



Article

Pursuing Dreams, Confronting Paradoxes: Palestinian Students in Israeli Institutions

Al-Khansaa Diab

Special Education Department, David Yellin College of Education, Maagal Beit Hamidrash 7, Jerusalem 9634207, Israel; diabkna@dyellin.ac.il

Abstract: Through an immersive qualitative exploration, we delve into the narratives of East Jerusalem's Palestinian students as they navigate the complexities of an Israeli teacher training college. Workshops and artistic expression unearth their aspirations, challenges, and coping strategies within a labyrinthine educational landscape. Our findings illuminate their indomitable spirit and unwavering pursuit of dreams despite isolation, discrimination, and the ever-present Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This study contributes to understanding minority students' experiences in higher education, particularly those in conflict-ridden regions. Drawing upon Resilience Theory, Social Identity Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Cross-Cultural Psychology, we weave a multi-dimensional framework elucidating factors shaping academic achievements, identity formation, and psychological well-being. The fruits of this research empower educators and policymakers to nurture resilience and inclusivity among diverse student populations navigating tempestuous waters. Amplifying Palestinian students' voices, our work stands as a clarion call for equity and social justice in education, even amidst adversity. We underscore the paramount importance of tailored support systems and interventions, illuminating education's transformative potential as a catalyst for positive change within communities gripped by conflict.

Keywords: Palestinian students; higher education in conflict zones; identity negotiation; cultural adaptation; educational resilience



Citation: Diab, Al-Khansaa. 2024. Pursuing Dreams, Confronting Paradoxes: Palestinian Students in Israeli Institutions. *Social Sciences* 13: 290. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13060290>

Received: 12 April 2024

Revised: 11 May 2024

Accepted: 19 May 2024

Published: 28 May 2024



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1. Introduction

Embarking on an educational journey can transform individuals, shaping their professional and social growth. For East Jerusalem students pursuing teaching careers in Israeli educational institutions, this path is complex, with hurdles and opportunities (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013; Makkawi 2004; Mizel 2020; Ramon 2017). Due to the lack of recognition for certificates by Israeli authorities, many students opt for Israeli institutions over Palestinian Authority universities (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013; Hasson 2019). Studying in Israel opens up prospects for future employment and professional progress (Abd Rabbo 2021; Arar and Haj-Yehia 2018). This research focuses on the experiences, hurdles, and concerns of students from East Jerusalem as they navigate their academic paths at a College of Education in Jerusalem.

This study delves into the emotions and perceptions of these students through methods beyond just interviews, adding insights to our understanding of how minority individuals perceive themselves within predominantly majority settings (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013; Billig 2021; Makkawi 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2010). It is crucial to understand the feelings and experiences of these students to offer them the needed assistance and support to navigate the situations they encounter (Arar 2017; Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013; Makkawi 2004; Verkuyten et al. 2019). Resilience Theory (Masten et al. 2021; Ungar 2012), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1986), Critical Race Theory (Gillborn et al. 2018; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995), and Cross-Cultural Psychology (Berry 2005; Schwartz et al. 2020) are incorporated into this research to understand the realities of students attending higher education establishments.

Previous studies have explored the experiences of Palestinian students in Israeli higher education institutions, shedding light on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate their academic journeys. [Arar and Haj-Yehia \(2013\)](#) investigated the experiences of Palestinian students from Israel studying in Jordanian universities, highlighting the dilemmas they encounter in terms of their sense of belonging and identity. The study underscored the importance of understanding the unique experiences of Palestinian students in different educational contexts.

[Makkawi \(2004\)](#) examined the identity formation processes of Palestinian Arab students in Israeli universities, focusing on the intersection between their national and student identities. The study revealed the complexities of negotiating identity in a context marked by ongoing political conflict and the strategies employed by students to maintain their Palestinian identity while pursuing their academic goals.

[Shalhoub-Kevorkian \(2010\)](#) explored the experiences of Palestinian female students in Israeli universities, highlighting the multiple forms of oppression they face as women, Palestinians, and students. The study underscored the importance of considering the intersectionality of identity and the impact of structural inequalities on the experiences of minority students in higher education.

In the context of conflict and oppression, education can serve as a means of resistance and empowerment for marginalized communities ([Freire 1970](#); [Hooks 1994](#)). [Nasir and Al-Amin \(2006\)](#) examined the role of education in fostering resilience and resistance among Palestinian youth, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and the creation of spaces for critical dialogue and reflection.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of Palestinian students in various educational contexts, there is a need for further research that specifically examines the experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem studying in Israeli institutions. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by providing an in-depth exploration of the challenges, coping strategies, and resilience of these students as they pursue their educational goals in a complex sociopolitical context.

By exploring these themes using Resilience Theory, Social Identity Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Cross-Cultural Psychology, this research delves into the experiences of students in universities ([Moll Riquelme et al. 2022](#); [Ungar 2012](#); [Tajfel and Turner 1979](#); [Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995](#); [Berry 2005](#); [Schwartz et al. 2020](#)). The findings from this study can offer insights to educators and policymakers looking to establish supportive learning environments that promote resilience, well-being, and academic achievement for a diverse student body in Jerusalem and other areas ([Arar and Haj-Yehia 2018](#); [Jakhelln and Postholm 2022](#)).

Ultimately, this qualitative study aims to explore the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of Palestinian students attending Israeli academic institutions. Its focus is on understanding how they navigate their educational journey while preserving their identity and demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity.

2. Contextual Background

Palestinian students from East Jerusalem who aspire to become teachers face a dilemma when deciding where to pursue their education. Due to the lack of recognition of credentials by Israeli authorities, many students opt for studying at institutions based on considerations such as better job prospects and opportunities for career advancement ([Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013](#); [Muqari 2020](#)). However, this choice presents challenges, such as language barriers, economic disparities, and cultural differences, that can impact their integration into these settings ([Arar and Haj-Yehia 2018](#); [Mizel 2020](#)). In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increase in student enrollment in these institutions. Graduates faced hurdles in obtaining acknowledgment in Jerusalem due to labor restrictions imposed by Israel. Consequently, students must acquire qualifications to enhance their employability. The recent quadrupling of student enrollment in institutions can be attributed to factors such as concerns over accreditation, improved job opportunities, and simplified admission procedures. The

growing trend of East Jerusalem high school graduates enrolling in colleges is encouraged by incentives for admissions processes, preparatory courses, and financial aid initiatives (Abd Rabbo 2021; Hasson 2019; Ramon 2017).

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has greatly affected the education of students in East Jerusalem. Since Israel took control of East Jerusalem in 1967, the Israeli government has put in place measures that have unfairly impacted students and made it difficult for them to receive an education (Nasasra 2018). These measures include providing insufficient funds to schools, limiting the construction and expansion of schools, and enforcing an Israeli curriculum that downplays Palestinian history and culture (Nuseibeh 2015).

Furthermore, Palestinian students residing in East Jerusalem encounter treatment and mistreatment from officials, such as the deployment of security personnel within educational institutions and the unjustified apprehension and confinement of students (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). These repressive measures and actions establish an unsettling atmosphere for students, impacting their mental health and educational accomplishments (Makkawi 2004).

Israeli qualifications can boost job opportunities in government roles, according to studies by Ramon (2017) and Muqari (2020). A significant number of students enrolled in sought-after programs at Hebrew University during the 2018/2019 academic year, as highlighted by Hasson (2019). Additionally, programs focusing on preparation have led to an increase in students attending art and design schools, as noted by Ramon (2017).

Financial support provided by Israel in 2014 for students pursuing education has played a key role in shifting perspectives and overcoming resistance to integrating into Israel's educational system, as discussed by Abd Rabbo (2021). Graduates from East Jerusalem often prioritize career opportunities over considerations when seeking employment opportunities within Israel, according to Muqari (2020).

Israeli government policies, such as Decision 3790, have impacted education in the country, promoting social mobility and expanding university access for communities located on the periphery. However, these policies may have nuanced implications for the circumstances of East Jerusalem.

Challenges arise from language and cultural differences that hinder Palestinians' integration into colleges. Transitioning from Arabic to Hebrew language instruction can lead to disorientation and academic obstacles, as highlighted by Mizel (2020). Proficiency in Hebrew is essential for Palestinians seeking advancement and successful integration into the workforce, as emphasized by Mizel (2020).

Palestinians living in East Jerusalem view learning Hebrew as essential for survival and a way to navigate society (Abbas and Mendel 2022). Culturally, Palestinians must adapt to an environment. Arab students studying at universities often face exclusion and marginalization, hindering their integration and intensifying identity struggles (Halabi 2016). Interactions between Jewish students prompt re-evaluations of identity and foster increased social involvement (Arar 2017). Students' interactions with the spaces and territorial boundaries at Hebrew University are significantly shaped by the cultural and linguistic disparities they encounter, impacting their daily experiences and sense of belonging (Sa'di-Ibraheem 2021).

Despite the obstacles, attending colleges in Israel offers students advantages. These benefits encompass receiving a top-notch education, being exposed to new viewpoints and concepts, and having the opportunity to foster understanding between Palestinians and Israelis (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013). For some students, studying in institutions is viewed as a form of empowerment, a means to question the existing order, and a pathway to contribute to societal transformation (Makkawi 2004).

Palestinian students hailing from East Jerusalem who attend these institutions encounter intricate obstacles. Despite these challenges, their perseverance and drive to achieve their aspirations remain steadfast. By overcoming this journey, they showcase their dedication to self-improvement, promote empathy, and contribute to creating a new environment in the area. The goal of this research is to shed light on their encounters, re-

silience, and tenacity, underscoring the role of education in resolving conflicts and molding a harmonious tomorrow.

3. Theoretical Framework

We carefully chose Social Identity Theory, Critical Race Theory, Resilience Theory, and Cross-Cultural Psychology for this study, as they are relevant to understanding the experiences of students in institutions. These theories shed light on the connections between identity, power dynamics, resilience, and cultural adaptation within the conflict contexts. Social Identity Theory delves into how group affiliations and social categorizations influence individuals' perceptions and interactions with groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986). Critical Race Theory emphasizes the impact of race and racism on experiences and outcomes while underscoring the significance of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings 1998). Resilience Theory offers a framework to comprehend how individuals navigate challenges and develop coping mechanisms in situations (Ungar 2012). Cross-Cultural Psychology provides insights into the processes involved in managing cultural environments and identities (Berry 2005). These theories shape the methodology of this study by guiding the workshop activities' design, framing the research inquiries' focus, and interpreting the results. They offer a basis for delving into students' real-life stories and shedding light on the tactics they use to maneuver through their academic paths in a challenging sociopolitical environment.

3.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, first introduced by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, suggests that an individual's self-perception is influenced by their association with groups. When looking at university students, this theory can provide insights into how their ethnic and national backgrounds impact their interactions, experiences, and sense of belonging within settings. It also delves into topics such as intergroup dynamics, discrimination, and the psychological implications of being part of a minority group.

Applying Social Identity Theory to the context of students in education institutions based on the research by Tajfel and Turner from 1979 allows us to understand how their ethnic and national identities intersect with their journeys. This theory underscores group affiliation's role in shaping individuals' self-concepts in environments marked by political tensions and cultural diversity. In a study conducted in 2021, Billig examined the identity strategies employed by minority students in academic settings. He uncovered these students' approaches to navigating this environment, including borrowing tactics from others, employing avoidance strategies, and positioning themselves ideologically. These adaptable strategies demonstrate how identity evolves within regions affected by conflict. Diamond (2020) explored how social influences impact the results of science education, highlighting how family background and economic status can significantly mold the goals and accomplishments of students compared to their Jewish counterparts. This study underscored the role of connections and family influence in shaping students' educational journeys. Moreover, research by Abd Alrhman and Cojocaru (2020, 2022) shed light on the obstacles faced by Palestinian Authority students attending schools in Israel. These students grapple with challenges related to their sense of belonging and the conflict between their identity and national identity, which leads to familial difficulties. The study brings attention to the complexities surrounding self-identity negotiation within a setting. Collectively, these studies provide insights into the experiences of students in education through Social Identity Theory. They demonstrate the tactics employed by these students to assert their identities and instances of discrimination and strive for success and social integration amidst a backdrop rich with political and cultural intricacies.

3.2. Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as explored by Delgado and Stefancic in 2017, presents a framework for understanding how race and racism are deeply ingrained in structures,

including educational institutions. This viewpoint offers insights when examining the challenges faced by students in Israeli universities, shedding light on how discrimination and marginalization are not isolated incidents but rooted in systemic and historical issues of racism within society. A core tenet of CRT emphasizes that racism is a reality in the lives of individuals from marginalized backgrounds. This idea resonates with [Ladson-Billings' \(1998\)](#) work, which underscored CRT's role in pushing for an evaluation of civil rights legislations' impact on educational equity and advocating against the slow progress of racial reform efforts. In the realm of education, applying Critical Race Theory provides a lens to scrutinize established victories and educational reform movements, such as multiculturalism, prompting an examination of their effectiveness in addressing racial inequalities. Further delving into the applicability of CRT within various settings, a compilation by [Gillborn et al. \(2018\)](#) encompasses scholarship on Critical Race Theory.

This compilation highlighted the ideas of Critical Race Theory (CRT): the presence of systemic racism in our judgments, making racism seem like a norm, the establishment and perpetuation of white supremacy, and CRT's vital role in promoting global perspectives while prioritizing specific social groups within their unique environments. Additionally, [Lewis et al.'s \(2019\)](#) research applied CRT to investigate instances of microaggressions among students at a white university, revealing a negative link between the frequency of such microaggressions and students' sense of belonging. This underscores CRT's focus on narratives and the significance of amplifying voices from marginalized communities to challenge prevailing narratives and advocate for justice.

Furthermore, [Billig's \(2021\)](#) exploration into how minority Arab Israeli students navigate identity strategies in university settings further demonstrated the relevance of CRT. The study revealed how ongoing political tensions require identity approaches among minority groups, contributing to discussions on place identity and minority experiences in conflict-ridden educational contexts. Critical Race Theory provides a framework for examining the nature of racism within educational institutions and society. It emphasizes the need for counter-narratives from marginalized communities to confront and deconstruct prevailing ideologies while advocating for efforts toward transformative social justice initiatives.

3.3. Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory has evolved to underscore the dynamic process through which individuals exhibit positive adaptation despite challenges and adversities. Initially emphasized as an innate quality, Resilience Theory has been redefined as a dynamic, developable capacity significantly influenced by environmental support and personal strategies. This contemporary understanding highlights resilience as particularly pertinent in educational settings, where students often face socioeconomic and political challenges. [Mansfield et al. \(2016\)](#) proposed a resilience framework for teacher education, emphasizing personal and contextual resources and specific strategies to bolster resilience outcomes in educators. This framework highlights the critical role of resilience in supporting teachers' well-being and effectiveness. Furthering this exploration, [Moll Riquelme et al. \(2022\)](#) conceptualized resilience as a universally present capacity that can be activated to overcome adversity. Their systematic review suggests that educational centers play a crucial role in fostering resilience through supportive relationships and pedagogical strategies. [Theron \(2016\)](#) emphasized the need for a culturally sensitive understanding of resilience, pointing out that the resilience-supporting mechanisms in marginalized youth are shaped by their unique cultural and contextual realities.

In academic resilience, [Cassidy \(2016\)](#) developed the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30), providing a tool to measure resilience based on students' adaptive responses to academic adversity. This measure aligns with the contemporary view of resilience as a process rather than an outcome. For Palestinian students in Israeli colleges, resilience might manifest through their perseverance in education, strategies for coping with cultural and identity challenges, and how they leverage support networks. Recent research has explored

resilience as a multifactorial construct, influenced by factors such as family support, community engagement, and personal attributes, such as optimism and self-efficacy (Panter-Brick and Leckman 2013). Resilience in educational contexts is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that can be developed through supportive relationships, personal and contextual resources, and adaptive strategies. Educational institutions are pivotal in nurturing resilience, enabling students and educators to thrive despite challenges.

3.4. Cross-Cultural Psychology

Cross-Cultural Psychology explores how cultural variations influence psychological processes and behaviors, elucidating how individuals adapt to cultural norms and academic expectations distinct from their own. This field provides a critical framework for understanding the adaptation mechanisms of Palestinian students in Israeli colleges, focusing on acculturation—the change process resulting from contact with culturally different people, groups, and social influences (Berry 2005). Acculturation encompasses assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, significantly impacting individuals' psychological well-being and educational outcomes. The choice of acculturation strategy is crucial for Palestinian students in Israeli contexts, influencing their sense of belonging and academic success (Sam and Berry 2010). Recent research has advanced our understanding of acculturation within educational settings, demonstrating its impact on academic achievement and psychological adjustment. Doucerain (2019) highlights the need for acculturation research to integrate insights from cultural psychology, suggesting that acculturation involves the development of a multicultural mind and self through the acquisition and flexible use of new cultural schemas. This perspective emphasizes cultural engagement's dynamic and tacit nature, underscoring the importance of re-establishing "cultural fluency" in new cultural environments. Schwartz et al. (2020) proposed integrating cultural psychology with developmental science, centering on acculturation as both a cultural and developmental phenomenon. This integration underscores the specific transactions between individuals and their cultural contexts, revealing how different international migrants encounter distinct culture–psyche interactions and person–context relations. Makarova and Birman (2015) examined the relationship between cultural transition and academic achievement among students from ethnic minority backgrounds. They identified acculturation as embedded in cultural identity development, psychological adjustment, and behavioral adjustment. Their findings suggested the complexity of the relationship between cultural transition and school adjustment, indicating that a bi-cultural orientation generally relates positively to the school adjustment of minority students. Erten et al. (2018) used a cultural evolution approach to model acculturation. They found that willingness to engage in cross-cultural interactions and a higher level of cultural conservatism among resident individuals favored the evolution of a multicultural society where immigrant and resident cultures stably co-exist. For Palestinian students, the choice of acculturation strategy can significantly influence their sense of belonging and academic success in an Israeli context (Sam and Berry 2010).

These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of acculturation in educational settings, emphasizing the need for academic policies and practices that support the cultural and psychological adaptation of students from diverse backgrounds.

4. Methodology

In this research, we employed an innovative approach to investigate the perspectives and experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem studying to become teachers at a teaching college in Jerusalem. The study was conducted through a workshop titled "Diversity in Society", designed to equip these students with the skills to interact with their future student body in schools across East Jerusalem. This approach aligns with the growing trend of using creative and participatory methods in qualitative research to capture the complexities of participants' experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018; Leavy 2020).

4.1. Participants

The study included 3 groups of students from East Jerusalem, comprising a total of 58 individuals aged between 23 and 38 who took part in the workshop, spanning 3 years. The majority of the participants were female, with six male attendees. All the participants were Muslims. To ensure that language barriers did not hinder their involvement in workshops alongside students, the sessions were conducted in Arabic, the students' mother tongue. This decision played a role in fostering an atmosphere where participants felt at ease expressing themselves and actively interacting with the content, as highlighted by [Bhatia and Ram \(2009\)](#) in their research on catering to the linguistic requirements of marginalized communities in research and intervention initiatives.

4.2. Workshop Components

The workshop involved a variety of activities, including discussions, hands-on learning tasks, and group talks in settings. Participants were urged to share their stories, experiences, and viewpoints on themes such as belonging, self-identity development, and the obstacles they encountered as minority students in various settings. These activities aimed to build a sense of togetherness and compassion among group members while offering them an environment to delve into their experiences and feelings. Using art-based techniques, such as those utilized in the workshop, has been proven to encourage self-expression and foster mutual understanding among participants ([Leavy 2020](#); [Ne'eman et al. 2022](#)).

Throughout the workshop sessions, students engaged in artistic projects and student-led discussions that encouraged expression and introspection beyond talking. These activities provided avenues for participants to explore their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs, promoting self-awareness and empathy. The incorporation of arts-based methods in qualitative research has been recognized as a powerful tool for capturing the nuances of participants' experiences and fostering empathy and understanding ([Barone and Eisner 2012](#); [Ne'eman et al. 2022](#)).

4.3. Student Seminars

A unique feature of the workshop was the student seminars, where small groups selected topics related to their shared identities as Palestinians, Muslims, and Jerusalemites attending a college. These seminars allowed students to take ownership of their learning journey, develop their research and presentation skills, and foster a spirit of collaboration and unity among peers. By exploring their identities, experiences, and aspirations, the students gained the confidence to drive change within their communities and future educational settings. This approach is consistent with the principles of participatory action research, which emphasizes the importance of involving participants as agents of change ([Kemmis et al. 2014](#)).

4.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers collected data from multiple sources, including workshop session protocols, facilitator notes, student assignments, posters, photographs, and participant reflections. The data also included artistic creations, such as sculptures made from plasticine, representing personal and social values, and collages reflecting the participants' identities as Palestinians and Jerusalemites from East Jerusalem. The use of multiple data sources and creative methods allows for a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings ([Creswell and Poth 2018](#); [Leavy 2020](#)).

It is important to note that previous studies on Palestinian students have primarily relied on questionnaires and interviews, which can be restrictive in terms of delving into the depths of students' experiences and uncovering hidden paradoxes, contradictions, and difficult emotions ([Nguyen and Benet-Martínez 2013](#); [Sirin and Fine 2007](#)). For many participants, the workshop provided a unique opportunity to recall past events and share sensitive and personal experiences that they had never shared before. The use of arts-based

methods and the creation of a safe, inclusive space facilitated this process of self-disclosure and exploration (Leavy 2020; Ne'eman et al. 2022).

The analysis involved using content and thematic analyses to uncover the themes arising from data sources that shed light on students' experiences at college, their journeys to the institution, and the memories, attitudes, thoughts, and experiences they brought along (Braun and Clarke 2019). This method of analyzing data aligns with the core principles of research that stress the significance of comprehending participants' experiences and perspectives in their words and contexts (Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

This distinctive methodological approach, which combined workshops, artistic expression, student discussions, and qualitative research methods, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives, experiences, and coping strategies of Palestinian students within the educational environment (Creswell and Poth 2018; Merriam and Tisdell 2015). By providing an inclusive space for these students to express their thoughts, reveal aspects of their hidden identity, and share their experiences in their own language, this study enhances understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by minority students within complex sociopolitical contexts (Bhatia and Ram 2009; Ne'eman et al. 2022).

All data were produced in Arabic and translated into English by Claude (<https://www.anthropic.com>, accessed on 13 January 2024), an AI-driven language tool.

5. Findings and Analysis

This investigation shed light on the real-life experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem as they maneuver through their academic path within an Israeli educational institution. By combining workshops and art creation, this research delved into stories to reveal the various aspects of identity formation, resilience, and the numerous hurdles these students encounter.

The results showcased seven themes that encapsulate the journey of students studying in an Israeli setting. These themes encompass their struggle with identity and belonging, resilience and coping mechanisms, experiences of stress due to minority status and discrimination, hope and resistance efforts, obstacles, and ways to cope, with values shaping identity formation and collective memories influencing national identity.

5.1. Navigation of Cultural Identity and Belonging

The ongoing process of defining one's identity and seeking a sense of belonging stands out as pivotal in the experiences of students studying in an Israeli environment. This theme explores how cultural identity interacts with the setting, emphasizing the students' efforts to establish a space where their Palestinian heritage is acknowledged and honored.

The narratives the students shared in the workshop's introductory section illustrated how they constantly navigate their identity and sense of belonging as Palestinians attending college.

Hanins' poetic description of wishing to soar "like a bird flying free" symbolizes a desire for liberation and independence. This sentiment reflects the idea of adaptation, as discussed by Doucerain (2019), where forming a self is crucial. Hanins' symbolic bird yearning to transcend imposed limits embodies this process of adaptation, suggesting a dynamic rather than rigid view of cultural identity.

Rose's report stated that she feels like "a stranger in my family" because of her pursuits, which echoes Halabi's (2016) research. Halabi's study on university students shed light on the alienation and marginalization that can exacerbate identity struggles, highlighting both internal conflicts and external challenges faced by these students.

Rose shared: "...I am passionate about learning...Unlike my family, none of them pursued education...I am the one in my family pursuing education. Sometimes, they find it hard to accept. They mockingly assign labels to me. However, in public, they support me. They take pride in my college studies among my peers. I often feel like an outsider within my family, as they fail to grasp my choices. I could have stayed home. Followed their ways, but I opted for college instead".

Applying Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986) to the experiences of students in universities helps us understand how their ethnic and national identities influence their interactions, experiences, and sense of belonging in academic environments. Through the students' stories, we see a struggle with identity and the psychological impacts of being part of a minority group, as proposed by Social Identity Theory.

As Palestinian students navigate questions of identity and belonging, they engage in conversations between their roots and the challenges of studying at an Israeli institution. Their narratives expose a quest for self-determination and comprehension within a framework of cultural adaptation and societal marginalization.

5.2. Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

In the face of challenges, students' resilience and coping strategies shine brightly as symbols of strength and adaptability. This topic delves into the methods these students use to tackle obstacles, revealing the shared strengths that drive their persistence. The students displayed resilience, utilizing a variety of coping mechanisms to navigate the difficulties they confronted.

Ameera's story exemplifies the determination and resilience of these students: "I am already 33 years old, and my life here at the college is one big race. I went back to studying after getting married and having children...and I do not want to be a regular student. I aspire to master's and doctoral studies...but I do not regret what has passed so far...because I have done beautiful things in my life". Ameera's determination, "I do not want to be a regular student. I aspire to master's and doctoral studies", exemplifies resilience as conceptualized within Resilience Theory (Mansfield et al. 2016). Despite personal and societal obstacles, her pursuit of higher education illustrates the importance of internal drive and external support systems in fostering resilience.

In her thirties, Reem is a student from Jerusalem who joined college after getting married and becoming a mother. Holding two photos, one of a child with computer equipment and another of a woman observing, she reflects: "Recalling my journey...I find solace at college...Despite deciding against continuing studies after spending a year and a half at Al Quds University in Abu Dis (a university in the Palestinian territories), I crave more. I ponder where to pursue further education after completing my current program. These two images combined...That is me...Life is not tranquil for me...How have these two years at college shaped me? It seems like I am trying to quieten my thoughts...Without my sister, who also studies here, I rely on myself more...Although she possesses life experience and wisdom, I feel secure in her presence. However, when she is not around, it is empowering to realize I can navigate on my own. I enjoy socializing with people, as shown in the photo...Find it challenging to do".

Reem's dependence on her sister for assistance coincides with the view of resilience outlined by Panter-Brick and Leckman (2013). The delicate equilibrium between determination and social support emphasizes the web of factors that contribute to resilience when faced with challenges.

Janan's sensation of being "like a child tackling an exam" but discovering solace in her aspirations of "earning a certification and progressing in my career" underscores the significance of goals in nurturing resilience. The recurring themes of resilience and coping strategies highlight students' determination as they navigate their educational journeys. By pursuing ambitions and utilizing support systems, these students exhibit resilience, providing valuable insights into the evolving processes of coping and adjustment.

Musa's description of a TV show that made fun of the Nakba adds to feelings of being disconnected and upset: "They aired a play on TV where they mocked our Nakba...It filled with racism...There is nothing we can do".

The influence of language differences on Palestinian students' feelings of belonging and how they experience daily life has been studied (Sa'di-Ibraheem 2021), showing how stress from being a minority shows up in academic settings.

Hayats sense of belonging is complex: “I find it hard to connect with Jews. I just do not get them...I feel at ease with Arabs in the program”, sheds light on the difficulties of navigating diverse cultures and backgrounds while trying to fit into an academic community.

Stranger at Home

The subtheme of “stranger at home”—feeling like a stranger in your land—captures Palestinian students’ sense of isolation and detachment as they go about their daily routines at school and on their journey to campus. This theme emphasizes the toll of living as a minority in an environment where their identity is constantly questioned, and their feeling of belonging is challenged by the dynamics surrounding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

A good number of the students discussed the challenges of being in the minority and the sense of isolation they carry with them both on campus and during their commute to college.

Ali said, “I reside near the Qalandia checkpoint and must cross it. I lose hours each day. There is no sense of freedom. It’s just a feeling of being disconnected and isolated”.

Sally added: “We are compelled to accept everything...We have to live for our children’s sake...It is quite tough”.

Isaa shared an experience: “...Every day, I get stopped by the officer...My car is thoroughly searched every time...I keep quiet outwardly. I feel like exploding...I want to question why me? Just because I’m Palestinian? Nevertheless, I remain silent...Recently, they set up a checkpoint at the entrance of our village. Each body search feels like an intrusion into my village. Sometimes I wish to ask them what their purpose is here”.

The feelings of isolation and disconnection shared by students in this research echo the concept of “minoritization” discussed by [Sa’di and Abu-Lughod \(2007\)](#). This term refers to how a group is marginalized socially and economically until they become a minority. For students studying at institutions, this marginalization is evident through daily encounters with checkpoints, surveillance, and constant reminders of their outsider status in their own land.

Additionally, the stories of these students resonate with [Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker’s \(2005\)](#) exploration of the “trapped minority” concept among citizens in Israel. They argue that these citizens are torn between their heritage and their status as citizens in a Jewish state. This dilemma leads to feelings of detachment and an ongoing struggle to reconcile their identities with their sense of belonging. Furthermore, the sense of being strangers in their land felt by students can be viewed through Fanon’s concept of “alienation”. According to [Fanon \(1998\)](#), being colonized leads to a feeling of alienation and disconnection due to the dominance of the colonizer and the imposition of a culture. For students, daily interactions with symbols, structures, and people constantly remind them of their status as a colonized community, resulting in feelings of isolation and detachment.

The subtheme “stranger at home” reflects the emotional impact of living as a minority amidst ongoing conflict and colonization. The experiences of alienation and disconnection shared by students in this research are not solely individual. Rather, they represent the broader sociopolitical realities that influence the lives of Palestinians under Israeli rule.

Additionally, Critical Race Theory ([Delgado and Stefancic 2017](#)) offers insight into how systemic and historical factors contribute to the discrimination and marginalization experienced by students. This theory underscores the importance of narratives, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities to challenge predominant narratives and advocate for social equity. The concept of minority stress and discrimination highlights the personal obstacles encountered by students, underscoring the importance of educational institutions in promoting a welcoming and fair atmosphere.

5.3. Minority Stress and Discrimination

In this theme, we delved into the challenges students face in the academic environment, shedding light on the psychological and social hurdles stemming from their minority

status. The stories shared by students are instances of stress and discrimination within the academic sphere.

Sherin's narrative sheds light on the difficulties students encounter in a Jewish setting: "I notice many things that bother me...It is frustrating...There is no representative in the student union to support us...Some courses seem repetitive and unhelpful...I choose to stay silent".

Sherin's thoughts echo theories such as Social Identity Theory and Critical Race Theory (Meyer 2003; Delgado and Stefancic 2017), which suggest that marginalized communities face increased stress due to their position. Her narrative underscores the obstacles that worsen feelings of isolation and prejudice.

Musa's recount of the TV show that made fun of the Nakba adds to feelings of being disconnected and upset: "They (the Jews) aired a show on TV where they mock our Nakba...There is much racism...We feel powerless".

The influence of language differences on students' sense of fitting in and everyday encounters has been studied (Sa'di-Ibraheem 2021), showcasing the subtle ways in which minority stress shows up in academic settings.

Hayat's sentiment, "It is hard for me to connect with Jews, their ways are unfamiliar...But I find comfort with Arabs in the program", sheds light on the difficulties of navigating cultures and backgrounds while trying to find a place within the academic community.

Being a Foreigner in the Homeland

The subtheme of "being a foreigner in the homeland" captures the deep sense of disconnection and isolation Palestinian students feel as they go about their daily routines both on campus and during their journey to college. This theme underscores the strain and mental burden of living as a minority in an environment where their identity is frequently questioned, and their sense of belonging is challenged by the sociopolitical landscape of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Many students shared their experiences of being in the minority and the sense of isolation they carry with them both on campus and during their commute to college.

Ali said: "I live across the checkpoint and have to pass through Qalandia every day...many precious hours are wasted every day...there is no freedom...only alienation and estrangement".

Sally added: "We are forced to swallow everything and keep silent...we must live for the sake of our sons...and it is hard".

Isaa shared a complex situation: "...Every day, the same policeman stops me...and checks everything in my car...and I keep silent and look and explode inside...and I want to shout and tell him...why only me? Because I am Palestinian? However, I keep silent...and recently they put a checkpoint at the entrance of our village; every time they search my body, I feel like a stranger in my village...and I want to shout at them...what are you doing here?"

Hanan expressed herself: "I always felt Palestinian...but like a stranger and a refugee in my homeland...Is this Shuafat (a neighborhood in east Jerusalem)? Or the State of Israel? Shuafat has Palestinian symbols...but when I take the light rail toward the college...everything is not Palestinian...not the roads, not the buildings, and not the people".

The situation in Shuafat, with its mix of symbols and a noticeable absence of elements on the light rail route to college, raises questions about the identity and atmosphere in that area. The feelings of disconnect and dislocation expressed by students in this research echo the concept of "minoritization" discussed by Sa'di and Abu-Lughod (2007). Minoritization involves processes that push a group into becoming a minority through political and economic marginalization. For students studying in educational institutions, this minoritization is evident in their daily encounters with checkpoints, surveillance, and constant reminders of their outsider status in their own land.

Similarly, the narratives shared by the students mirror the insights presented by [Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker \(2005\)](#) regarding the notion of a “trapped minority” among citizens living in Israel. These scholars argue that Palestinian citizens face a duality of balancing their heritage against their citizenship within a state that identifies as Jewish. This sense of being caught between identities results in feelings of isolation and an ongoing struggle to navigate issues related to identity and acceptance.

Furthermore, the way students feel like outsiders in their country can be seen through [Fanon’s \(1998\)](#) concept of “alienation”. According to Fanon, those who are colonized experience a sense of disconnection and isolation due to the colonizers’ dominance and the imposition of a culture. For students, daily interactions with symbols, structures, and individuals constantly remind them of their status as colonized individuals, making them feel disconnected and isolated.

Being a foreigner in the homeland highlights the psychological and emotional impact of living as a minority amidst ongoing conflict and colonization. The experiences of disconnection and isolation shared by students in this research reflect not only their personal journeys but also mirror the broader sociopolitical realities that define the lives of Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

Moreover, Critical Race Theory ([Delgado and Stefancic 2017](#)) offers insights into how systemic and historical factors influence the discrimination and marginalization experienced by students. This theory underscores the significance of narratives, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities in challenging prevailing narratives and advocating for social equity. The concept of minority stress and discrimination highlights the personal obstacles that Palestinian students encounter, underscoring the importance of institutions promoting a welcoming and fair environment.

5.4. Aspirations and Resistance

Amidst adversity, Palestinian students’ aspirations and acts of resistance emerge as powerful narratives of hope and determination. This theme delves into the dreams and ambitions that drive these students to overcome obstacles and contribute positively to their communities. Despite the challenges they faced, the students expressed a strong desire to pursue their dreams and make a positive impact in their communities.

Rana’s story demonstrates the pragmatism and determination of these students: “...Indeed, many ask why this college? You could have studied pharmacy at Al-Quds University with your high school average...I came here because the job afterward is more guaranteed”.

Rana’s pragmatic decision, “I came here because the job afterward is more guaranteed”, reflects resilience as a dynamic adaptation process ([Masten et al. 2021](#)). Her strategic choice highlights the students’ ability to navigate systemic challenges with pragmatism and foresight.

Hana chose two pictures. The first was a picture of a woman feeding a goose, which she described as “...It was hard for me to find a picture that really resembles me...This picture is of me at home. I fatten everyone and take care of everything...Being at college is the best thing that has ever happened to me. It is my life’s dream...here I am, Hana herself”. In this part of her story, Hana manifests the dream she has had for a long time. Selecting a picture of a large audience listening to a woman, Hana adds: “...Maybe this is me in the future...I will be something big and lead many men”. Hana’s aspirations of being “something big and leading many men” in the future showcase the students’ desire to challenge gender norms and make a positive impact in their communities.

Hana’s tale and photographs effectively reflect her travels, aspirations, and societal challenges as a woman. Hana’s desire for college shows how education may empower women to defy gender preconceptions and pursue their dreams ([Stromquist 2015](#)). Additionally, her story is part of Palestinian women’s higher education struggles to defy gender norms and succeed ([Arar and Haj-Yehia 2018](#)). Hana’s narrative illustrates how Palestinian women manage personal objectives, social expectations, and education’s transforming

effect. It stresses the importance of challenging gender roles, empowering women, and enabling them to improve their communities.

The collages created by the students, featuring symbols of Palestinian culture and history, showcase their efforts to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of assimilation pressures.

Musa brought the map of Palestine with a deed for him, stating: "...Palestine is not for sale and not for negotiation. It is the Holy Land that belongs to its owners." He attached the key to his grandfather's house as a symbol of the right of return.

The role of cultural heritage and identity in resisting assimilation pressures is critical (Arar 2017). Students' efforts to maintain their cultural roots amidst educational pursuits underscore the intertwined nature of aspirations, identity, and resistance.

This theme illustrates the students' unwavering commitment to their aspirations, underscoring the importance of resilience, cultural identity, and community engagement in their journey toward personal and professional fulfillment.

5.5. Emotional Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

The emotional landscape of Palestinian students reveals a complex interplay of challenges and coping mechanisms. This theme highlights the psychological toll of navigating academia as a minority and the strategies employed to manage stress and emotional labor. The students' narratives revealed the emotional challenges they faced in navigating their academic journey and the coping mechanisms they employed.

Manar, a young mother of two children, expressed her feelings in the college as: "Like in a whirlpool, getting lost, with several buildings, and many lecturers to remember...I need support from someone here". However, her strategy is to put a mask on her face and hide under it (as demonstrated in the picture she chose), and she continued: "Everything is fine with me".

Manar's feelings and her need for support but resorting to managing by herself highlights the emotional toll of adjusting to a new academic environment. Manar's feeling of being "Like in a whirlpool, getting lost", yet choosing to "put a mask on her face" illustrates the emotional labor involved in adapting to a challenging academic environment. This resonates with the concept of emotional regulation in coping strategies (Aldao et al. 2010), where individuals manage their emotional expressions in response to environmental demands.

Naheela's feeling of being "like a ticking bomb that is about to explode...and wants to scream enough...I am tired and dying to rest..." showcases the emotional exhaustion and stress experienced by these students. Naheela's experience echoes the findings of Smith et al. (2011), who highlighted the psychological and physiological impact of racial battle fatigue among African American students in predominantly White institutions.

Malik chose an image of crowded squares with cars: "...The movement of the vehicles can make one dizzy, but the main thing is to move forward in the right direction". When asked what the right direction is, he answered: "To get the degree and fly out of here". Malik's focus on moving forward despite the dizzying challenges resonates with the concept of grit (Duckworth et al. 2007), which emphasizes perseverance and passion for long-term goals in the face of obstacles.

Samar's coping mechanism of smiling, as she explained: "...because, despite all the difficulties, I am studying well and will soon get the certificate...and thus ensure my future", demonstrates the role of positive thinking and goal setting in managing emotional challenges. The significance of social support and positive thinking in managing emotional challenges has been emphasized in resilience research (Panter-Brick and Leckman 2013). The narratives of students such as Samar highlight the role of goal setting and optimism in fostering emotional well-being.

Amina, Dalal, and Tahani decided on positive drives to pursue their goals and obtain their certificate rather than dealing with Jews in college. Amina said: "I am the woman with a mask in the picture...the woman is mostly satisfied because she achieved more than

80% of what she wants...the academic degree...but many things around her are still unclear, such as the Jews”.

Tahani shared: “I feel like a woman knitting a garment...she is alone and not in contact with the Jews but producing, studying, and succeeding”.

Dalal chose a picture of young men sitting and waiting: “...this is how I feel at college, as a stranger and getting lost, and there is no clear address for me...I feel this is not my place...but I have to finish my studies and fly away”.

These narratives illustrate the coping strategies that minority students employ to navigate challenging academic environments, such as focusing on personal goals and achievements while minimizing interactions with the dominant group (Verkuyten et al. 2019). This theme underscores the emotional resilience of Palestinian students, showcasing the diverse coping mechanisms they utilize to navigate the academic and sociopolitical challenges they face. The students’ experiences align with research on the emotional labor and coping strategies of minority students in higher education (Buckley 2018; Verkuyten et al. 2019), highlighting the importance of understanding and supporting the psychological well-being of students from marginalized communities in academic settings.

5.6. Values and Identity Formation

The exploration of values and identity formation among Palestinian students offers insights into the foundational beliefs that guide their actions and aspirations. This theme examines the role of values in shaping the students’ personal and professional identities.

When the facilitator asked them to share the most important values for them as individuals and as educators, the Jerusalemite students found it difficult to answer immediately, as this area is not common in their daily lives. The facilitator asked them to sculpt the value in clay, where the value is a coin that can be shaped and placed in any form and location in the product they create. The group rejoiced and played for a few moments with the colors and texture of the material, and slowly, the students entered the task and started their creation.

Jamila opened the round with: “My value is justice, justice with women...(she sculpted an image of a woman with the coin placed in the heart)...For me, justice is the most important value because, in our society, women have not received and have not been granted their basic rights. Yet, she is the heart of society. She drives everything...and despite the frustration that women feel, they are still enveloped in optimism and hope that everything will change for the better, and that is why I chose the color green”.

Jamila continued: “I try to be fair and just with everyone...but there are people who do not deserve this treatment, and you are forced to be tough and rigid with them...I am in a relatively good situation compared to other women around me...because I insist on what I deserve...but many women work, study, and raise children...even here in our group in the workshop, they work hard to maintain peace at home. However, the decisions are in the hands of the man...the same man who is worth nothing without the woman who supports him”.

Jamila’s emphasis on justice, “justice with women”, and her artistic expression of this value reflect the critical role of gender and social justice in shaping the students’ values and aspirations. This story supports Social Identity Theory (Halevy et al. 2015) by showing how sacred values, social motives, and group-based moral emotions affect moral judgments and conduct in intergroup disputes. These elements contribute to the complicated dynamics of intergroup morality, where people’s decisions to aid or harm, approve policies, and react to violations are firmly rooted in their group identities and moral beliefs.

Lama, Nadine, and Amina also listened to and connected with every word Jamila said. In Amina’s eyes, “...the value of justice should be like a flag waving above the house, and justice paves the way, organizes relationships with others, and makes them more comfortable”.

The students’ reflections on their most precious values provided insights into their identity formation and the factors that shape their personal and professional aspirations.

Jamila's choice of the value of justice, particularly for women, and her observations highlight the role of gender in shaping the students' values and aspirations.

Musa's choice of the value of justice, focusing on the political aspect and social justice between nations, and his careful and hinted manner of speaking about it demonstrates the students' awareness of the complex political realities they navigate and the challenges of openly expressing their views.

Anan, Malik, and Amal's emphasis on the value of cooperation and partnership and the importance of educating children about this value showcases the students' aspirations to foster positive change in their communities through their roles as educators. The importance of cooperation, partnership, and honesty in community building and educational settings highlights the students' commitment to fostering positive change (Jakhelln and Postholm 2022). Their focus on these values underscores the potential for education to catalyze societal transformation.

Three female students chose the honesty value. Jumana said, "...I cannot stand dishonest people!" Explaining the dishonesty she experienced many times and got burned by, she shaped it as the head of a venomous snake that devours anyone who encounters it. According to her, she was raised in a good home to trust and be honest with others, and when she came to college, she found it a world teeming with dangerous snakes.

The theme of values and identity formation revealed the deeply held beliefs that motivate Palestinian students, emphasizing the importance of justice, cooperation, and honesty in their personal and professional lives (Jakhelln and Postholm 2022).

5.7. Collective Memory and National Identity

The "Collective Memory and National Identity" theme explores how shared experiences and cultural heritage influence students' sense of self and belonging. It delves into how memories of events, such as the Nakba and the two Intifadas, shape their consciousness and understanding of identity. The narratives shared by students emphasized the importance of memory in forming a shared identity amidst conflict and displacement.

The connection between memory and national identity among students sheds light on the historical and cultural roots of their sense of belonging. It examines how significant events and shared experiences impact their awareness and sense of self. The students' narratives of feeling Palestinian and the impact of significant events, such as the First and Second Intifada, on their national identity highlight the role of collective memory in shaping their sense of belonging and political consciousness.

Musa's recollection of being eight years old during Ariel Sharon's visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the worry and fear he experienced watching the events unfold on television demonstrates the impact of political events on children's emotional well-being and national identity formation. Musa recounted: "...I was eight years old when Ariel Sharon entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque...My father was late that Friday and did not return immediately after the prayer. I was very worried and saw all the events on television".

Musa's recollection of Ariel Sharon's visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque and its impact on his childhood illustrates the profound influence of political events on national identity formation. This narrative supports the theory of collective memory (Wang 2018), where shared memories of significant events contribute to a group's identity and cohesion.

Hayat and Omar's experiences of feeling Palestinian "since forever" and the intensification of this feeling during the Second Intifada (a few of the participants, the oldest, were also affected by the First Intifada), particularly with the arrest or killing of family members, highlight the role of personal and familial experiences in shaping national identity.

Lama stated: "...despite feeling Palestinian all my life, the Second Intifada greatly influenced me, especially when the soldiers arrested our neighbor, just for being Palestinian".

Omar has felt Palestinian forever, similar to Lama. However, the matter intensified on the first day of the Second Intifada when his cousin was killed and became the family's martyr. In addition, his uncles were security prisoners for many years, "...and then I understood and internalized the meaning of the homeland...Palestine", he added. The role

of personal and familial experiences in shaping national identity, as seen in the narratives of Lama and Omar, resonates with research on the impact of conflict and political violence on identity (Volkan 2001). These experiences underscore the interconnectedness of personal histories and collective identities.

Suha, with tears, confirmed that in the Second Intifada, her two brothers were arrested, "...they were boys aged 12 and 14...and then they took them...Mom cried a lot...why...why...because they are Palestinians".

Amal stated (sadly and angrily), "...I do not want to talk...because it reminds me of how our neighbor was killed on the roof by the soldiers in the First Intifada when we lived in the Al-Ram neighborhood". Amira spoke with tears, stating: "I was in shock...only four years old in the First Intifada, playing in the yard...and suddenly soldiers from every direction...and more pictures of masked boys, lots of stones...scared...I can die at any moment".

Hanadi, who was born during the First Intifada, finds it difficult to remember when she first felt her Palestinian belonging. She recounted: "I grew up in my grandfather's house in the Silwan neighborhood...everything was beautiful...we played with stones and also hide-and-seek...but in 1996, we were in Ramallah, and during the tunnel events, everything was under our house...tanks and soldiers and shooting from every direction...and when I cross the Qalandia checkpoint to Jerusalem...I only suffered humiliation and insults...why not...am I not Palestinian? Moreover, again in 2001, a soldier shooting injured my brother, and his friend was killed...and then you can understand what I feel inside along with my Palestinian-ness".

Yacoub spoke last in this round and provided a complex response: "...In the ID card...you are Palestinian...and you also live in Palestine...but until the age of 16, everything was normal...kind of...and then one day, a good friend of the family was killed...a young man almost my age...and since then, I am a different person...since the Second Intifada...I feel Palestinian through the harsh pictures broadcast on television...Muhammad al-Dura, the family from Gaza that was killed in an instant...and more and more...and then you go to congratulate the released prisoners...one who stayed for 27 years and the other for 34 years...and you cannot digest it...I was arrested for only one night, and then they released me...and I cannot forget a single moment of that night...and they were arrested for years upon years...and you do not really understand what it is...I am fighting with myself...in order not to open my mouth...and not let anything out of me...in front of the Jews, you keep silent". "Because you are afraid of the Jews?" the facilitator inquired. Yacoub continued: "...Fear of losing your ID card...losing your job with the Jews...and you...Moreover, you remain alone...we are few, and they (the Jews) are many".

Yacoub's complex reflections on being Palestinian, feeling like "a different person" since the Second Intifada, and the internal struggle of remaining silent in front of Jews for fear of losing his ID card or job demonstrate the challenges and contradictions of expressing Palestinian identity in a context of power imbalances and political oppression.

The importance of memory in shaping identity, as seen in the stories shared by the students, echoes Wang's (2018) research on collective memory. Wang suggests that individual memories are always influenced by contexts, and collective memory is vital in shaping and preserving group identities. For students, shared memories of events such as the Nakba and the First and Second Intifada serve as foundations for their sense of belonging and their understanding of what it means to be Palestinian. The experiences of these students also resonate with Frosh's (2020) concept of "post-memory." Post-memory refers to how the generation that follows relates to the collective and cultural traumas experienced by those who came before them.

When it comes to students, passing down memories of the Nakba and the Intifada through generations influences how they perceive their identity and connection to the broader Palestinian story, even if they did not directly live through those events.

Additionally, the stories shared by students highlighted the significance of symbols and traditions in upholding identity, as discussed by Wang (2018) about national identity.

The “Collective Memory and National Identity” theme explored how shared historical experiences and cultural legacy profoundly influence how Palestinian students view themselves and their sense of belonging. Through their narratives, the students showed how collective memory and cultural symbols act as tools for resilience and resistance amidst conflicts and displacement.

5.8. Embracing Identity—Being a Palestinian

The subtheme “Embracing Identity” delved into the diverse facets of what it means to be Palestinian, as reflected in the collages and stories created by students. This particular theme emphasized how cultural symbols, historical events, and personal and shared experiences shape the students’ perception of identity. The collages depicted the intricate and diverse aspects of being Palestinian, incorporating themes of resistance, resilience, and optimism amidst ongoing challenges of occupation and displacement.

When tasked with creating collages that reflect their interpretation of identity within the context of their lives in Jerusalem, the students’ artworks were truly remarkable. Below, we will showcase a sample image and discuss the recurring elements found in their creations.

For instance, Musa included a map of Palestine along with a deed in his collage; to him, Palestine is not something up for sale or negotiation but the sacred land that rightfully belongs to its inhabitants. He symbolically attached his grandfather’s house key to represent the right to return home. He ensured to carry photographs and personal accounts depicting life in his village under occupation.

The other images captured a checkpoint, the impoverished houses of today, the houses of the village, and a poignant moment of a soldier pointing a weapon at a mother holding her child. Additionally, the images portrayed homes that had been seized and taken over from their owners in favor of Jewish possession, with Israeli flags fluttering overhead. The religious aspect was also evident in all the students’ creations, with a featured depiction of the Al Aqsa Mosque. With its roots, the olive tree was highlighted as a symbol of homeland and prosperity in Palestine across all their works.

Several students incorporated other elements; for instance, Hala presented a snapshot of the Dabke dance, while Omar showcased Mahmoud Darwish alongside one of his renowned pieces. Jumana shared images of household tools used for baking bread and harvesting olives.

Traditional garments were also showcased. Each student included the keffiyeh as an emblematic representation of their Palestinian identity. Moreover, there were depictions of men’s attire and embroidered dresses worn by women. When it came to individuals, many of them associated the identity and image of Yasser Arafat as an aspect of their Palestinian identity.

To sum up, being Palestinian and from Jerusalem involves sharing stories intertwined with experiences of occupation, reflections on the Nakba, history, and recent events. Additionally, a majority of the students expressed a message and hopeful outlook for a future symbolized by the dove of peace or the olive branch.

The students’ artworks and narratives reflected the notion of “Sumud” (steadfastness), as explored in the writings of [Marie et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Ryan \(2015\)](#). Sumud signifies the tradition of persistence and resilience in the face of occupation, often manifested through cultural customs and a strong connection to their homeland. The significance placed on symbols such as the olive tree, embroidery, and keffiyeh in the students’ creations can be interpreted as demonstrations of Sumud, asserting their identity firmly rooted in defiance against displacement. Furthermore, the students’ works are in line with the idea of “resistance” introduced by [Said \(2012\)](#) and [Fanon \(1998\)](#). Cultural resistance involves using traditions and artistic expressions to defy control and affirm one’s identity against oppression. Poetry, art, and music in the students’ collages can be seen as acts of resistance, showcasing the vitality and strength of Palestinian culture amidst attempts to erase it.

Additionally, the students' narratives emphasized the role of shared memories in shaping identity, as Masalha (2012) and Jawad (2006) explored. By referencing events such as the Nakba, First Intifada, and Second Intifada in their collages and stories, the students underscored how collective memory contributes to a sense of identity and purpose among Palestinians, despite challenges such as division and displacement.

The theme "Being a Palestinian" demonstrated the facets of identity portrayed through the students' artworks and stories. Through their written expressions, they asserted resilience, resistance, and optimism in response to occupation and loss by drawing on cultural symbols, historical events, and shared memories to cultivate a sense of community and direction.

The theme of collective memory and national identity highlighted the centrality of historical and political events in shaping the identities of Palestinian students. It underscored the importance of acknowledging and integrating these collective experiences into the broader narrative of identity and belonging.

6. Discussion and Summary

This study explored the experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem navigating their educational journeys within an Israeli teacher training college. The findings revealed seven interconnected themes: navigation of cultural identity and belonging, resilience and coping mechanisms, minority stress and discrimination, aspirations and resistance, emotional challenges and coping strategies, values and identity formation, and collective memory and national identity. These themes highlighted the complex interplay between the students' personal aspirations, the challenges they face, and the broader sociopolitical context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).

The study's title, "Pursuing Dreams, Confronting Paradoxes", sums up the central conundrum that its conclusions point out. On the one hand, despite the many challenges they face, Palestinian students exhibit incredible resiliency and an unshakeable commitment to pursuing education and personal improvement (Marie et al. 2018; Theron 2016). They are unwavering in their will to surpass social norms and expectations, accomplish their goals, and positively impact their communities (Stromquist 2015). Their educational journeys are both an example of the transformational power of education and an act of disobedience (Ryan 2015; Said 2012; Jakhelln and Postholm 2022).

However, the study revealed the substantial ambiguities and difficulties these students have when enrolled in educational programs (Halabi 2016). It highlighted the stress, prejudice, and feelings of alienation that Palestinian students go through in these settings as they try to shape their identities and a sense of belonging in a system that frequently ignores or marginalizes their history (Arar 2017; Sa'di-Ibraheem 2021).

We created a framework for comprehending the social and cultural aspects of these students' experiences by utilizing theories such as Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), Resilience Theory (Mansfield et al. 2016), and Cross-Cultural Psychology (Berry 2005). These theories shed light on how Palestinian students deal with obstacles by using resilience and resistance tactics (Cassidy 2016; Moll Riquelme et al. 2022) and how power and inequality structures influence their interactions (Ladson-Billings 1998; Lewis et al. 2019). According to Mansfield et al. (2016) and Moll Riquelme et al. (2022), the research highlights how important it is for educational institutions to create environments that support minority students' resilience, well-being, and sense of inclusion in areas affected by violence. Additionally, it emphasizes how crucial it is to create support networks and interventions that are customized to the unique requirements of students in Israeli academic institutions while taking into account their political, social, and cultural backgrounds (Billig 2021; Makarova and Birman 2015).

The findings of this study align with previous research on the experiences of minority students in conflict-affected regions. The struggles with identity and belonging faced by Palestinian students in Israeli institutions echo the findings of Arar (2017) and Makkawi

(2004). The resilience and coping strategies employed by the students resonate with the concepts of Sumud (Marie et al. 2018) and everyday resistance (Ryan 2015). The experiences of minority stress and discrimination are consistent with the findings of Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2010) and Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008). The students' aspirations and resistance reflect the transformative potential of education in conflict-affected regions, as highlighted by Akesson (2015) and Pherali and Turner (2018). The emotional challenges and coping strategies identified in this study are similar to those reported by Hammad and Tribe (2020) and Veronese et al. (2017). The role of values and identity formation in shaping the students' experiences aligns with the findings of Arar and Haj-Yehia (2018) and Makkawi (2004). Finally, the influence of collective memory on national identity among Palestinian students is consistent with the works of Masalha (2012) and Jawad (2006).

This research added to these theories by offering insight into how Palestinian students navigate their educational journeys within Israeli educational institutions. The results validate the relevance of Resilience Theory, Social Identity Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Cross-Cultural Psychology in understanding the experiences of minority students in conflict-affected areas. The study emphasized the importance of considering the social and political contexts when applying these theories and advocates for an all-encompassing approach that acknowledges the intricate interactions between individual, social, and structural elements.

The outcomes of this research hold implications for organizations, policymakers, and professionals who work with minority students in conflict-affected regions. The study underscores the necessity of establishing fair environments that foster resilience, well-being, and a sense of belonging among minority students. This can be accomplished through creating tailored support systems, aware teaching methods, and programs that encourage communication and empathy between communities. Educational institutions should also prioritize recruiting and training faculty members and staff who can act as role models and mentors for minority students.

Policymakers need to focus on tackling the underlying inequalities and enacting policies that help minority students succeed academically and integrate into society in conflict-affected areas. The research also highlighted the role of education in bringing about change and promoting fairness in regions impacted by violence (Stromquist 2015). This study expanded our understanding of how education empowers minority students to pursue their aspirations, challenge existing structures, and contribute to their community by sharing their perspectives and experiences (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2018; Verkuyten et al. 2019).

In conclusion, this study provided an exploration of the experiences of students within Israeli educational settings. The findings highlighted the determination, creativity, and resilience displayed by these students as they navigate hurdles in their education amidst conflict and injustice. Moreover, the research underscored the importance of institutions addressing the challenges faced by minority students in conflict zones and fostering inclusive learning environments that support positive transformations. By delving into the perspectives and narratives of these students, this study contributes to our understanding of how education can drive change, promote equality, and uphold justice in these circumstances.

7. Limitations and Further Research

This study offers insights into the experiences of students at an Israeli higher education institution. It is important to recognize the focus and opportunities for research. The qualitative method, which delved into the stories of 58 participants from an education college over 3 years, allowed for an exploration of individual experiences. However, future studies could broaden their scope by including students from Israeli higher education institutions and regions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences in various academic settings.

Long-term research could reveal how educational experiences impact students' personal and professional paths. Comparative studies on student experiences in Palestinian universities could highlight the unique challenges and opportunities found in each setting.

Additionally, expanding the study to include a range of minority student groups in conflict zones may enhance our understanding of how educational experiences influence identity development and social integration.

Despite its limitations, this study's qualitative approach and comprehensive examination of student experiences lay a solid foundation for future research endeavors. They also play a pivotal role in fostering educational environments that champion the aspirations of all students in conflict-affected regions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The David Yellin Academic College of Education for the Protection of Human Participants in Research (approval date: 01/01/2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available to protect the privacy of the participants.

Acknowledgments: The author confirms that Claude, an AI-driven language tool, was utilized to aid in language refinement proofreading and enhance the manuscript's clarity. The initial text was composed in Hebrew before being translated into English.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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