and authoritarian aggression at checkpoints, road closures, the undermining of energy supplies and bandwidth–all furnishing Palestine with a continual turmoil to an inverted hierarchy of needs, where education cannot flourish. However, still we discover that educators and students' determination to learn persevere through any means. One such mode is for teachers to utilise tools that empower students with the autonomy that goes hand in hand with distance education. Teachers report their use of design platforms such as Canva and Prezi, or using YouTube or H5P. One teacher from Institution 3 described the necessity for organisations and teachers to "make my profession more adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions" [of the world]. Innovation in teaching under occupation has become a norm, and distance a fairly routine challenge.

Q2. Our second forum question asked specifically about the importance of education to Palestinians:

- It is our window to the world, our source of strength and dignity, and therefore an obligation.
- Palestine is a country that is well-known for its care about education
- It gives us human capital
- Palestinian attach great value to education and this cannot be viewed separately from the situation after 1948. Education is a weapon to show the reality and convey the real picture to the whole world and understand our history and rights
- It is our long-term weapon
- Palestinian people in general value education over anything else. That's why there are over 20 universities and colleges.

It can be seen from these answers that education is generally viewed as vital, indeed, as a weapon against the oppressor. Again and again during our visits to Palestine on the Erasmus+ project we worked on, students and staff pressed on us the urgency of the development of English language teaching as a means of articulating their story to a global audience: the plight of the Palestinian people. This can be recognised in the response above about the value of "human capital", which could have various connotations: the quality of being human in a regime where the oppressor dehumanises the population. Alternatively, it may signify human agency: education as developing capabilities to act upon the world—to be emancipated, to become skilled, or to speak to the world. Other, somewhat inspirational, responses above again reinforce the perseverance of the oppressed for education: it gives Palestinians a "weapon". Education is a source of strength and a defence to those who are oppressed, an expression of which we saw painted on a wall in Nablus: "Resist to Exist".

The many and varied problems all indicate, as Shraim and Khlaif stated, that educational reform to "enhance the learning process is a priority, and eLearning has become a necessity rather than a luxury to improve access to quality education for all Palestinian students" [6]. They note that substantial investment, mainly from international organisations, and considerable efforts have been made to develop distance education in Palestine; however, as Baalousha et al. [25] have shown, there is a lack of infrastructure and qualified staff in formal settings alone, while DE arguably requires rich pedagogical methods, drawn from teacher experience and knowledge. We have written about one such project at length

elsewhere [26], and we will draw on it to illustrate some key points later.

Q3. Our next question focused on distance education: its uses in overcoming the challenges of occupation. The first of these, "How has distance education helped you overcome the challenges of occupation?" elicited responses such as these:

- It opened many closed doors and gave us the chance to represent our country in workshops and conferences. Distance Education also helped us to make up for any missed classes due to the pandemic and political situation.
- It has a fruitful hand on my education as it was enough to contact professors online especially during the pandemic
- Keep in touch with my students and continue the teaching
- Help student and teachers to get rid of the barriers that prevented them or made it difficult for them to reach educational institutions
- There were positives to the development of technology, its use and investment in education during the closures, and the prevention of the access of lecturers and students to universities and schools, where universities and schools were able to volunteer technology. Therefore, there was ease in communicating with students during the closures, raising educational materials for them, making lectures and providing some exams through the use of various technological programs such as zooming and facilitating the process of communication between the student and the teacher. Thus, Palestine succeeded in completing the school years on time, despite the obstacles and challenges faced by our Palestinian people.
- It helps in situations mentioned in Question 1. When getting to the workplace is not an option due to roadblocks, it becomes crucial to have a distance learning platform.

Notable among the responses above is the stability technology represents. In a nation with omnipresent disruption or at the very least its ongoing threat, the notion of continuity must be of significant value. Norms are established via online practices to the best of educators' ability, whether this is due to the pandemic or the closure of transport routes and campuses. More excessive disruption (such as the arrest of educators, student activists such as Layan Nasir, or the confiscation of teaching equipment by soldiers) cannot be alleviated by online provision, but technologies can provide an essence of continuity and stability where these factors impact provision. This resonates with earlier points made from the literature about education as "survival". It is often said that education is about transformation, growth and change, but here there is a sense of holding on and sustaining something precarious and vulnerable: of staying in contact, of succeeding to complete a year, and of education giving strength. This is profoundly felt: distance education enables continuity and contiguity when physical interaction is disrupted. It is fluid and allows obstacles to be temporarily overcome. This notion of education as survival is against the continual trauma of life in Palestine, noted by Alfoqahaa [27], who writes that "the universities of the West Bank and Gaza have never given way to Israeli hegemony. Palestinian universities have encouraged young people to be Palestinians through endless cultural strategies".

We have noted previously [26] that educational practice in HE is still situated mainly within the conservative and traditionally hierarchical Palestinian society, but that many tutors are now "looking to augment the didactic approach as the commonest experience of language teaching in Higher Education with more active, social-constructivist student-centred practices" (p. 400). This was shown by a participant, who explained how, for them: "Capacity-building means preserving effective, traditional practices and continuing to develop and support them with what's new". We noted that "younger teachers have a readiness and confidence with innovation that enables learning to be assimilated more easily into the everyday Arab culture outside of the institution—in the home, the community and the wider social context", ([26], p. 401) but we caution that many still feel constrained by institutional and cultural traditions and practices. However, we celebrate the decolonial

aspects of this: being determinedly Palestinian in nature but using educational technology to teach, maintain and honour their heritage.

The digital ecology noted above reflects a repertoire of apps and platforms in common educational use around the globe: mainly conferencing and messaging tools that enhance communication between and among students and teachers, knowledge exchange and—to a lesser extent—assessment. Whilst much of this seems to support widening participation, much of this still mainly stems from the teacher's direction. However, there are also tools for "outside the classroom learning" and the beginnings of the use of the flipped approach (see e.g., [28]). Our Palestinian colleagues on an Erasmus+ project have had great success in transferring some of their in-class learning to remote, or distance, educational activities, especially in the realm of language learning (e.g., [29]). Itmeizah, Khalil and Smith [30], as another example, describe a project where students conduct interviews with people in English, which they video record on mobile phones. These are then submitted to an online platform and are reviewed by both peers and tutors. All of this can be done remotely and asynchronously, allowing for it to happen even when educational settings are closed.

Q4. Our fourth question was "What lessons have been learned from distance education (including during the pandemic)?" and we were looking specifically to draw out an understanding of this within the context of oppression and occupation.

- Where there is a will there is a way. Knowledge can be obtained in many ways and distance education can unlock many closed doors for Palestinians.
- First of all, computer and internet skills, then the importance of distance learning as a vital solution and alternative for traditional education
- Addressing problems regarding our situation in Palestine because of occupation not only for the pandemic
- Time-saving
- Effort-saving
- Saving money
- Technology has been well invested [in] during the crises we went through, whether from the occupation or during the pandemic, but the results were not the best, as we sometimes had to use distance education completely, and the infrastructure was not fully prepared for its use, whether in terms of rehabilitating staff and students or in terms of owning equipment.
- Not all students have access to electronic devices, electricity, and the Internet, all of which has a negative impact on their use of technology and obtaining the best results, in addition to the fact that distance education completely does not enable us to get to know students closely and refine their personalities, so it is better to combine distance education with face-to-face education. But if we talk about lessons learned, we can say that we have been able to challenge crises and adapt technology and invest in it as much as possible.
- We should develop our e-learning system to be an essential and primary tool for teaching
- We need to be more prepared.

Even from these brief responses, it is evident that HE teachers see digital and remote learning as crucial, as pointed out by a number of respondents: "it can unlock many closed doors"; "vital solution"; "essential and primary tool". From this, it appears that technologies help to address and redress problems arising from the occupation of Palestine that most educators only experienced in a diluted fashion through the pandemic. There is a growing body of literature (see, e.g., [31]) describing the ramifications of the abrupt shift to online teaching in HE in the global North. This current special edition is usefully filling in some of these other areas. However, it is also clear that digital learning is not a panacea. In our report for the UK EdTech Hub on the global digital response to COVID-19 [32], we discussed many of the necessary preconditions for optimal use of remote learning, including: effective local partnerships [33,34], using pre-existing technologies rather than investing in

new ones [35]; the use of consistent and well-curated educational resources [36]; governments and educational institutions working with providers to make data and bandwidth more available and more affordable [37]; and—crucially—an understanding at institutional, educational and individual levels that online content alone is not enough. We can add to this from the insights above that educators see the limitations of distance education and recognise that it is better augmented with f2f contact where possible. This is because of the apparent lack of sociability in distance education and how personalisation and interpersonal dynamics between students and between teacher and students is best experienced in a face-to-face context. It is also vital that educators have the digital literacy to make use of the content in order to learn, and that this digital literacy is quickly developed in learners, especially as so much remote learning is, or can be, achieved with no teacher presence [37]. Above and beyond this, we can see from both the pandemic and the closures so ordinary to everyday Palestinian life that investment in bandwidth, equipment and infrastructure is paramount.

It is by no means certain that all of these preconditions exist in Palestine, where there is widespread poverty (physical and digital) and where Israel controls the bandwidth and can—and does—switch off the internet when it deems it necessary. We may view the shutting down of bandwidth and internet access as aligned to the forced closure of HE campuses in recent history, with Birzeit University for one closing over 15 times and once for up to four years [38,39] has further outlined the extent to which the occupation and military impairs Palestinians' right to education under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whether through curfews, roadblocks, checkpoints or prohibited admission to Israeli universities for Palestinians in East Jerusalem, or simply through the spiralling costs of education itself.

It is plausible to argue that with so much continual disruption and such barriers, an informal means of teaching and learning through DE and using different channels, such as social media, remains the only option for Palestinians to fulfil their right to education. We now explore what is needed for that to be realised, whether skills, knowledge, technical infrastructure or a complete overhaul of the notion of what education is and is for.

Q5. Our final question asked participants to describe what they felt was needed in terms of next steps. We did not specify anything more than that, so they were free to include anything they felt necessary.

- 1. Continuous training for teaching staff; and 2. Being up-to-date with new teaching strategies
- Computer experts, MOOC Courses, cost- effective technology tools
- Changing Faculties beliefs and training them to use suitable e-teaching and e-learning methodologies
- Check in with your students regularly.
- Help your students' families get connected.
- Choose tools that are mobile friendly or can be used offline.
- More awareness over teachers and students
- Qualifying and enabling students and staff to fully use technology, in addition to rehabilitating the infrastructure and equipping it with electricity, the net, computers, and support programs for all students and teachers to make the educational process successful.
- Decent internet speed, training workshops for teachers and students.

All of these seem sensible and effective with obvious advantages. As we have argued previously, there is a clear need for continued investment in staff development—perhaps even online teaching qualifications in an acknowledgement of the importance of digital tools for teaching and learning. Faculty development programmes are needed to train teachers to design and use online teaching effectively. The use of shared/open platforms and shared open/resources, and developing habitual sharing of best teaching practices that "exemplify the teaching of culturally relevant, curricula-aligned content using student-centred

pedagogy and technologies will help to shape a community of professional practice" [30]. This "cascading" of information has been a feature of the Erasmus+ funded TEFL-ePAL project the authors worked on, with all four institutions describing how the digital pedagogies and technologies they developed with European partners have been shared beyond the original English learning departments that participated. This is also a feature of further work in Palestine—see, e.g., [40].

As noted by our respondents, it is also vital for Palestine to generate the infrastructure to support mass online learning. Shraim and Crompton [41] agree, arguing that the Palestinian Ministry of Education would do well to turn away from spending millions on textbooks and instead invest in digital textbooks, interactive materials, mobile apps and open educational resources that can be adapted by teachers to the individual and contextual needs of their students (see also [42]).

Another factor that was noted by several respondents was the importance of student–teacher relationships and of teacher presence in learning, even where this is remote. These concerns are reflected in [37,43]. Shraim and Crompton [41] draw on these same ideas, noting that "teachers must open a social presence through social communication tools to maintain and possibly enhance the lost spontaneous student–student and student–teacher interaction" (p. 8). However, an underlying factor is noted in the responses, with a response stating that the attitude of faculty itself needs to be challenged and shaped potentially by progressive teachers, who see different values in education than simple qualification. Distance education, where it becomes the norm over f2f environments, may need to posit an alternative vision of "curriculum" from content delivery of outdated and foreign sources to a curriculum that upholds students' existing knowledge and acknowledges their autonomy, while promoting collaboration to eradicate the separation enforced between them.

4. Limitations of the Study

The major potential limitations of this study are listed below. For each, we have demonstrated how we have tried to mitigate the effects:

(i)   Lack of generalizability: the results of our study may not be representative of the full population of Palestinian Higher Education teachers, but we present these findings as truly representative of the views of those who participated in the project.

(ii) Some responses were given in Arabic and were translated by our Palestinian co-authors. Although this has the potential for bias, we see no reason to doubt the accuracy of the translation.

(iii) Limited technology access: the sample may not fully represent diverse groups of people with varying access to technology, which is particularly true in Palestine, but we believe we reached a good cross-section of HE teachers.

(iv) Cost and time constraints: conducting a larger-scale study would be time-consuming and expensive, which was not feasible for this unfunded research, but we believe that our convenience sample of participant responses is credible for this study and its conclusions.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Amongst all of the difficulties, privations and the risks to education, freedom and even life that we have described, the Palestinian belief in the power of education is steadfast. Through a decolonial lens, the use of technology to retain the nature of being Palestinian is both fascinating and powerful. Using the same ed tech tools and pedagogies in the face of oppression is decolonial in its truest sense. In the light of the geopolitical realities on the ground that have "devastated Palestine's infrastructure, fractured the economy, fragmented the integrity of the State of Palestine, and overwhelmed service providers" [44], it is clear that work needs to be done on the infrastructure to support distance education, and more pedagogic and technical training given to support teachers' use of remote and mobile learning, but it has the potential to be transformative. We say potential, because of the numerous contextual challenges, including poverty, digital poverty, lack of access, Israeli

control of bandwidth and others, as described. But we have also noted how asynchronous use of videoed materials, the use of well-curated open educational resources, and social messaging have all enabled students and teachers to allow education to continue in the most difficult situations.

Indeed, Palestinian colleagues in HE continue to teach and conduct research through all of their hardships: our respondents informed us that they have been working on such disparate fields as Massive Open Online Courses (lecturers see these as a supportive tool, but do not wish them to replace their normal lectures), policies under emergency, the quality standards of e- courses, and the challenges and solutions of the public budget of Palestine.

These two hopeful and positive findings—the determination for education to flourish despite the challenges and the provision of distance education as enabling some stability in life—are hallmarks of our experiences in Palestine, and characteristic of the determination of our colleagues to ensure the best possible life chances for their students.

Whilst these traits are not obviously generalisable from, nor directly transferable to other contexts where occupation by a hostile force is or may be in operation, we hope that distance education and the possibilities it brings to continue to deliver future opportunities and to allow the oppressed a "weapon" against their oppressor on a global stage will be utilised to the fullest. This will, however, require policymakers in politically volatile regions to futureproof their infrastructure and to provide technological and pedagogical training to teachers. In order to be used to the best ability, it will also require the physical hardware for remote and oppressed communities and individuals to access learning materials, none of which is simple to create or provide. Many other lower-tech solutions exist [30,45], such as maildrops, the use of radio, even dedicated TV channels, but these are essentially top-down and one-way transmissive forms of education. Distance education as discussed in this paper allows for dialogue, collaboration and transformative education, and it is our hope that oppressed peoples find ways to engage like this, free from colonial expectations and open to the world whilst maintaining and celebrating their heritage.

We finish, in solidarity with our Palestinian colleagues, with the hope of freedom from oppression and the best wishes of the academic community to all who strive for a better education under these circumstances.

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