



**FACULTY
OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES**

Lund University - Graduate School

Faculty of Social Sciences

Master of Science Programme in

Politics and Society of the Contemporary Middle East

Funding Palestinian Identity

How UNRWA's Donor-Based Funding System Affects Palestinian Identity Processes in
Jordanian Refugee Camp Schools

Candidate: Ludovico Bennicelli

Supervisor: Torsten Janson

Academic Year 2025/2026

Submission Date: 05.20.2026

Examination Date: 06.1/5.2026

Course Code: SIMZ41

Abstract

The study examines the influence exerted by the UNRWA funding system - largely based on voluntary contributions from donor states - on the negotiation of Palestinian identity within schools located in refugee camps in Jordan. By conducting interviews with eight former students of UNRWA schools in the camps, and integrating the resulting data with field observations and analyses of United Nations documents, the study seeks to identify the spaces within the school environment in which processes of Palestinian identity formation are articulated and negotiated.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and Stuart Hall's conception of diasporic identity, the study argues that the voluntary donor-based funding system influences Palestinian identity formation primarily within the sphere of formal curricular education. In this context, donor inspection visits, control over school textbooks, and institutionally legitimized representations appear to shape the discursive framing surrounding Palestine. By contrast, informal educational practices and extracurricular student networks emerge as spaces in which Palestinian identity is constructed, debated, and negotiated detached from hegemonic dynamics.

The study reflects on the relationship between economic power and education in humanitarian aid contexts and its implications for identity formation within diasporic communities, seeking to offer an original contribution to Middle Eastern Studies in the epistemological and analytical approaches to the Palestinian refugee identity.

Keywords: Palestinian Identity, Diasporic Identity, UNRWA Education, Refugee Pedagogy, Cultural hegemony.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the seven months I lived in Amman working at the headquarters of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), I regularly took part in field visits to the Agency's refugee camps, organized as part of the institutional activities to observe their context, engage with local interlocutors, and gain first-hand insight into the institutional (and social) practices shaping life in the camps. Among these visits, one to a girls' elementary school in Al-Wehdaf Camp (also known as Amman New Camp) was particularly striking to me, as the presence of Palestinian belonging in the school environment felt quiet yet palpable. Although no visible official references to the Occupied Territories appeared, in line with UN neutrality principles, subtle markers of Palestinian identity were nonetheless discernible in the children's brief self-presentations. This prompted me to reflect on the collective self-making processes of younger generations of Palestinians in diaspora - who, even in the most direct cases, have not lived in Palestine for three generations - and on the role that the school, as an assemblage composed of formal and informal practices, plays in shaping these processes. Moreover, having become familiar with the agency's funding mechanism - largely based on voluntary contributions - I began to wonder whether, to what extent, and in what ways such mechanisms could influence identity formation within the school environment.

1.1 Research Problem and Gap

The rationale for conducting this research lies in the layered complexity that students in UNRWA schools in Jordanian refugee camps embody with regard to the construction of Palestinian identity. The self-definition of diasporic populations, beyond being a highly topical issue within academia and beyond, is characterized by processes of entanglement with and differentiation from the host territory, making it a distinctive case within the social sciences due to its

inherently hybrid and dynamic nature. When applied to Palestinian communities displaced after 1948, the question becomes even more intricate, as it intersects with the condition of refugeehood, the practice of a culture whose freedom remains contested even in its historical homeland, life within an international humanitarian framework, and participation in a highly polarized political and media debate. All of this acquires further significance in the Jordanian context, where - unlike in Syria and Lebanon - the greater political and economic stability, combined with the fact that many Palestinians displaced from the West Bank hold Jordanian citizenship, has enabled a higher degree of integration into the local social fabric, to the extent that Palestinians constitute an important component of Jordan's own identity landscape. This layering of dimensions makes the case of Palestinian refugee students in Jordan particularly significant for the study of belonging construction dynamics, especially as these processes unfold within environments designed specifically for them and mediated by teachers and educators who are themselves Palestinian refugees.

These specificities have been addressed within the existing scholarship and occupy a considerable place across multiple disciplines. Palestinian youth in Jordanian refugee camps have been widely analysed, generating extensive debates on the sociological dynamics of these settings, the psychological dimensions affecting young people, and the role of schools as social institutions within them. Nevertheless, these three strands have rarely been brought into systematic relation with sociocultural formation processes within school communities; and when they have, it has typically occurred in relation to social integration with host societies or the preservation of Palestinian culture.

A key gap in the research, however, concerns the relationship between UNRWA's predominantly voluntary funding system and the processes of collective identity formation within Palestinian childhood. While the funding structures of UN refugee agencies have been widely discussed - primarily in relation to geopolitical dynamics or refugee governance - they have rarely been mobilized to analyse such dynamics within refugee camp schools.

In this sense, the title “Funding Palestinian Identity” should not be read literally, but rather as an attempt to signal that the focus of the analysis does not concern with a putative form of cultural hegemony exercised by the United Nations over assisted communities, but instead focuses on the influence that UNRWA’s funding system - necessarily based on voluntary contributions - may exert on children identity construction within schools. In this regard, the UN agency should not be understood as an instrument through which particular international actors directly exercise political control, but rather as an institution whose purported neutrality and humanitarian character are themselves constrained by a funding structure that ultimately tends to reproduce the political orientations of those who hold economic power.

This research seeks to address this gap by examining how, to what extent, and within which educational spaces the UNRWA funding system, largely based on voluntary contributions, influences identity transformations among Palestinian youth in Jordanian refugee camps.

1.2 Research Questions

In light of these considerations, which position this study as a systematic investigation of the interplay between funding systems and schooling structures (curricula, informal educational practices, and students’ free association) in relation to the Palestinian belonging, the analysis seeks to address the following research question:

- In what ways do Palestinian refugee children perceive the influence and limitations of UNRWA’s donor-funded educational system on their Palestinian identity processes in Jordanian refugee camp schools?

The three sub-questions will further guide the research and structure the findings:

- How do curricular and textbook representations of Palestine, within a funding-dependent educational system, shape Palestinian student identity formation?

- How do extracurricular practices, as shaped by the funding structures of UNRWA schools, function as spaces of Palestinian identity formation among students?
- How do informal peer networks within UNRWA school environments enable processes of identity negotiation and meaning-making among Palestinian youth?

1.3 Relevance of the research

The relevance of the research does not lie simply in adding another study on education in refugee camps, but rather in recentring attention on a structural mechanism - the funding system - as a factor influencing identity production, an aspect that has so far been addressed only indirectly or marginally in the literature. More specifically, it seeks to cover a thematic and a theoretical gap. As regards the former, the research identifies an empirical gap in the study of UNRWA schools, where scholarship has predominantly focused on issues of governance, efficiency, political relevance, educational outcomes, social marginality, and camp management. The underexplored aspect concerns the analysis of the funding system as an influencing force in students' collective formation, exercised through practices as control over textbooks or the authorization of commemorative and ceremonial practices. As regards the latter, the study moves from understanding funding as an "external" variable affecting only the quality of education to conceiving it as a structural dispositif shaping learning environments. This transition opens up a new analytical dimension concerning power relations between international humanitarian assistance and processes of self-definition in diasporic populations. In doing so, it implies a structural shift in perspective that has rarely been considered to date and which encourages reflection on the underlying power relations embedded in educational environments sustained by external donations.

The choice to adopt a theoretical framework grounded in an explicitly political tradition and informed by a post-Marxist worldview stems from the conviction

that academic research is also called upon to interrogate and potentially challenge the *status quo* rather than merely describe it. Furthermore, given the current geopolitical context and the competing narratives surrounding Palestine, approaching Palestinian identity through the lens of historical materialism is undertaken with the intention of giving the research a constructive rather than merely descriptive orientation. In a similar vein, the ethnographic method employed - understood as a qualitative approach based on fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews - responds to the same need and is grounded in the belief that research in social sciences should never be detached from empirical realities.

1.4 Disposition

The research starts with a contextual part, chapter 2, which provides an introduction to the history of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the formation of their subjectivity within and beyond the camps, as well as an overview of education and the UNRWA funding system. This background is intended to provide the basis for situating the empirical data within its broader interpretative context. Chapter 3 presents the existing literature on the topic, structured around three main strands: (a) sociological, psychological, and educational studies on schooling in refugee camps; (b) studies on identity formation among Palestinian youth in the diaspora; and (c) analyses of the UNRWA funding system. Chapter 4 introduces the theoretical framework of the study, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", and Stuart Hall's theories of diasporic identity. Chapter 5 outlines the research methodology, including the methods employed (interviews, observations, and qualitative textual analysis), the selection of participants and research setting, sample size, data analysis procedures, the researcher's positionality, as well as ethical considerations and method limitations. Chapter 6 presents the findings and develops their analysis. Chapter 7 presents the conclusions, highlighting the study's contribution, its boundaries, and potential directions for future scholarship.

The thesis concludes with a bibliography and an appendix containing respondents' profiles and the interview guide.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Palestinian refugees in Jordan

The UN General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 in response to the 750,000 (UNRWA, n.d.) Palestinian refugees resulting from the Nakba of 1948, with the mandate to provide immediate relief to refugees defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict” (UNRWA, n.d.). Initially conceived as a short-term institution, UNRWA has gradually expanded its scope of action, to the point that, even today it provides education, health care, social services, micro-credit loans, and emergency aid to 5.9 million Palestinian refugees (UNRWA, 2026) across its five fields of operation: Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Jordan.

The latter currently hosts 2.39 million registered Palestinian refugees (UNRWA, 2026), 18% of whom reside in the ten UNRWA-administered camps: Amman New Camp, Baqa'a Camp, Husn Camp, Irbid Camp, Jabal el-Hussein Camp, Jerash Camp, Marka Camp, Souf Camp, Talbieh Camp and Zarqa Camp. The remainder live either outside the camps or in the “informal” camps, like Prince Hasan and Madaba camps.¹

The majority of these refugees were granted Jordanian citizenship under a 1950 law, enacted while the West Bank and East Jerusalem were under Jordanian administration (Alduraiddi et al., 2025). By contrast, many Palestinians displaced by the Six-Day War in 1967 - predominantly from the Gaza Strip - do not hold the same Jordanian citizenship status (Abu-Odeh, 1999).

Thanks to these conditions, Jordan is commonly regarded as the only Arab state to have integrated the Palestinian refugees of 1948, who today constitute approximately 40% of the population (Alduraiddi et al., 2025). Despite this formal legal integration, and although “citizenship is a major step towards the

¹ They are commonly defined as “camps”, though UNRWA does not.

comprehensive integration of long-term refugees” (Munch, 2001), Palestinians are *de facto* a minority in the political system (Brand, 1988) and often referred to as “guests, with guests' rights” (Al-Hamarneh, 2004).

Today, scholarly debate continues regarding the extent to which Palestinians enjoy full integration, deriving from “the self-contradictory ambiguity of being both Palestinian refugees and Jordanian citizens” (Achilli, 2014) and a “majority-minority” (Al-Hamarneh, 2004) within society.

The arenas in which Jordanian and Palestinian identities intersect remain the subject of considerable debate, rendering the Jordanian society and refugee camps a particularly salient case study.

2.2 Palestinian Contested Identity in Jordan

This large influx of Palestinian refugees into Jordan also led to the arrival of the *fedayeen* (guerrilla groups engaged in Palestinian resistance) on Jordanian territory. Although they were initially welcomed without significant resistance (Massad, 2001), they gradually became less tolerated by the Hashemite government as they began to be perceived as a threat to Jordan’s internal stability. On the one hand, they engaged in persistent tensions with neighboring Israel - most notably the Battle of Karameh in 1968²; on the other, they established themselves as an increasingly autonomous entity, creating military, political, and social institutions within the refugee camps and transforming them into effective recruitment bases for new fighters (Fruchter-Ronen, 2008).

These tensions ultimately culminated in the outbreak of a civil war in 1970, known as “Black September” - a term used by Jordanians in stark contrast to the Palestinian expression “White September.” The conflict resulted in the expulsion of the guerrilla groups from Jordanian territory to Lebanon and the subsequent “exclusion of the Palestinians from domestic politics” (Al-Hamarneh, 2004).

²This battle became the object of a sustained dispute between Jordanians and Palestinians regarding which side had contributed more decisively to the victory against Israel. As Fruchter-Ronen (2008) argues, it evolved into a political myth that helped crystallize distinct Jordanian and Palestinian national identities.

Moreover, the scale of violence employed by the Jordanian army delegitimized, in the eyes of much of the Arab world, the notion of a Jordanian national belonging inclusive of a Palestinian component, while simultaneously consolidating the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the primary bearer of a distinct Palestinian self-understanding (Lynch, 1999).

Thus, although the majority of Palestinians remained largely aloof from direct involvement in the fighting (Brand, 1995), the civil war established a delicate precedent in the formation of Palestinian socio-cultural positioning in Jordan and its interaction with that of East Bank Jordanians, oscillating between moments of rupture and assimilation.

2.2.1 Identitarian Palestinian Elements

Such dynamics are remarkably evident in the socio-cultural and symbolic transformations of post-civil war Jordan. Among these:

(a) linguistic variations such as the pronunciation of the Arabic letter qāf (either as a glottal stop or as /g/), which, in the aftermath of the civil war, came to function as an identitarian marker distinguishing Jordanians from Palestinians (Al-Wer 2007)³.

(b) The institutionalization of identity-oriented social events. An example is the 1971 “Jordanian Folk Fashion Show” - created “in an attempt to represent both the banks” (Massad, 2001) - that might suggest the emergence of a shared national identity. By contrast, the organization of the 1981 Palestine Folklore Day was cancelled on the grounds that it posed a threat to the integrity of Jordanian national belonging (Brand, 1988).

(c) Duality between Palestinian and Jordanian fashion, notably represented by the colors of the Jordanian *shmagh* (red and white) and the Palestinian *keffiyeh* (black

³ Although pronunciation is also shaped by factors such as gender and regional background (e.g., urban vs. rural, southern vs. northern) (Massad, 2001).

and white), which began to serve as markers of national pride, implicitly separating the two groups.⁴

(d) Football matches between clubs historically linked to the Hashemite kingdom (such as Al-Faysaly) and those based in Palestinian refugee camps (such as Al-Wehdat), which often become outlets for unresolved tensions between Jordanians and Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin. The most remarkable episode happened in 2010, when the city derby witnessed clashes, leaving approximately 250 people injured, as both supporter groups chanted slogans dating back to Black September⁵.

(e) The presence of refugee camps, which, since the arrival of the *fedayeen*, came to be perceived as a “state within a state” (Fruchter-Ronen, 2008). Notably, Wehdat Camp came to be known by the epithet “the Republic of Palestine” (Achilli, 2014). Moreover, camps provided refugees with a new shared spatial identity, acquiring an almost mythical character, and giving rise to a “new Palestinian”: the *mukhayyamji* (camp resident), a term that came to denote not only geographical belonging but also a distinct socio-political identity shaped by life in the camps (Al-Hamarneh, 2004). The expression “*Filastini min al-mukhayyam*” (“Palestinian from a camp”) gradually came to function as a powerful - almost magical - term (Yusif, 1991), reflecting the emergence of an unstable yet deeply rooted and distinct Palestinian identity.

(f) Education. It is often regarded as a key catalyst in the formation of Palestinian identity, as well as a driver of differentiation between Palestinian diaspora communities and host states. According to Naser, by providing “nine years of free education for boys and girls, administered by an agency bearing the word ‘Palestine’ in its letterhead” (1996), schools effectively reinforce students’ Palestinian national consciousness.

As shown, historical and political developments between Jordanians and Palestinians have strongly shaped the emergence of a Palestinian collective

⁴ Yet again, the situation was not that strictly defined, as Joseph Massad notes: “those [Palestinians] seeking assimilation wore the red-and-white shmagh” (2001).

⁵ The match was played shortly after the introduction of the so-called “Lieberman Plan” and subsequent measures by the Jordanian government revoking thousands of Palestinians’ citizenships.

consciousness in Jordan, alternating between phases of integration and rejection. Regarding the former, Betty Anderson (2005) identifies Palestinian identity as one of the three “competing national identities” during the early formation of Jordan (alongside Arab and Hashemite identities), while Laurie Brand describes “the unity of the two banks and the two peoples” as a feature of Jordanian society (1995). Moreover, the contested case of Adnan Abu Odeh, a Jordanian Palestinian dismissed from his position as royal advisor for publishing a book promoting a hybrid Jordanian-Palestinian belonging⁶, sparked a very contested discussion in 1999 (Nanes, 2010). Regarding the latter, a school of Jordanian scholars minimizes the mutual contamination of the two identities. Among them, Nahid Hattar went so far as to argue that the Palestinians’ presence in Jordan is a triumph for Zionism and that Jordanizing the Palestinians means the Judaization of Palestine, asserting that “the Jordanian, precisely, specifically, and exclusively, is the non-Palestinian” (Hattar, 1995 in Massad, 2001); also, Al-Hamarneh considers “the opposition to the Jordanization of Palestinian refugees” (2004) one of the layers of Palestinian identity formation processes.

2.3 Education and Funding Systems

2.3.1. UNRWA and Education

The education of Palestinian refugee children in Jordan is delivered through UNRWA structures, comprising 169 schools (out of 706) and serving approximately 185,000 students out of a total of 550,000 (UNRWA, n.d.). For 76 years, the agency has been committed to ensuring “quality education that helps young Palestine refugees understand the world in which they live and promotes values of tolerance, cultural identity, and gender equality”. Within its core program, specific objectives related to the formation of Palestinian collective

⁶ c.f. Abu Odeh, A. (1999) *Jordanians, Palestinians, & the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process*, United States Institute of Peace Press.

consciousness are also explicitly outlined, including encouraging students to “become proud of their Palestinian identity” (UNRWA, n.d.). To achieve these goals, the agency relies on a range of strategic partnerships, primarily with other international organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF - the latter being particularly involved in psychological support - as well as with external actors including small- and medium-sized NGOs and the British Council (UNRWA, n.d.).

Despite these efforts, the agency’s funding system remains a central issue in its educational operations, given its overwhelmingly voluntary nature, which influences its operational independence. According to available data, as of 2023 UNRWA was funded for only 4% by the United Nations’ general budget and approximately 1.3% by non-state actors. The remaining roughly 95% comes from state actors - primarily European and North American countries - raising new concerns regarding the orientation of educational provision.

2.3.2 Voluntary Donor Funding Model

The issue of political interests underlying UNRWA’s funding has clear historical precedents and is rooted in some structural features of its financing structure. With regard to the former, quantitative evidence can be found in reports from recent years, which show that this asymmetric system has remained relatively stable over time, largely due to compensatory dynamics among donor countries. In particular, states have tended to increase their contributions when other donors - typically associated with opposing geopolitical alignments - have withdrawn. A notable example is the decline in U.S. funding between 2016 and 2020, which was offset by increased contributions from China and Gulf countries (Rausin et al. 2024). Another case concerns the corresponding decrease in funding from several key European donor states following shifts in domestic politics and the electoral success of radical-right parties between 2015 and 2020. As for the latter, two structural features of the funding system further stress the asymmetry between donors and the agency: so-called “earmarking” and the year-to-year basis of

donations. The first one refers to a funding mechanism whereby donors allocate their contributions not to the agency as a whole, but to specific projects or regions of operation; such funds account for approximately 50% of UNRWA's budget. The second one defines contributions on an annual basis, thereby allowing for their potential interruption at any given moment, depending either on the nature of the operations funded or on changes in domestic and international political contexts.

These two elements contribute to the inherently precarious nature of UNRWA's funding and constrain its operational autonomy in relation to the United Nations principles, with potential consequences on their implementation within the educational system as well. On the one hand, the fact that the majority of funding derives from sovereign states creates the possibility that shifts toward more illiberal domestic political orientations among donor countries may lead to the instrumentalization of UNRWA in pursuit of geopolitical interests. On the other, the agency becomes increasingly vulnerable in terms of its institutional agency and political independence.

This highly asymmetric configuration gives rise to an ontological and moral dilemma that approaches the form of a trade-off for the agency: preserving funding or preserving its liberal foundations. Given the political nature of these financial flows - and considering that more than half of UNRWA's budget is allocated to education - this, in turn, raises important questions regarding the nature of the education provided, particularly in relation to the construction of Palestinian identity. A representation of Palestine in school curricula shaped by donor states' directives, potentially in pursuit of their own political interests, may indeed influence the identity formation of Palestinian refugees.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review is to situate this research within the broader body of scholarship on education in Palestinian refugee camps, with particular attention to processes of identity formation and funding systems within this context. Since the 1970s, a research tradition - largely associated with refugee studies, though not exclusively - has sought to analyse the dynamics within schools and, more broadly, the experiences of refugee children in camp settings. While the study of schools in UNRWA refugee camps has largely focused on sociological, psychological, and historical/curriculum-based aspects, the analysis of children formation processes within such contexts has often been linked either to questions of integration with host countries or to examinations of educational structures from a pedagogical perspective. Similarly, the academic literature addressing the influence of UNRWA's funding system has predominantly concentrated on the agency's more explicitly political dimensions or on broader issues related to refugee governance. By contrast, the relationship between UNRWA's voluntary, donation-based funding system and the formation of collective identity among Palestinian children in the camps remains relatively underexplored, particularly when examined through theoretical frameworks concerned with power relations and hegemonic dynamics. This narrative literature review is organised around three strands of scholarship: the educational experience in refugee camps; Palestinian identity formation within UNRWA schools; and the agency's funding system.

3.1 Schooling in Refugee Camps

The school system of UNRWA has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, generally structured around three main strands: sociological, psychological, and historical/curriculum-based approaches.

3.1.1 Sociological Approaches in Young Refugee Contexts

UNRWA schools have frequently been examined in relation to the broader sociological dynamics of refugee camps. Among these, processes of social exclusion constitute the most extensively developed strand (Bilagher, 2006; Ugland, 2003; Ahmad & Smetana, 2021). Within this field, scholars have explored specific issues such as school dropout rates (Al-Hroub, 2014; Beqai, 2025), gender dynamics (Gren, 2017; Attaallah, 2019; Ghrayeb et al., 2016), and suicidal tendencies among youth (Itani et al., 2017). Other contributions have conceptualized schools as social spaces within the camps. For instance, Dawn Chatty (2009) highlights the role of UNRWA programs in fostering environments where young refugees can socialize and participate in community life. Similarly, more recent studies (El-Ziakka & Diab, 2023; Hamdan, 2024; Salti et al., 2021) examine the spatial dimension of refugee camps, identifying schools as catalysts for broader social processes. Conversely, some scholars have shifted attention away from the communal dimension toward the family sphere. In this perspective, the relationship between families and schools is analyzed in terms of its impact on children's well-being, as well as on phenomena such as violence and social vulnerability (Chatty & Mundt, 2005; Shahrour & Bataineh, 2025; Kortam, 2018). Overall, the sociological analysis of schooling in refugee camps encompasses a wide range of interconnected phenomena and has developed through sustained scholarly dialogue, contributing to the consolidation of this field of research. Nevertheless, a clear sociological research on identity processes of young Palestinians doesn't feature in this strand; this study seeks to position in a space that also includes sociological factors.

3.1.2 Psychological Approaches in Young Refugee Contexts

Dawn Chatty noted in "Theoretical and Methodological Challenges of Studying Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa" (2005) that the vast majority of scholarship on refugee youth is informed by psychological and

psychiatric perspectives. Within this body of research, education often emerges as a key mediating factor.

The most prominent focus concerns the impact of war and the development of post-traumatic disorders. Many scholars analyze how contextual factors - such as school systems, family environments, and broader socio-political conditions - shape children's psychological well-being (Ahmad & Smetana, 2021; Gredebäck et al., 2023; Frounfelker et al., 2020; Thabet & Vostanis, 2000; Schöler et al., 2021). Other studies adopt more participatory approaches. For example, Almahmoud et al. (2026) argue that trauma-informed educational practices contribute to the development of coping mechanisms among affected children. Earlier work by Punamäki & Suleiman (1990) examines children's coping strategies, suggesting that increased exposure to conflict fosters more intentional cognitive and emotional responses. Beyond trauma-centered perspectives, psychological research has also addressed community-related issues, such as substance use. Studies by Sanduka et al. (2025), Snoubar et al. (2023), and Wazaify et al. (2020) investigate the impact of tobacco and drugs on young refugees, including the effects of growing up in households where substance use is prevalent.

Taken together, this body of scholarship generally reveals a tendency to individualize, pathologize, and medicalize the stress associated with refugee life and seldom leave room for psychological dimensions of the identity peculiar status of Palestinian refugees. Moreover, this body of scholarship has the merit of attributing significant weight to the "refugee" dimension of young Palestinian students in the camps. Nevertheless, this dimension is predominantly examined through a medicalized lens. By contrast, this study seeks to approach the notion of "refugee" not only in terms of the psychosocial repercussions stemming from a background of displacement and conflict, but also from an identity-based perspective partially deriving from such a background.

3.1.3 Curricula and Policy-Based Approaches in Young Refugee Contexts

A third important strand of scholarship focuses on curricula and educational policies in refugee camp schools, often addressing broader questions related to refugee conditions and integration into host societies. Early contributions, such as Hoeg Larsen (1961), questioned the suitability of curricular structures in refugee contexts, particularly highlighting the inadequacy of standard assessment tools (e.g., tests and examinations) in addressing the specific needs of refugee children. Subsequent research has expanded this line of inquiry: some studies examine specific subjects, such as English language or physical education (Asali, 2022; Shahrour & Bataineh, 2025), while others address broader curricular issues, including processes of curricular decolonisation (Albhaisi, 2021; El Masri, 2024) and the quality and structure of curricula (Fuddah, 2016; Corrigan, 2005).

More recent analyses have concentrated on curriculum reforms and policy developments within UNRWA, including program evaluations and institutional reviews (Kelsey, 2023; Al Kilani, 2025; Pinto, 2014, Pantazi, 2026). This body of research on educational programs is largely oriented toward the efficiency of the school system, often for politico-emancipatory purposes. However, this dimension has predominantly been examined in relation to curriculum reviews, pedagogical approaches, and broader learning frameworks. It has been rarely connected to underlying hegemonic dynamics. By contrast, these dynamics are typically analysed with reference to the demands of Israel, host states, or the international community, while a systematic analysis of the role of voluntary funding remains largely underexplored. As observed, the study of the educational system of UNRWA in refugee camps has often been linked to sociological, psychological, or strictly educational phenomena. Processes of national identification, by contrast, remain significantly underexplored, although they are not entirely absent from the existing scholarship.

3.2 Identity Processes in UNRWA schools

With regard to the study of identity formation processes in UNRWA schools, the potentially influential impact of the agency's funding system remains almost entirely absent from the existing scholarship. Instead, research in this area has predominantly focused either on processes of integration within host countries or on the educational spaces where social belonging is constructed.

3.2.1 Identity Integration in Host Countries

The first strand can be traced back to the mid-1970s. In a context in which debates surrounding the liberation of Palestine were central to political discourse, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod argued that the imposition of host-country curricula functioned as a mechanism for the creation of "stable and ongoing societies" (1973) within host states. More recent studies continue to emphasize processes of cultural integration between Palestinians and host societies (Beydoun et al. 2021, Beuregard et al. 2021, El Masri 2024, Shuayb 2021). For example, Sean Corrigan (2025) points to dynamics of "long-term inclusion" facilitated by school curricula, while Yafa El Masri (2024) argues that it is precisely state-imposed curricula that contribute to the consolidation of national identities within host countries. Conversely, other studies highlight the persistence of a distinct Palestinian culture (Banat, 2018; Fincham, 2012; Shabaneh, 2012; van Hemst, 2012). In this regard, van Hemst (2012) and Banat et al. (2018) stress the centrality of key historical events in school curricula - most notably the Nakba - in shaping collective and distinctive forms of belonging; similarly, Shabaneh (2011) identifies schools as sites for the production and reproduction of "Palestinian nationalism."

3.2.2 School Practices and Palestinian Identity

A second strand of scholarship emphasizes the role of educational practices in fostering Palestinian identity. Irfan (2018), for instance, argues that informal practices within school communities enable students to create spaces of resistance

against educational structures imposed by international actors. Similarly, Al-Hamarneh (2004) suggests that the existence of a school system tailored to a specific ethnic group may also reinforce social divisions. From a pedagogical perspective, Hamed (2023) explores the tension between the preservation of Palestinian cultural heritage and the adoption of new educational approaches typical of the twenty-first century, while Farah (2009) addresses similar issues from the standpoint of teachers. Other scholars including Banat (2017), M'lili (2024), Perez (2018) and Ryseck & Johannsen (2019) approach the topic from cultural, symbolic, and humanitarian perspectives, emphasizing the role that derives primarily from tradition rather than from political dynamics or the lived experience of being a refugee.

Across both strands, education is consistently linked to the identity formation processes of Palestinian children, but remains confined within political, social or cultural constraints. Conversely, the relationship between these processes and the funding structures of UNRWA remains largely underexplored within the existing literature and this study seeks to be positioned in that space.

3.3 UNRWA Funding Structures

The analysis of UNRWA funding constitutes one of the central dimensions through which the agency has been examined in the scholarly literature. The vast majority of academic work has focused on how the nature of these funds shapes geopolitical dynamics or affects the agency's operational efficiency. By contrast, an approach that considers the impact of funding structures on Palestinian sociocultural negotiation remains comparatively underexplored within the field.

3.3.1 The Influence of Funds on Politics

Several scholars have emphasized the importance of UNRWA funding in shaping political contexts (Aiazzi, 2015; Al-Husseini, 2000; Bocco, 2010; Hilal, 2009; Irfan, 2018; Khouri, 2009; Takkenberg 2007). In particular, scholars such as Rami

Khouri (2009) have stressed the exclusion of refugees under UNRWA assistance from the Palestinian national debate, while Jalal Al-Husseini (2000) has focused on their role in broader nation-building processes. This line of inquiry, while keeping attention to the relation between funding and Palestinian national territory, still lacks a focused analysis on national belonging processes and its shifting dynamics deriving from the uncertain nature of funds. At the same time, other authors have examined the UNRWA funding system in relation to broader geopolitical dynamics. This body of literature includes analyses of peace settlements and durable arrangements for Palestinian refugees (Aiazzi, 2015; Hilal, 2009; Takkenberg, 2007). It also encompasses historical perspectives that explore how the precarious nature of funding has shaped the long-term political trajectories of Palestinian refugees over time (Bocco, 2010; Irfan, 2018). Overall, this strand of scholarship does not seek to connect the precariousness and oriented nature of the funding system to its potential influence on Palestinian identity formation. Rather, it tends to draw conclusions centered on political outcomes or on broader processes of peacebuilding and refugee governance.

3.3.2. The Impact of the Funding System on UNRWA Operations

Research on the funding system of UNRWA has also been widely connected to the agency's operational efficiency, particularly in relation to its capacity to deliver support and humanitarian aid to assisted communities (Abu-Laban, 2016; Al-Husseini, 2010; Berg et al. 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Hamash, 2025; Rausin et al. 2024). Some of these studies place particular emphasis on how funding cuts affect the efficiency of operations, especially in light of recent reductions and future prospects (Al-Husseini, 2010; Berg et al. 2022; Rausin et al. 2025). Others have linked funding cuts to internal dynamics within the agency, such as their impact on refugee governance (Rausin et al. 2024) or even on UNRWA staff (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018).

Overall, however, within analyses of funding there is limited reflection on the hegemonic implications that such financial structures may exert on education and

on the construction of Palestinian self-understanding within schools - an analytical gap where this research seeks to position itself.

3.4 Positioning of the Study

As observed in this section, the issue of schools and Palestinian refugee youth communities is widely present within the scholarship. However, the analysis of UNRWA structures in this context is most often limited to sociological interpretations focused on school-related social phenomena (such as dropouts, widespread violence, or gender norms), with relatively little attention to the broader social significance of identity-making processes within these communities. Similarly, the psychological approach - which arguably constitutes the dominant discipline in the study of young refugees in camps - has largely been characterized by pathologizing and medicalized frameworks derived from the experience of being a young refugee. In this regard, the experience of refugeeeness as a psychologically formative dimension in the construction of Palestinian collective identity remains significantly underexplored and would merit greater scholarly attention. Moreover, the study of curricula and teaching structures is also predominantly oriented toward historical or pedagogical approaches, leaving limited space for an analysis of how their nature shapes the identity processes of young people. This research positions itself at the intersection of these three strands, conceptualizing children formation as a sociological, psychological, and educational phenomenon, and examining the interplay between these dimensions in shaping identity construction. Identity, in this sense, is often under-theorized in the literature and tends instead to be addressed through broader social phenomena such as refugee integration into host societies or the tension between Palestinian and host identities. By contrast, this study seeks to link processes of cultural positioning to the precarious nature of the funding system governing UNRWA operations - an approach that is rarely adopted in the existing scholarship, where funding is typically analyzed through purely political perspectives or within frameworks of refugee governance. By situating the context of schools in refugee

camps in relation to both subject formation and the funding system, this research seeks to address a significant gap within Middle Eastern Studies while contributing to broader academic debates through theoretical frameworks concerned with power dynamics in humanitarian schooling contexts.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Having situated the research within the broader academic landscape, the following section locates it within the specific theoretical traditions that will serve as the analytical lens for the interpretation of the data.

To analyze how the United Nations funding system influences Palestinian sociocultural negotiation in the refugee camps of Jordan, this research is structured around three core cornerstones embedded in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire and Stuart Hall. By adopting an approach grounded in political philosophy, critical pedagogy, and cultural studies, it mainly draws on:

- the theoretical reflections of Antonio Gramsci as the foundational framework through which the study examines the refugee camp school system in relation to Palestinian identity dynamics, with particular attention to the hegemonic influence exercised through its funding system.
- The pedagogical reflections of Paulo Freire to assess the extent to which the actual educational practices are oriented toward a pedagogical method that accounts for Palestinian identity processes;
- The conceptual framework developed by Stuart Hall in his reflections on diasporic identities, mobilized in this study to examine the nature of Palestinian collective understandings, which constitute the primary analytical object of the research.

4.1 A Gramscian Perspective on the School System

The research draws upon a number of reflections developed by Antonio Gramsci over the course of his life, and later compiled in the Prison Notebooks, concerning education and school systems. These speculations encompass both philosophical considerations on the role of schooling and theoretical observations aimed at improving educational structures through a lens of power dynamics and social transformation.

Gramsci's broader approach may be situated within the framework of "cultural hegemony". As one of the pioneers who expanded Marxist critique beyond socio-economic dimensions into the cultural sphere, his central premise is that education is never neutral. For Gramsci, schooling corresponds to the dominant class's need to generate spontaneous consent among students in order to secure the continuity of a given *status quo*. Consequently, educational systems - understood as curricula, textbooks, and the broader teaching apparatus - embody a specific social and cultural orientation. Rather than being neutral, they generate tensions between the form of culture and society they represent and those embodied by students. It is precisely the ultimate aim of aligning students' education with the education providers' culture that defines the traditional role of the school as either "ruling or subordinating" (1999). Within UNRWA camps, where education is entrusted to extra-national systems and largely financed by Western donors, the dissonance between providers and recipients of education emerges with particular relevance. This tension is especially visible in the conflict between students' socio-familial backgrounds and both the curricula and the authority profiles promoted by the international context of the agency. Another crucial Gramscian insight concerns the inability of schools to meaningfully engage with the historical contingencies that produced that given educational structure. In this case, the historical and political trajectory that gave rise to the establishment of UNRWA schools in Jordan is not always reflected in their curricula. Instead, in adherence to host counties' and donors' directives, these curricula often appear ahistorical, disconnected from the lived realities and socio-familial backgrounds of the students they are designed to serve.

The last dimension considered in the study is the importance that Gramsci attributes to tradition. According to the Italian thinker, the teaching of what may be termed "folkloristic" notions (1999) is regarded as essential in the early years of schooling, as it forms the basis for the collectivization of the social type, upon which students later build in the development of their intellectual frameworks. This research seeks thus to examine how, in a similar manner to the study of Latin in Italian schools - a dead language which nevertheless "continually comes to life

again in examples and in stories” (1999) - the teaching of Palestinian tradition in early schooling within UNRWA institutions may generate a shared symbolic ground for the emergence of Palestinian identity. For Gramsci, this initial phase of education constitutes the major challenge for schools, in ensuring that the teaching of tradition remains as non-dogmatic as possible, in compliance with what he defines as the “active school”. Such an approach is necessary in order to lay the foundations for the “creative school”, the later stage of the educational journey in which students, together with their teachers and peers, actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive it. Within this framework, the transmission of tradition is not conceived as an end in itself, but rather as the medium through which students may situate and make sense of their own Palestinian self in relation to broader international and externally funded structures. This process is enabled through the implementation of a collective form of schooling, enacted in “seminars, in libraries, in experimental laboratories” (1999), which fosters shared spaces of intellectual and social formation.

4.2 Education Through Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed

In a more explicitly pedagogical sense - one that privileges the totality of everyday practices over the formal structures of the official school system- the ideas advanced by Paulo Freire in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1969) provide an additional theoretical foundation for this research.

Freire’s central argument is that schooling constitutes the primary instrument through which oppressed peoples may strive toward their “humanization”. This term - defined as “the only man’s vocation” (1969) - recurs throughout the Brazilian pedagogue’s writings and refers to the imperative that both individuals and communities be recognized as fully human through the attainment of autonomy. Given its widespread circulation across multiple academic fields, and more broadly in discussions of Palestinian subjectivities, “humanization” acquires particular salience in the context under consideration: education in diaspora. For Freire, at the core of an instruction which promotes this process lies the opposition

between two antithetical approaches to education. On the one hand stands what Freire terms “banking education”, an approach that conceives of the child as a *tabula rasa*, onto which knowledge is unilaterally deposited from external sources. Such a model presupposes relations of power in which those who provide education are implicitly considered more knowledgeable than those who receive it. Education thus becomes an unidirectional transfer, granted as a “gift” to the student. This, in turn, implies the existence of a student “in the world and not with the world” (1969), establishing a pedagogical space in which the teacher exercises authority by determining which forms of knowledge the student are legitimized to internalize. When applied to international contexts funded by external sovereign states, in which institutional authority does not necessarily correspond to the cultural realities of the assisted communities - as may be the case in Jordanian refugee camps - this model risks fossilizing asymmetrical power relations within the educational process. In such circumstances, education may devolve into what Freire defines as “cultural invasion.” This danger is particularly acute in humanitarian educational settings such as those administered by the United Nations, where the influence of third-party actors may result in the delivery of an education that is profoundly humanitarian in rhetoric, yet insufficiently human in practice. Closely connected to humanitarian conceptions of education is the broader universe of practices that fail to emancipate assisted communities and which Freire identifies under the notion of “false generosity.” Such practices generate an unilateral education carried out *for* rather than *with* the people it purports to serve. To prevent this, Freire argues that those genuinely committed to educating communities should engage in a continuous process of self-examination. Applied to the Palestinian context in Jordanian refugee camps, the analysis of educational practices - and of the extent to which they reproduce “banking” models - becomes crucial to understanding processes of identity formation, as these practices may ultimately reflect the “false generosity” and “cultural invasion” embedded in such forms of externally financed education. To counter the banking model of education, Freire proposes an alternative pedagogical method called “problem-posing education”. This model does not rely

on the transmission of fixed truths through a top-down mechanism; rather, it understands knowledge as a collective process constructed through dialogical interaction. By definition, such interactions are symmetrical and grounded in shared engagement among equals in order to make sense of the surrounding reality. This process is what Freire calls the “naming” of the world, and it cannot be grounded in hierarchical or coercive relations, insofar as the aim of would-be oppressors is precisely to inhibit this act of naming, or to impose partial and biased forms of signification. Naming the world is therefore, by definition, an *inter pares* process, unfolding among students in a dialogical rather than transmissive manner. Yet the creative force of education does not reside solely in the subjects of dialogue, but also in the nature of their relationships. To be clear, *inter pares* does not refer exclusively to interactions among students, but also to the student-teacher relationship when it is grounded in mutual exchange. Such a relation is no longer structured around the binary of “teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher,” but rather around the model of the “teacher-student and students-teachers” (Freire, 1969).

Within this research, the analysis of problem-posing education, as a practice of knowledge creation and collective positioning, is examined through three components that Freire identifies as intrinsic to dialogical relations: love, hope, and humility. Observing the extent to which relationships concerning identitarian matters between students and teachers are infused with these three characteristics provides a measure of the degree to which education in Jordanian refugee camps is oriented toward a problem-posing approach. Such an orientation would indicate an educational environment less constrained by external pressures and asymmetrical power relations, thereby enabling a more autonomous process of negotiation and construction of Palestinian identities.

4.3 Stuart Hall on the Dynamic Nature of Diasporic Identity

Having defined educational spaces - understood both as schooling systems and pedagogical practices - within which refugee camp schools operate in shaping

Palestinian identity processes in diaspora, it is now necessary to clarify the specific conception of identity that this research seeks to examine. To this end, the study situates such processes within the conceptual framework outlined by Stuart Hall in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990). The author distinguishes between two conceptions of diasporic identity.

The first is a fixed one, grounded in the unity of all members of a diasporic population. This identity can be understood as a shared culture, held in common by people with a collective history and ancestry, which is perceived as crystallised in time and space, albeit experienced differently by its members. The second conception differs fundamentally in terms of the processes through which it is produced and acquired. In this case, identity is not understood as something already given, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Rather, it is rooted in a determinate historical origin, yet remains continuously subject to transformation in the present and future, depending on the ways in which it is performed and enacted. This form of identity may be described as a process of “positioning” in time, accounting for what “we have become” in relation to what “we are” (1990). It can be defined as an identity of “becoming,” one that informs how individuals within a diasporic community situate themselves in relation to the past, including through representational practices. In this sense, the role of memory, narrative and myth becomes central, as these elements define the ways in which tradition (widely intended in this case as the “Palestine of the past”) is narrated, and consequently repositioned and continually reconstructed.

This deep relationship between identity and the narration of the past is particularly relevant in UNRWA educational settings in refugee camps, where the link between schooling systems and Palestinian historical memory remains a pressing yet still underexplored area in the literature. In this context, given that memory representations are subject to transformative pressures stemming from external financial forces, they cannot be analysed from a single fixed perspective. Instead, they should be approached as ontologically mutable, also because they developed outside national borders and were constantly confronted with representations of other traditions. Analyzing how elements typically associated with

“Palestinianness” are represented and negotiated within curricula, formal education, and informal relations can therefore help further delineate the contours of the identity whose evolving processes constitute the core focus of this research.

4.4 Gramsci, Freire and Hall in the Research

The three theoretical strands establish the structural framework upon which the research is developed. Given that the study concerns identity formation, it is necessary to approach the subject from multiple perspectives.

On the one hand, it is essential to define the type of identity under examination. Since these negotiated dynamics are subject to shifting influences, Stuart Hall’s notion of “diasporic identity”, and in particular the emphasis he places on positioning within history and its representations, provides a relevant conceptual framework. On the other hand, as the research is centered on how power relations influence social belonging sentiments within schools, it is equally important to examine the nature of the educational apparatus both as school systems and as pedagogical approaches. The theories of Antonio Gramsci are suited to the first objective, especially through the concept of cultural hegemony, while the work of Paulo Freire addresses the second, most notably through his critique of the “banking model” of education. These two theoretical perspectives are complementary and mutually reinforcing in analyzing the influence of an externally financed educational system on Palestinian identification processes. The use of theoretical frameworks not directly grounded in cultural hegemony, or that adopt more static conceptions of diasporic identity, may have had somewhat less analytical strength and relevance within the scope and context of this research.

4.5 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Theoretical Framework

Generally speaking, the theoretical framework is grounded in a triangular structure that interweaves multiple dimensions - namely institutional structures, educational practices, and symbolic representations - and thereby enables a multidirectional and non-descriptive approach that brings together cultural power, emancipatory education, and diasporic identities. By situating the analysis within this tradition, the research acquires a relevant critical sensitivity that resists reducing education to technocratic or neutralizing approaches. Instead, it locates it within broader relations of power, historical narrations, and national belongings.

At the same time, however, the analytical lens presents certain limitations. First, it risks adopting political positions through theories that are themselves ontologically oriented toward morality, insofar as discussing cultural hegemony in education may risk presupposing implicit moral judgements within the theoretical framework. Second, it does not fully account for some of the structural differences within the sample under analysis. The identity of Palestinians in the camps is examined primarily for the fact of being palestinian, and therefore inherently shaped by power relations in the educational sphere. While this perspective is analytically justified, such an anticolonial-oriented framework inevitably risks overlooking other significant axes of social differentiation within the population, including gender, class, heterogeneity across camps and citizenship status (as some camp residents hold Jordanian citizenship while others do not). Furthermore, as with much academic research, the application of theories developed in historical and cultural contexts different from that of the present study inevitably raises ontological challenges when these frameworks are transferred to other settings, as is the case with Antonio Gramsci's cultural conception of Marxism, developed during the Italian Fascist period; Paulo Freire's anticolonial critical pedagogy, articulated in twentieth-century Brazil; and Stuart Hall's theorisation of culture as a political practice in Britain across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

5 METHODOLOGY

Having introduced the topic, situated it within the existing scholarship, and outlined the theoretical foundations underpinning the study, this section aims to clarify the theoretical and practical dimensions underpinning the overall architecture of the research. In particular, it addresses the research design, methodological approach, sampling strategy, data analysis, researcher positionality, ethics and limitations.

A fundamental premise must be established at the outset: situated within a qualitative research tradition, this study seeks to examine the phenomenon through the intrinsic value of each participant's account, as expressed during the interviews. Rather than aiming to generalise findings or identify patterns across broader macro-level dynamics, it focuses on how the actors involved make sense of their environment in relation to the phenomenon under study (Hallberg, 2006). The emphasis placed on the contextual section is therefore intended to delimit the interpretative parameters that should guide the reading of the findings.

5.1 Research Design

The research is largely informed by ethnographic methods and revolves primarily around interviews as its central instrument. As supportive methods, field observations and an interpretive analysis of official documents are incorporated in order to relate participants' experiences to the broader socio-political framework within which they are embedded.

The three methods, permeated by an "iterative-inductive" use - moving back and forth between theory and analysis (O'Reilly, 2009) - made it possible to approach the phenomenon as a form of intrinsic case study. While the findings are not intended to be generalizable, the study not only seeks to present, in its complexity, the participants' understanding of their environment, but may also serve as an instrumental contribution to broader research on power relations, humanitarian aid, refugee settings, and identity processes in school settings.

5.2 Methods

5.2.1 Interviews as Main Method:

The study consists of eight semi-structured interviews, defined as a format in which “some questions will demand fixed responses while others are presented as themes to explore in depth” (O'Reilly, 2009). These interviews were conducted online in March 2026 and were conceived as “ethnographic interviews,” namely interviews embedded within a relational context established with the research partner (Heyl in O'Reilly, 2009)).

Each interview was conducted individually and lasted approximately between 35 and 45 minutes. The participant selection process combined purposive and snowball sampling strategies. With regard to the former, I established a set of parameters: participants had to be between 18 and 25 years old, have attended UNRWA schools throughout their primary educational cycle within refugee camps, and possess sufficient fluency in English. No distinctions were made on the basis of gender or citizenship - while the fact that some participants hold Jordanian citizenship and others do not has significant implications for access to certain national services, it does not constitute a decisive factor in relation to students' self-perceptions within refugee camp school communities. Regarding the snowball sampling component, I deliberately chose not to seek assistance from individuals within UNRWA whom I had previously encountered during my experience with the agency, in order to avoid a potentially biased sampling process. Had I relied on them for recruitment, the fact that participants would have been contacted through institutionally affiliated figures could have introduced power dynamics capable of constraining their freedom of expression. Positioning myself as an outsider was a deliberate choice, guided by the need not to further deepen the human and social distance between myself and the participants - stemming from my status as a Western researcher, my different

historical and social background, and my use of a language that is not their mother tongue. I therefore relied on online searches, primarily through platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, contacting cultural associations, student clubs, sports organizations, and local researchers, through whom I was ultimately connected with participants. I was ultimately able to engage with individuals from four different camps across the country: Jerash Camp/Gaza Camp (Jerash), Baqa'a Camp (Amman), Amman New Camp/Al-Wehdat (Amman), and Prince Hasan Camp. Prior to starting the interviews, I designed a research guide (see Appendix 1), which I did not share in advance with participants in order to encourage responses that were as spontaneous and minimally prepared as possible. One exception was made for a participant who, concerned about potential linguistic difficulties (although he ultimately demonstrated a high level of English proficiency), requested access to the guide in advance. All of them were informed beforehand on the general aim and nature of the study.

Participants were informed that their identities would be anonymized, that the interviews would be recorded, and that the recordings would be destroyed after transcription. For security reasons, each interview was transcribed in full, including sections not directly related to the research topic, without the use of online transcription tools.

The interviews were conducted entirely in English. Participants demonstrated a high level of language proficiency. Only in two instances did interviewees request the use of online translation tools to articulate particularly complex concepts.

5.2.2 Field Observations and Documents Analysis as Supportive Methods

As noted earlier, in order to mitigate the limitations inherent in a qualitative focus centered on lived experience and to produce findings grounded in participants' perceptions while simultaneously relating them to the broader world in which they are situated, I chose to complement the research with field observations and qualitative analyses of selected official United Nations documents.

With regard to the former, I sought to draw on the value of the field visits I conducted through the agency in order to develop a general framework for understanding the refugee camp environments in Jordan. Although these visits were organized and structured within specific institutional and temporal constraints, they nonetheless enabled me to establish an initial connection with the setting in which the research would later unfold. Subsequently, I returned independently on multiple occasions and for extended periods, seeking to diversify the camps visited and initially adopting a covert approach - namely, “gathering information [...] in a passive way, then becoming overt later on in the study” (Estroff in O’Reilly, 2009). In my case, this later stage was represented by overt interviews, conducted with participants fully aware of my role as a researcher.

Furthermore, the use of documentary sources - such as reports on donations to the United Nations and reviews of educational programmes - enabled the research to maintain a concrete connection to material realities. This made it possible to analyze participants’ experiences while simultaneously placing them in dialogue with the quantitative and historical dimensions of the environments they inhabit, namely UNRWA schools within refugee camps. These elements functioned not merely as background or contextual information. Given that the United Nations system - particularly in its institutional practices and funding structures - constitutes the framework within which participants engage with the phenomenon under study, these documents were also treated as substantive research material in their own right.

5.3 Methodological Approach and Sampling

The decision to conduct interviews that follow specific guidelines responds to methodological parameters that seek to remain consistent with both the rationale of the research and the nature of the data under investigation.

In order to analyze a phenomenon of such complexity and multilayered nature, the choice to rely primarily on interviews stemmed from the intention to move

beyond reality in its presumed objectivity and instead examine how the protagonists of that reality experience the phenomenon firsthand.

5.3.1 Selection of Participants

In this sense, the boundaries of the research - situated at the intersection between the educational system and identity-making processes - would have been less coherent had institutional figures such as teachers or school administrators been included. While their perspectives could certainly have provided valuable insights into how they interpret reality from their institutional positions, their inclusion would have shifted the focus away from the asymmetrical dynamics and the frictions between students and the culture represented by educational institutions. The decision to restrict the sample to participants between 18 and 25 years of age is deliberate. Having already left the school environment and moved into different university or professional settings creates a degree of emotional distance, enabling participants to revisit and reinterpret their experiences with greater clarity. The upper age limit of 25 was established in order to preserve the contemporaneity of the research and to introduce temporal boundaries that would prevent overgeneralization across different historical periods. The aim is not to determine how the relationship between schools and students has evolved over time in relation to palestinian national belonging, for instance in response to specific political events, but rather to capture and analyze a narrowly defined timeframe in its integrity. Indeed, the age difference between the youngest and oldest participants is only four years, reinforcing the study's temporal coherence. The research examines experiences spanning from 2008 to 2021, without generalizing them or comparing them to preceding or subsequent periods. The temporal perspective adopted is broadly that of Generation Z and, consequently, does not account for more recent developments (including funding cuts).

5.3.2 The Setting Selection

The decision to focus the research on Jordan, rather than on other refugee settings, reflects the same need to investigate a specific place and moment instead of generating broader spatiotemporal comparisons. The choice of Jordan over other countries in which UNRWA schools operate - namely Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria - derives from several factors. First, Jordan hosts the largest number of Palestinian refugees, who constitute approximately half of the country's population. Second, Jordan is widely recognized as the country that has most successfully integrated the Palestinian population into its social and labor fabric. This is due both to its comparatively greater political and economic stability than Lebanon and Syria, and to the fact that a large proportion of Palestinians were granted Jordanian citizenship during the period in which part of Palestine was under Jordanian administration. This has created additional layers of complexity in relation to Palestinian identity that are less pronounced in Syria and Lebanon. Third, as discussed in the contextual chapter, the Jordanian state is understood as being ontologically shaped by its Palestinian component, not only in demographic terms but also in the very construction of its national belonging. This renders the Jordanian case unique, to the extent that it cannot be reduced to a simple refugee-host dynamic. In contrast, the decision not to investigate schools in Gaza and the West Bank is grounded in the fact that, although these contexts are deeply relevant to questions of cultural positioning and economic power, they do not entail the geographical distance from the national territory that introduces an additional dimension to identity-making processes. To conclude, the choice to situate the research exclusively within refugee camps, rather than in other UNRWA schools across the country (the majority of which are located outside camps), was guided by the recognition that the camp environment itself constitutes a relatively distinct social space. Due to its historical and cultural background, Palestinian subjective formation plays a more prominent role in everyday life there than in other, more socially mixed areas of the country.

5.3.3 Sample Size Selection

Finally, the decision to conduct eight interviews was driven by two specific needs. On the one hand, it allowed for the representation of a sufficient number of self-contained experiences - not large enough to derive general or quantitative conclusions, but adequate to identify recurring tendencies without diluting individual subjectivity. In a larger sample, personal narratives risk being reduced to comparative data points or subsumed within generalized patterns. The objective is to prioritize personal narratives for their intrinsic significance. Moreover, a methodological reflection informing the sample size concerns the phenomenon of so-called “academic extractivism,” namely the tendency to implement practices that exploit knowledge from marginalized or less powerful communities. This tendency has received increasing scholarly attention, particularly in contexts such as refugee camps, which are often treated as reservoirs of data without sufficient attention to reciprocity or to the potential benefits for the communities involved (Ruiz Tagle et al., 2025). In this sense, limiting the sample size enabled the research to remain in closer contact with participants and to preserve the human value of each contribution. This approach rejects the assumption that refugee camp settings can be studied in order to produce an all-encompassing and homogeneous account. Instead, it rests on the premise that research focuses on the lived experiences of specific individuals who encounter phenomena that are at once deeply personal and collectively significant, such as Palestinian identity-making processes in schools. The inclusion of a complementary, albeit marginal, analysis of documents and field observations also responds to this concern. It seeks to avoid one of the key dimensions of academic extractivism: “fast science” (Ruiz Tagle et al., 2025), which disrupts relationships between scholars and lower-class communities and prevents an approach grounded in context, replacing it instead with one extracted solely from participants’ responses. By combining multiple forms of engagement, the study aspires to remain situated, relational, and caring of the ethical demands of knowledge production.

5.4 Analysis of Data

With regard to the interviews, these were designed as semi-structured in order to allow for both the collection of fixed responses, useful in orienting the broader analytical framework, and open-ended answers aimed at capturing the more individual and nuanced dimensions of participants' experiences, particularly those most relevant to the objectives of the research.

Following the transcription of all interviews, the fixed-response questions were employed as an analytical compass to identify the most pressing themes around which participants' narratives were articulated, while also seeking to relate these themes to the theoretical framework. Once eight core themes were identified, they were synthesized into four broader analytical frameworks to explore the distinct hegemonic dynamics driving Palestinian identity formation. .

A general overarching theme - examining how the funding system shapes the teaching of Palestinian national belonging - was placed at the forefront of the analysis as a conceptual container through which the broader dynamics could be understood. This overarching category then was articulated in three subthemes corresponding to the principal educational spaces in which processes of self-definition assume different forms: formal curricula, informal teaching practices, and students' free association.

These four analytical themes were then cross-referenced with the documentary analysis, which provided dimensions of cultural hegemony, as well as with field observations that grounded the study in empirical reality.

5.5 Positionality and ethical considerations

Drawing on the legacy of the so-called "reflexive turn", understood as the 1980s movement that led ethnographies to be recognized as the product of human choices (O'Reilly, 2009), I consciously examined both my writing style and the nature of my arguments.

5.5.1 Positionality of the Researcher

First and foremost, I had to confront the fact that I occupied a position of partial former insider. Although I had never had direct experience within refugee camps, having had my experience in departments without direct operational ties to them, I nonetheless gained access to internal perspectives and organizational knowledge that could have shaped the way I approached the research topic. Having witnessed firsthand the considerable commitment and labor undertaken by the agency, I developed concrete human and ideal ties to UNRWA. My experience within the organization fostered a strong respect for its personnel, as well as for the dedication and integrity underpinning its daily operations. However, this proximity also risked compromising the critical distance expected of a researcher. For this reason, I had to consciously set aside the emotional dimensions I had developed as an insider, retaining only the knowledge that could serve the research while subjecting it to the rigor of academic inquiry without ulterior motives. In doing so, I sought to strip away what Ghassan Hage terms “political emotions” (in Davies, 2010), which manifested in two primary ways. On the one hand, having devoted several months to the agency’s work, I could not approach its operations in a partial or defensive manner; instead, I sought to use my familiarity and connection as a basis for constructive critique whenever the findings required it. On the other hand, having lived in Jordan and previously spent extended periods in the West Bank, I had also developed a sense of empathy toward the Palestinian population. Within the context of research on such sensitive issues, this could have produced romanticizing tendencies that I consciously sought to avoid. I therefore worked to suspend preconceptions and emotional investments tied both to UNRWA and to Palestinian communities.

I therefore deliberately chose to approach the field as an outsider, refraining from involving internal organizational members and presenting myself to participants as external to institutional structures. This decision was intended to avoid power dynamics that might have influenced responses. Instead, by positioning myself as a peer and fellow university researcher genuinely interested in their lived experiences, I was able to foster a degree of mutuality and trust that encouraged

expressive freedom. Reflections on the already-mentioned phenomenon of “academic extractivism” were central in this regard, guiding my efforts to cultivate reciprocity with subjects whose histories are frequently placed at the center of academic, political, and - especially since the watershed of 2023 - media debates. This risked reducing their humanity and subjectivity, polarising the discourse around them into binary categories of heroes or villains. This formed part of a broader commitment to reintroduce a human dimension into academic research.

5.5.2 Ethics of the Research

The ethical concerns of the study primarily revolved around the minimization of harm to the population under investigation. Beyond obtaining informed consent and anonymizing participants’ names, I sought to reduce their recognizability to the greatest extent possible by limiting respondent profiles to gender, age, and camp. In small communities characterized by economic hardship and social precarity, such measures were particularly important. This was especially the case given that the research engages with politically sensitive issues surrounding education in UNRWA schools, topics that remain at the center of highly contentious international debates concerning the alleged “politicization” of instruction. Ensuring the unidentifiability of respondents was therefore a critical safeguard. Given the public scrutiny surrounding UNRWA schools, often shaped by accusations, predominantly from Israeli and American political actors (Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality, 2024) regarding their legitimacy and intentions, I was particularly attentive to responsible representation. My objective was to ensure that participants were not exposed to risks affecting either their personal trajectories or the broader standing of their communities.

5.6 Limitations of the Methods

The methods, while relevant within the context, present some limitations. Among these:

- The previously mentioned snowball technique, which inevitably reduces the possibility of obtaining a sample that is fully representative of the wider population.
- The restricted geographical and temporal scope of the interviews. The conclusions drawn are bound to these specific parameters. Although they yield insights into wider phenomena, they lack external validity and cannot be applied to other cases - even those identical in nature. To put it clearly, other respondents from the same school, within the same camp and during the same years, may have experienced the same circumstances differently due to factors related to individual subjectivity.
- Temporal distance. Although the research seeks to minimize its effects, the recounting of anecdotes - often dating back to respondents' childhood - may be shaped by the role that both personal and collective experience play in remembering. In addition, the international debate surrounding Palestine may influence how respondents frame and recall their experiences, particularly given the highly polarised nature of the topic. This may have generated emotional responses that affected the selective process of remembering.
- Causal links identified in the study are the result of the researcher's interpretation. As an interpretive qualitative study, the researcher's individual consciousness inevitably plays a role in shaping the analysis, and this may define some findings as products of those interpretive choices rather than objective causal relationships.
- The use of a language that is not the respondents' mother tongue may have had consequences for the quality and depth of their answers. On one hand, their experiences were originally lived and understood in Arabic, and the act of translating them into another language already implies an ontological shift in how they are conveyed. On the other hand, despite the generally high level of linguistic

competence among participants, the use of a second language may reduce the complexity and nuance that would likely emerge through expression in their native language.

6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following section examines the principal findings derived from the study through interviews. Supported by official documentation and field observations, it seeks to address the research questions by dividing the analysis into four macro-section. The sections will explore the processes underpinning identity processes in Jordanian refugee camps' schools, with particular attention devoted to how the United Nation funding system influences such processes. This will be carried out through an analysis of the relations between students and funding constraints, curricula, formal pedagogical practices, and free association moments within schools in UNRWA camps.

The first section examines how UNRWA funding practices contribute to forms of cultural hegemony which, when applied to the school system, produce a dependency between donor priorities and the survival of educational institutions. This dynamic appears to have significant effects on processes of Palestinian self-making within schools, which seem to operate through a system of legitimisation that subordinates Palestinian narratives - as articulated by Palestinians themselves - to frameworks more aligned with top-down directives. This section defines the general relationship of students to the school system and its guidelines concerning Palestinian representations. The following three sections, in contrast, unpack this relationship across the three school environments in which schooling activities are structured: formal classroom instruction, informal education, and students' free association. The second section draws upon official documents from various United Nations agencies, which establish the continuous revision of textbooks, agreements between Israel and host countries, and adherence to the principles of neutrality as the foundation upon which formal education in these schools is structured. Drawing on student interviews, the study highlights how such a system gives rise to an educational model closely aligned with a banking approach, one that does not account for a Palestinian identity as it is constructed and lived, but rather for a "legitimated" one. The research argues that the representation of Palestine within curricula hinders the development of a

Hallian form of Palestinian diasporic identity within refugee camps in favour of a crystallized and externally driven one. Students appear to be aware of these dynamics and emerge as seekers of alternative spaces to textbooks in which self-construction can be shaped through dialogical relationships with peers and teachers. As shown in the following two paragraphs, this space is constituted by informal education and students' free association. The third section addresses another dimension of education in refugee camp schools, namely the set of educational practices implemented by the school system despite not deriving directly from institutional guidelines. The study contends that it is precisely within this sphere that a transition occurs from banking education to problem-posing education. Through an active pedagogy of Palestinian tradition, which is subsequently transformed into a creative force, collective consciousness formation processes appear increasingly liberated from constraints coming from protocols and funders' clauses. It is in this context that students emerge as the primary agents of their Palestinian identity, engaging within more open educational structures and cultivating constructive, symmetrical relationships with their peers and teachers. The fourth section aims to assess how informal interactions among students, outside strictly institutional educational frameworks, also take on a dialogical character and enable students to "name" their Palestinian belonging beyond any externally imposed framework. By engaging in dialogue with one another, children are able to create a space that facilitates the formation of an evolving identity, which Stuart Hall identifies as characteristic of diasporic communities. Within this space, power relations appear more horizontal and are structured around principles of individual and collective agency, rather than being constrained by donor-driven frameworks.

The four sections thus identify the relationship that students maintain with the funding system and the extent to which it is perceived as a constraint on their sociocultural negotiation. The study concludes that students seem to perceive the ways external donors shape and validate identity, with these mechanisms manifesting differently across the school's educational spaces. While within textbooks and curricula this form of influence manifests in its most explicit form,

it is in informal activities and in everyday interactions among students that Palestinian self-making processes appear more emancipated from such forces, allowing students to assert themselves as active agents in the construction of their diasporic “Hallian” identity.

6.1 United Nations and Palestinian Students

The education of Palestinian children in Jordan is largely entrusted to the UNRWA funding system and is subject to specific procedures and review mechanisms derived from the principles of the United Nations, as well as from concerns raised by third parties such as non-governmental organizations and member states. This system is currently sustained primarily through financial structures that depend heavily on external donations, whether from third-party states or private actors. As external donors, such entities are at minimum expected to operate in accordance with the principles of United Nations neutrality; at worst, they may embody specific political or economic interests.

In recent years, the most prominent donors have been the United States (not considering 2025 suspension of fundings)⁷ and several European countries, notably Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden (Pledges to UNRWA’s Programmes, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025). As international actors, these donors tend to calibrate their financial commitments according to regional geopolitical developments, their own economic circumstances, and the directions of domestic politics. Two mechanisms emerge as particularly salient in the interviews: first, the monitoring exercised by donors over how “Palestine” is addressed within schools; and second, the declared risk of funding cuts, or the creation of a climate of tension that encourages school authorities to engage in self-censorship in order to avoid reductions in financial support. The first axis of analysis concerning control will be examined through Antonio Gramsci’s conception of power relations within the school system, where the dissonance

⁷ For detailed information:
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-202500222/pdf/DCPD-202500222.pdf>

between the culture represented by students and that embodied by educational institutions almost invariably generates dynamics of cultural hegemony. Through donor oversight and institutional representations of schools, the analysis explores the mechanisms of adhesion that students are led to enact toward international cultural superstructures - a phenomenon which Gramsci describes as “cultural invasion”. The aim is to interrogate the nature of this phenomenon, ultimately situating it within the parameters of what Paulo Freire defines as a “humanitarian” rather than a “humanist” school. The second axis, related to funding cuts, is also framed within a logic of cultural hegemony and, drawing on Gramsci’s notion of students’ “spontaneous consent” towards institutions, seeks to define the nature of donor commitment. While Freire characterizes aid in humanitarian rather than humanist contexts as “false generosity,” the analysis here identifies a different configuration (one that is not explicitly colonial in the Freirean sense), proposing the concept of “guided generosity” as more appropriate to the context of the United Nations.

6.1.1 Donors’ Monitoring of Palestinian Content

To describe the broader context of how school communities behave when engaging with donors in relation to Palestine-related themes, Interviewee 2 recounts:

“Actually you can speak about Palestine and do some homework and show yourself as a Palestinian. Okay, but without the foreign people or foreign nationals. Sometimes there are funders or people - I don’t know what they do - but that are not Jordanians or Palestinians, and I remember that when this happened we behaved differently because the schools, I think, had to stay within certain guidelines and certain constraints. [...]. It’s like a circle. So you can speak and you can do a lot of things, but without them, they know. Without them knowing it.”

This testimony highlights the forms of oversight implemented by certain actors financing the United Nations educational project who, addressing to the

compliance with “*certain guidelines and certain constraints*”, appear to sacrifice aspects of education related to the cultural relativity of subjects. In doing so, they seem to steer students’ education toward a direction more consistent with their *forma mentis* than with that of the pupils themselves, whose interpretive frameworks are rooted in lived experience and collective memory, and who would likely engage with such issues differently were they not subject to these policies. This dynamic closely reflects the Gramscian conflict between the narrative universe cultivated within students’ families and communities, and that represented by schools funded through international mechanisms. In this case, the teaching structures do not appear as neutral bodies; rather, those whom the interviewee describes as “*foreign people*” explicitly represent the agents who regulate the schooling discourse with regard to Palestinian topics. Students’ freedom to “*speak about Palestine [...] and show as Palestinian*” appears to some extent to derive from their personal commitment to maintain a connection to Palestinian cultural roots beyond the moments of institutional checks. These visits, by contrast, emerge from the interviewee’s account as forms of routine oversight, designed to ensure that the functioning of the school proceeds in accordance with externally guided expectations and institutional norms. In doing so, they appear to reproduce an idea deeply rooted in Gramsci’s understanding of education, namely a conception of schooling “intended to perpetuate a specific traditional function, ruling or subordinate” (1999). Nevertheless, the excerpt points to the “private space” of school communities - understood as a sphere not directly exposed to external authorities - as the primary site in which Palestinian identity is negotiated free from external constraints.

As evidence of this, it is noteworthy that the internal decorations of the schools never display explicit signs of national pride, but instead privilege neutral slogans concerning peace and the brotherhood of peoples. While the moral integrity of such values is not in question, their substitution for symbols of cultural belonging may hinder the development of a “Hallian” identity among the communities they are intended to serve. These depictions align students with ideals of peace and neutrality, which are not in themselves inherently incompatible with cultural

symbols such as the Palestinian flag (recognised as a state by approximately 80% of United Nations member states). By contrast, the external spaces - not managed by the United Nations - often depict symbols that refer to a Palestinian national imaginary, such as the “Key of Return” and Al-Aqsa Mosque.



1. An internal wall in an elementary school in Wehdad Camp (Amman) bearing the inscription: “For solidarity, tolerance, and world peace.”
2. The external wall of an elementary school in Baq’a Camp (Amman) depicting the Dome of the Rock, the Palestinian flag and the Palestinian key.

These reflections underscore the necessity for Palestinian communities residing in the camp to articulate their own national values through representational forms, where they find the space to do that. In turn, the phenomenon may generate an underlying tension insofar as it overlooks the fact that, as Gramsci (1999) argues, the pupil “reflects the sector of civil society where the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his family, his neighbourhood, his village.” By excluding these elements from the visual imaginary of students in UNRWA schools, there is a risk of producing a form of dissonance not necessarily present in other state schools, thereby illustrating the influence exerted by donors over the environmental imaginary of the Palestinian students. As evidence of the contradiction inherent in this mechanism, it’s relevant to note that in Jordanian public schools, not financed by western countries, national flags and portraits of the royal family constitute a highly familiar and institutionalized visual presence. Interviewee 8 also states:

“that we don’t have any maps on the walls... Because of political violence”

These considerations make visible the divergence between the culture represented by institutional structures - on which funders base their contributions - and that embodied by the communities they are intended to serve. This, in turn, highlights a distinction between the cultural elements explicitly legitimised by the former and those that more genuinely reflect the latter. Also, the mentioned issue of “*political violence*” is typically framed in relation to donor priorities, as no United Nations resolution or official document has ever defined the Palestinian flag or Al-Aqsa Mosque as illegitimate symbols of political violence or as incompatible with UN principles. By contrast, actors such as the United States have recently suspended their funding, citing concerns related to hate speech and antisemitism⁸. Here, it thus appears plausible to argue that such dynamics do not stem directly from United Nations guidelines, but from the need of UNRWA to comply with donors’ requirements in order to ensure the continuation of its activities.

This tension is rendered explicit (maybe not on purpose) through the words of interviewee 5, who, when discussing this issue, remarked:

“The policy of it makes us, like, in a siege.”

Borrowed from military vocabulary, the metaphor of a siege powerfully encapsulates the confrontation between two forces: on one side, the vaguely defined “*policy*”; on the other, the school community, which, seeking its own humanization in the Freirean sense, recognizes itself as a site of resistance. As Interviewee 2 further explains:

“...if you have to ask permission to read some poems... it’s definitely a problem. On the one hand I understand, of course I do, because when you need money you just

⁸ Read the White House declaration here:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-to-certain-united-nations-organizations-and-reviewing-united-states-support-to-all-international-organizations/>

accommodate requests. I mean... our instruction, making it possible for example that we are able to do calculations or know English, I understand that you are willing to renounce these aspects... but at the same time we both students and teachers found a way also to make these two things possible...”

Thus, an educational system driven by principles of justice and the right to education risks reproducing frameworks that do not correspond to the lived realities of those it serves. Instead, it may promote the implementation of cultural codes aimed at reaffirming the validity of cultural superstructures, in the Gramscian sense, associated with the funders of the schools. This may provoke what Freire terms a form of “cultural invasion” (1970), or, in the interviewee’s own words, a cultural “siege”, where education becomes dependent upon third-party actors. This can be analysed through Freire’s concept of the “humanist” school, which stands in sharp contrast to that of the “humanitarian” school. In this case, as the interviewee recounts episodes in which the reading of poems was restricted, the education funders seem to embrace a highly paternalistic pedagogical approach that turns the assisted communities into mere objects of humanitarian intervention. This process, as Freire (1969) argues, maintains and embodies a degree of oppression and fails to grant autonomy - and humanity - to those communities. Because the United Nations is structurally and necessarily dependent on donor funding, it should seek common ground between its normative framework and the humanisation of the communities it serves. These communities possess their own creative agency and expressive codes, which do not always fully align with those of their benefactors. For this reason, they should not be conceived as passive recipients of a monocultural form of education paternalistically bestowed upon them. Moreover, when applied to the study of Palestinian poetry (as shown in previous quotations), or, as the following testimony indicates, to the commemoration of the Nakba, the consequences of the paternalistic donor oversight become particularly visible:

“The first five years of my studying there was a regular thing that happened on the day of Nakba. But after five years, because of the economic situation in UNRWA that

happened, they started checking the teacher, what they are writing and what they are teaching. [...] We finished to celebrate Nakba... yes. Because they started checking teachers.” Interview 7.

It is not difficult to discern how a Hallian diasporic conception of identity, as dynamic and determined by the historical and contemporary positioning of communities in relation to their culture, is affected by such mechanisms of oversight. Still, it remains unclear how, in the name of the aforementioned “*cultural violence*,” certain symbols are subject to censorship within the official UNRWA educational system. Since these are not explicit symbols of terrorism or religious intolerance - circumstances that would justify exclusion in accordance with the value framework of the United Nations - the removal of the commemoration of the Nakba (historically and officially acknowledged by the UN through Resolution 77/23 2022), appears to correspond more closely to the expectations and requirements of donors, rather than neutrality principles. This affirms the Gramscian role of power relations in schooling of identitarian processes. Hall’s conception of diasporic identity, in fact, reflects the unstable points of identification or suture that are produced within the discourses on national history and culture. By presenting historical and cultural narratives surrounding events such as the Nakba as fixed historical facts, stripped of their cultural, affective, familial, and emotional dimensions, there is a tendency to promote an understanding of culture grounded in claims of timeless validity. This approach fails to account for the processes of historical positioning that students need to undergo in order to develop a more grounded diasporic identity.

6.1.2 Funding Cuts on UNRWA Schools

Beyond the moments of monitoring necessary to ensure compliance with United Nations reviews and institutional policies, there is another dimension in which the United Nations voluntary funding system operates in ways that raise important questions for the study of Palestine. As Interviewee 3 notes:

“But in school, in our school, like... it's always... you are afraid of not having funds.”

And similarly, Interviewee 5 recalls:

“We grew up with the ‘this year we received less funds’ at school...”

Both statements reveal a normalized familiarity among students with situations of economic hardship affecting their educational institutions. This condition contributes to their broader awareness and partially shapes the framework they operate in. Having been repeatedly exposed to the idea that an excessive emphasis on Palestine may negatively affect the quality of education through its impact on funding, students may develop an approach to the issue that is not entirely disinterested. This dynamic to some extent grants power to those who, through economic power, determine which symbols may be legitimized within specific historical and cultural narratives embedded in education. Analyzed through the theories of Antonio Gramsci, the creation of such a climate of precarity risks triggering among students the “spontaneous consent” that the Italian politician argued individuals tend to grant by *default* to the direction imposed by those who possess the authority to generate knowledge (1999).

Throughout the interviews, recurring expressions of gratitude emerge from students toward UNRWA and the opportunities it has afforded them. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to ask to what extent a system of voluntary donations truly enables students to pursue, in a free and disinterested manner, the ongoing recreation of an identity that, particularly in diasporic contexts, is sustained daily through the very practices enacted around it. In this sense, because the United Nations funding model allows donors to calibrate their participation partly in response to what is taught in schools, it risks displacing identity construction from a creative to a “standardized” context resulting from negotiations between external states and international institutions. Analyzed through Stuart Hall’s theories, which suggest that identity is shaped in the present and oriented toward

the future through the ways in which value systems from the past are transmitted through representations, the study of Palestine may also influence the cultural positioning of students. Consequently, the United Nations should reflect on the extent to which its system may be accommodating such dynamics, which Paulo Freire defines as “false generosity” (1969). Since this concept was developed by the Brazilian author inside explicitly colonial contexts without the presence of a neutral intermediary genuinely committed not to domination but to humanitarian engagement (the United Nations), its direct application to this context may prove partially misleading. This, in turn, should encourage deeper reflection on the mechanisms that may obstruct the implementation of the United Nations’ intentions. Such dynamics appear to foster a form of “guided generosity” shaped and financed by external donors. While Paulo Freire speaks of “false generosity,” within this mediated context the notion of “guided generosity” appears more appropriate for describing the situation.

As it will be observed in the analysis, this tendency of guided generosity is reflected most clearly in the sphere of formal education - namely, in curricula and textbooks - while the space in which Palestinian identity is actively exercised, contested, and positioned in Hallian sense is left to informal educational settings and to the free association moments among students. It is within these less regulated domains that formation processes become a lived and negotiated practice, an identity “of becoming” (Hall, 1990), particularly in such a peculiar environment as the schools of refugee camps in Jordan.

6.2 Palestinian Identity and Curricula

As far as curricula in UNRWA schools are concerned, the common practice is to use host-country curricula and textbooks, in accordance with UNESCO recommendations⁹, plus some additional material specifically designed for UNRWA schools.

⁹ Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386924>

In recent years, however, part of the material has been revised in response to concerns raised by Israel, some NGOs - 90% of which from the Israeli NGO IMPACTse - and international donors (Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality, 2024). This process has led to the removal of content deemed not to meet “UN values and standards” (2024) and to the implementation of “a yearly review of all textbooks and supplements” (2024), prompting an immediate response from segments of Palestinian civil society, often opposing omissions considered misleading, such as the removal of the terms “Palestine” and “Zionist Occupation” from school textbooks¹⁰. Without entering into the substance of the debate, whose evaluation falls outside the scope of this research, the study seeks to examine how curricula and textbooks shape the sociocultural self-perception of Palestinian students through an analysis of their relationship with the official institutional approach of UNRWA schools .

When respondents were asked how they positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* the way Palestine was portrayed in the textbooks they had used throughout ten years of schooling, two key themes emerged. These were primarily linked to a cultural discrepancy between the textbooks and the students, as well as between the textbooks and the broader historical and cultural processes that have shaped the environments in which such materials are consumed. Both axes are analysed through Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on the school system. With regard to the former, the analysis situates the asymmetry between schools and students within the broader pedagogical framework of the banking model of education which, according to Paulo Freire, inherently limits the humanization of assisted communities. In the specific case under examination, this approach also appears to constrain the autonomy necessary for the development of a Hallian diasporic identity. Regarding the latter, the analysis employs the discrepancy between curricula and historical context in order to assess the normative dimension of textbooks and official educational programs. It ultimately concludes that the

¹⁰ An example of protests:

<https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanon-camps-protest-palestine-omission-textbooks>

manner in which Palestine is represented appears close to what Gramsci defines as a “rhetorical” school - a concept closely connected to Freire’s banking educational approach - which, in itself, significantly restricts the understanding of the historical processes that, for Stuart Hall, would constitute the foundation of identity formation within diasporic communities. In both cases, these findings also appear to problematise the “Critical Thinking Approach” promoted in the so-called “Colonna Report”¹¹ (2024), as well as the “comparative and multiperspective approach to the study of history” advanced by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (2013). Taken together, these dynamics align the banking representation of Palestine - and its consequent effects on students’ self-construction - more plausibly with donors’ demands than with the theoretical and normative framework of the United Nations.

6.2.1 Curricula and Socio-familial Context

Taking into consideration the excerpt from Interviewee 1:

They talk [...] about Palestine in a respectful and informative way [...] talked about history and culture, they were information, unbiased I think. No politics. [...] I heard at home sometimes [about] politics. No [at] school. [...] it is obvious that it (school programmes) couldn’t... exhaust the discourse about Palestine. We all grew up in Palestinian family... we used to talk about it at home... [...] I understand the educational purposes of books, but we definitely needed more. To give a shape to... to the reason why we were there, in that school...

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on cultural hegemony in school curricula, the student’s account appears to suggest a mismatch between the content delivered in schools and the lived realities of its intended audience. In particular, the quotation resonates with Antonio Gramsci’s account of the

¹¹ The “Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality” is an independent review commissioned by the United Nations to assess UNRWA’s neutrality, accountability, and institutional safeguards following allegations concerning the agency’s staff and operations.

relationship between students' backgrounds and school curricula. Gramsci argues that students acquire, within the family, both a preliminary form of education and a continuation of their school experience. According to him, young people "breathe in" (1999) a vast amount of knowledge in the household, shaped by specific socio-familial conditions. When this inherited worldview clashes with the imaginary promoted through educational curricula, it may generate friction within the mechanisms of legitimization advanced by the teaching class. The participant's words highlight precisely this alienating dimension of school textbooks which, in the name of the compromise reached among "host countries, Israel and the Palestinian Authority" (Final Report for the UN Secretary-General, 2024), provide students with an approach that is detached from their lived experiences and from the socio-cultural environment that has shaped their consciousness (*"I understand the educational purposes of books, but we definitely needed more"*). Moreover, in addition to the content itself, there are also important considerations about the way such content is pedagogically transmitted: what the participant describes as "*information*" appears to privilege the perception of knowledge as the transfer of mere notions, and does not conceive students as an active participant in the learning process. Rather, they appear to align with what Paulo Freire defines as "banking education," a narrative model where teachers and textbooks function as narrators and students are encouraged to memorise content mechanically. This approach limits the development and construction of diasporic cultural identity, as articulated by Stuart Hall.

By failing to recognize the learner's consciousness as an integral part of the educational process, the adoption of such a banking approach risks overlooking a fundamental dimension of learning processes, that is the students' subjectivity deriving from their family and social background. In the present case, such a background (*"We all grew up in palestinian family... we used to talk about it at home..."*) could provide an additional layer of depth to their education. It reflects the preliminary understanding that students acquire within their families and communities, as well as the curiosity and need (*"but we definitely needed to give a shape to the reason why we were there, in that school"*) that would lead them to

engage with the concept of “Palestine” not merely as a historical subject feeding their repertoire of knowledge, but as a constitutive element of their own constructed and positioned identity.

6.2.2 Curricula and Historical Context:

Beyond the personal dimension, students also appear to perceive school materials as detached from the historical conditions through which knowledge is shaped.

Considering the following quotation from Interviewee 6:

"(we study it) because Jordan is so close to Palestine. [...] And everything (that) happened in Palestine affected Jordan. [...] In history class and Arabic class, because there are a lot of poets speak(ing) about the situation in Palestine. A lot of author, also in the textbook, so yes, we do talk about it, but in the level of studying. [...] we live in Amman. It's 45 minutes driving to Jericho. So we cannot avoid talking about it. Jordan itself was built partially around palestinian matters. [...] too close just to pretend Palestine doesn't exist, but at the same time we have to speak about it only as a "school thing", for example in Arabic class... we study poetry... and palestinian poets are very important [...] So we do speak about them but... but.. I mean mostly for education purposes..."

The interview excerpt points to an understanding of the study of Palestine as primarily tied to the need of learning about the historical and cultural developments of the region (“a school thing”), rather than as a means of fostering participatory knowledge production that takes into account the historical conditions leading to the establishment of the UNRWA school system in refugee camps. This is exactly what Antonio Gramsci argues when debating the disconnection of the school systems from history and auspices for a school “related to life” (1999). It can be said that in textbooks, which appear to treat Palestine and China in the same way (for “education purposes”), students don’t perceive a historical self-reflection of the school system. In this case, such a process would also entail the co-construction of students’ historical understanding as an integral component of their identity formation, i.e. studying the historical

trajectories of Palestinian refugees not as something to understand the history of Levant but to understand themselves.

Paulo Freire also critiques non-participatory approaches to historical themes. From this perspective, textbooks appear to be perceived by students as a source of information aligned with a dogmatic model of knowledge acquisition, rather than as part of a process of knowledge construction, thereby highlighting the “banking” nature of schoolbooks in addressing Palestinian historical and cultural matters.

Participant 5, discussing the representation of Israel-Palestine maps on books, states:

“(Palestine is mentioned) but as ‘the place where the Palestinian people live,’ referring to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. [...] We know the history behind that map, so if you avoid to mark it as Paletine... tamam, it’s a formal thing.”

This consideration, in addition to reiterating the banking-nature of textbooks proposed by Freire, adds another important layer of analysis, namely the student’s awareness of textbooks’ banking approach. In particular, describing as a “*formal thing*” the adoption of an epithet employed to remain compliant with review mechanisms, reveals student awareness of the position of those textbooks within mechanisms appearing to her as rhetoric (or “*formal*”) rather than actually constructive. All of this corresponds to the effects outlined by Gramsci regarding the construction of a school system grounded in hegemonic mechanisms. As he writes in the Prison Notebooks: “We will have rhetorical schools, quite unserious, because the material solidity of what is true will be a truth only of words: that is to say, precisely, rhetoric” (1999). In this case, students’ awareness of the gap between their own historical experience and the narratives promoted within the curricula leads precisely to the creation of such a “rhetorical school”, a “*formal thing*”.

Moreover, this quotation implies the student’s recognition of herself as an integral part of the cognitive and learning process regarding Palestine (“*we know the history behind that map, so if you avoid to mark it as Paletine... tamam* (alright)”). In doing so, her individual consciousness - shaped beyond textbooks, possibly

through familial and social networks - is transformed into a form of resistance, more or less consciously articulated, to the banking system embedded in textbooks. It promotes a more active role for the student within the learning process, thereby inherently challenging the “banking” model of education described by Paulo Freire.

From the passages analysed above, it can be inferred that curricula in UNRWA schools in Jordan - understood in terms of both textbooks and official UN guidelines - tend to move away from a dynamic conception of teaching, largely overlooking the cultural and historical context of Palestinian refugee camps. With regard to culture, answers indicate the absence of a key feature of Hallian diasporic identity, namely the awareness that any act of speech is always necessarily situated within a specific place and time. As for history, the approach adopted by textbooks appears to endorse a homogeneous understanding of it, one that presumes an underlying unity “beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of (palestinian) actual history” (Hall, 1990). The characteristics of the curricula described in this paragraph therefore appear misaligned with Stuart Hall’s understanding of diasporic cultural positioning.

6.3 Palestinian Identity and Extracurricular Practices

As emphasized by Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire, however, the school is not composed solely of unidirectional academic structures and top-down official paradigms. On the contrary, there exists a dense repertoire of interactions, informal practices, rituals, and extracurricular trajectories that play a fundamental pedagogical role within educational institutions. It is precisely within this sphere that the real site of negotiation of young Palestinians’ identity emerges: through the enactment and reworking of a range of historical and cultural-folkloric practices, they interpret and generate new horizons of collective knowledge and self-identitarian formation. These dynamics are examined in the paragraph through a Gramscian framework which, when applied to extracurricular activities, would presuppose a multi-phase learning process. One phase is centered on the

acquisition of a common cultural code, another on its interpretation and sharing aimed at negotiating and recreating it. The first corresponds to what he calls the “active school,” which nevertheless should remain as non-dogmatic as possible. The second phase, the “creative school,” builds on these foundations and allows individuals to develop their own “naming” of the world. *Mutatis mutandis*, this framework may also be applied to the Palestinian refugee context, where an initial phase of acquiring Palestinian cultural and historical codes can lead to a second phase characterized by the construction of one’s own diasporic self-identification. The following two sub-paragraphs examine precisely the unfolding of these two phases of active and creative school, characterised by a shift from a banking approach to a problem-posing one. The latter also entails a significant redefinition of the teachers’ role. A third paragraph presents concrete examples (fashion and food) in which national belonging shifts from being collectivised to being collectively negotiated. It then analyses this phenomenon through one of the key components of dialogical relations among students: love. For Paulo Freire, love constitutes a foundational element of relationships that enable the creation of knowledge, or, as he defines it, the process of “naming the world.” This study applies this concept to Palestinian identity.

6.3.1 The Creation of a Common Identity Ground

The first phase can be illustrated through an excerpt from Interview n. 4, which describes an extracurricular activity where students memorise historical and cultural information about Palestine to compete against other schools in an event called “My Palestinian Identity”.

“It’s called ‘My Palestinian identity’ [...] It’s (about) information on Palestine. [For example] What is the Al Aqsa Mosque? A lot of information about Palestine... [...]. For example, where are the cities [...]. We prepare in advance by studying, for example, the traditions or the key dates of Palestinian history, and we meet other students from other UNRWA schools, divided by regions, and compete against each other; and at the end there is a kind of final ranking...”

At this level, students' approach to didactics appears radically different from that presented in textbooks. Although conveyed in a largely mnemonic manner, the repetition and sharing of information (in this case facilitated through pedagogical tools such as competition) already constitute a step beyond the "banking" model described by Paulo Freire, which predominates in the textbooks adopted in schools. The memorization of specific notions related to Palestinian history and tradition, combined with their competitive transmission among children, reflects Gramsci's notion of the "creative school" and situates these spaces within the initial phase of education: the preparation of the cultural terrain and the collectivization of the individual. At the same time, these kinds of events seem to incorporate some elements typically associated with the problem-posing education such as dynamism and participation (*"we meet other students from other UNRWA schools, divided by regions, and compete against each other"*), which prepares the ground for the Gramscian construction of a second phase of education. Moreover, it affirms students as integral participants in the learning process.

6.3.2 The Passage from an "Active" to a "Creative" School in Shaping Palestinian Identity.

The absorption and sharing of Palestinian cultural elements, already containing components of hybridity between the banking and problem-posing approaches, is repeatedly attested in other interviews:

"During Palestinian important anniversaries like Jerusalem Day [...] we read Palestinian poems" (Interview 5).

"Sometimes we do Zoom meetings [...] with another UNRWA school. And sometimes we make small visits between us and we talk about the same thing (Palestine)" (Interview 8).

Taken together, these practices point to the construction of a shared cultural code enacted through an active pedagogical approach, one that is expected to evolve

over time into what Antonio Gramsci defines as the “creative school,” namely a stage in which genuine knowledge production takes place. This transition from the “active” to the “creative” school is illustrated in the following excerpt from Interview n. 3, which refers to a later stage of education compared to the one in which “My Palestinian Identity” took place:

“We did in the school something [...] like a competition. We are talking about one topic, but there are two opinions [...] a debating competition. And you have to convince the audience. [...] we were discussing not as Palestine insiders [...] for example “do international organizations do enough or not?” or “countries made this agreement, what do you think?” and there are two teams that have to debate: one defends one opinion, the other the opposite. [...] Usually we chose the topics; most of the time it was about Palestine and something that had happened there. [...] for example: if we say that international organizations did enough, the other team says they did not. [...] Teachers moderated, like referees, and then in the final step they gave ratings and said “team A was better than team B because they proposed more realistic solutions, for example”.

These words mark a clear difference compared to the mnemonic competition described above. In this case, the focus is no longer on memorizing cultural notions in order to construct a shared ground of values; rather, knowledge is actively produced through the interpretation and negotiation of historical and cultural issues. The competition is no more on the knowledge of historic-cultural elements, but on the capacity of the student to elaborate on them. It is at this point that the school ceases to impart a fixed collective consciousness to students and instead provides a shared heritage upon which they can develop their own consciousness through processes of encounter and contestation. In this sense, the school moves from being “active” to becoming “creative” within Gramscian perspectives and emancipate itself from any external influence, with the aim of creating an “independent responsibility in each individual” (1999). By deconstructing and reinterpreting notions about Palestine in light of their individual and collective consciousness, students generate new personal knowledge of their background. It takes place in a non-instrumental manner,

building upon a set of collectively negotiated and exchanged notions that enable an individual positioning within Palestinian history and narrative. This process thus leads to the formation of a diasporic identity grounded in the past and shaped by an awareness of the present, as conceptualized by Stuart Hall (1990).

Moreover, the debating competition quotation reveals an additional feature which pushes education closer to the problem-posing approach: the role of the teacher is no longer conceived in the terms of the banking model of education, but rather as a “friendly guide”, as defined by Gramsci (1999). Within the debating competition learning seems to “take place especially through a spontaneous and autonomous effort of the pupils” (Gramsci 1999), while the teacher is largely limited to acting as a “*moderator*” and “*referee*”, quoting the excerpt. This new perception of educators, when tackling Palestinian representations, leaves the room to a space where pupils can generate their own social meanings.

To conclude, another element marking the problem-posing character of learning during the second phase - “creative school” - can be identified, which is related to the learning modalities. The fact that Palestinian identity in these occasions is not debated within institutional and pre-structured spaces such as textbooks, but is instead articulated within associative and discursive environments, aligns more closely with a transformative conception of diasporic identity. This shift facilitates a more creative and personalized engagement with Palestinian culture and allows students to emerge as the central agents of the process, relatively autonomous from external influences. In addition to the already mentioned competitions, it is worth mentioning school radio activities, anniversaries/commemorations, and artistic/cultural activities:

“when it's the anniversary for Nakba, for example, we used to do some activities for the whole school, not only for one class.” (Interview 3)

“Okay, I used to recite Palestinian poetry on the school radio.” (Interview 4)

“We presented projects about Palestinian traditions and heritage. [...] I was responsible for organizing the performances... arts, and Palestinian anthem groups”. (Interview 1)

“I remember one time when a teacher asked us to write about what Palestine means to us, and many students shared emotional stories connected to their families.”

(Interview 5)

“During Nakba Day [...] we danced Dabke [...] we all danced Dabke. And also [...] we sing songs about Palestine.” (Interview 8)

This collective dimension of extracurricular education stands in stark contrast to the textbook model discussed in the previous paragraph, acquiring instead a crucial role in the re-elaboration of the Palestinian cultural experience initially absorbed during what has been defined as “first phase” (where children internalize shared cultural notions). In particular, with reference to the first quotation (activities during the anniversary of the Nakba), Interviewee 3 states:

“The main reason is to remember our history not to stay together, but we also stay together... and I think these two things can... ya ‘nī... they can merge... do you understand? [...] I think that apart from being a way to connect with our roots... family roots, it’s mostly also a way to... elaborate... I mean: you grow up in a family talking about Palestine and you have to make sense of the fact that you don’t live there (in Palestine) anymore”

This passage highlights how a participatory education can generate knowledge through, in this case, the collective reworking of intergenerational traumas among students’ families (Nakba, distance from the land, refugees’ traumatic experience and precarious conditions).

Adding a further layer to this collective construction of education, Interviewee 1 notes:

“I mean that if we talked about Palestine I could understand a part of myself and a part of my family... [...] but also of other people [...] around me... I never thought about this... [...] maybe I would say that I could understand the teachers... that maybe lived close to the Six-Day War... and yes... by talking about Palestine I could also understand their personal feelings and lives...”

These words underscore not only peer interaction as a driver of knowledge construction of their cultural self-definition, but also the relational dimension between students and teachers. This latter aspect points to a key feature of problem-posing education, an ontological *detournet* that further reinforces the relevance of adopting a problem-posing approach in the construction of an ideal “creative school”, capable of generating an understanding of palestinian diaspora identity free from hegemonic guidelines and policies. In this case, teachers no longer present themselves as the representatives of power cultures entrusted with the role of “teaching” Palestinian tradition, but are themselves part of a collective negotiation; thus going even beyond the Gramscian idea of the teacher as a “friendly guide”. It is not only a matter of emancipating teachers from their role as “knowledge depositors” within the banking system, nor from their function as representatives of institutional and externally financed structures. Rather, they become an active co-participant in the process of knowledge construction, on equal footing with the student, who in turn also assumes a partial role of a teacher: it is exactly what Freire calls the relation “teacher-students and students-teacher” (1969). This shift defines how problem-posing education can reach its fullest expression, as well as the conditions for the emergence of a diasporic identity that is grounded in the autonomous subjectivity of collectivized educational communities.

6.3.3 Examples and modalities of Palestinian Identity Creation in Extracurricular Activities

The argument advanced in the last two subparagraph (the transmission of a shared field of cultural heritage understood as a living substance capable of being reinterpreted through both individual and collective elaboration among students and teachers) can be further discussed through the following quotation from Interview 6:

“When we are children [...] we talk about food and about dress and typical cultural things... then, after you study it, sometimes we could talk about things more related to... to contemporary things that happened... politics but also comments on what was happening.”

This account captions the difference presented above between the two forms of mnemonic and debating competitions and suggests that, in the early years of schooling, education tends to assume the character of an “active” school in relation to the transmission of the Palestinian universe to pupils. At this stage, education addresses themes that lay the foundations for an identity-based background (clothing and food in the quotation). In the Jordanian context, however, such elements do not constitute a neutral body of knowledge about the cuisine or clothing of another country (studying *Kuffiyeh* is not like studying Japanese Kimonos); rather, they function as markers of the historical socio-identitarian integration of the Palestinian population within Jordan.

As noted in the contextual section, clothing can be understood as a litmus test of the level of cultural integration between Jordanians and Palestinians. In downtown Amman, for instance, street vendors often sell both the *shmagh* and the Palestinian *keffiyeh* at the same stalls, suggesting a degree of cultural overlap; yet signage and verbal distinctions frequently emphasize their difference, presenting them as distinct national-symbolic items of Jordan and Palestine. Similarly, food operates simultaneously as a site of fusion and differentiation between the two cultures. While one the most popular mansaf restaurants in Amman display the Palestinian flag and the map of historical Palestine (*Da7berha*, in *Al-Abdali* area), the dish itself is still commonly associated with segments of the population closer to the Hashemite tradition than to the Palestinian diaspora. As one interviewee also notes:

At home I eat musakhan summakiyye, and other Palestinian families from Gaza Camp do the same. But... if in another family in Jordan they eat mansaf... it's true, there is a difference, but not a 'bad' one” (Interview 2)

This evidence illustrates how the presence in the early phase of UNRWA education of extracurricular activities centered on Palestinian cultural elements contributes to the construction of a shared field of values that is destined to evolve into a new “created” identity. Returning to the initial quotation, the shift from teaching about Palestinian clothing and culinary culture to engaging in debates among students and between students and teachers, specifically demonstrates the transition from an “active” to a “creative” dimension of knowledge. It is in these “unofficial settings” that students are thus called upon to construct the understanding of themselves, drawing on the cultural material acquired in earlier years and incorporating its collective negotiation in later stages. To make this explicit, just as Antonio Gramsci valued the teaching of Latin in the early stages of schooling as a “dead” language, yet “continually coming to life again in examples and in stories” (1999), in the same way, the collective study of Palestinian culinary traditions and fashion in the early years of education could be understood as preparatory to a subsequent “creative phase”. In this later stage, students would possess the interpretive and analytical tools necessary to position themselves within history and to give meaning to their Palestinian background, when these “passive” Palestinian elements will come to life again in examples and in stories.

A final aspect to consider is the dialogical nature of this identity construction process. To this regard, interviewee 1 observes:

“(during school events) related to Palestine we were happy both because we didn’t have lessons (laughs) and also because, I guess, that everyone was proud of their Palestinian origins... so yes... we were happy and maybe proud... I don’t know if proud is the right word... but we were happy, that for sure”.

This passage not only reaffirms the value of identity as a dialogical construction between past and present but also foregrounds one of the central tenets of Freirean pedagogy: love (or more broadly “*happiness*”), placing it at the service of subject formation among Palestinian children in Jordan. According to Paulo Freire, the process of naming the world (and identity in this case) unfolds through dialogical

relations in which love constitutes one of the central pillars. Conceived as an act of creation and re-creation, this process of naming must necessarily be imbued with love, and the references to feelings of pride and joy surrounding Palestine in the testimony fulfill precisely this function.

In contrast to curricula and textbooks, where the banking model of education predominates, extracurricular practices place students at the centre of processes of self-identification, as evidenced by their emotional engagement - an element that appears largely absent when they speak about textbooks. In this context, Palestine is no longer understood as something detached from them and fixed in the past, but rather as something actively constructed through dialogical engagement, with a greater degree of autonomy from external constraints. Since it is not grounded in banking representations - which can be more readily shaped by donor demands - the dialogical nature of these interactions opens up a space allowing identity to be negotiated with a greater degree of autonomy from ideologically dominant forces.

6.4 Informal Student Relations and the Construction of Palestinian Identity in Schools

Beyond being a site of “formal” education comprising institutional educational practices, the school is also a space of spontaneous encounter among subjectivities. These, through constant interaction, collectively learn to construct knowledge and seek to make sense of the world in a setting shaped by peers and detached from up-to-down constraints. Such a mechanism emerges clearly in the interviews, taking the form of genuine spoken interactions, particularly during breaks or in moments not strictly devoted to formal instruction. Through dialogical acts of naming the world, two central dimensions of collective meaning negotiation emerge from the interviews: Palestine as a territory and Palestinian family histories. Both aspects are examined through a Freirean lens of dialogical relations, namely through an assessment of the presence or absence of key characteristics underlying the constructive processes of knowledge production and

the “naming” of identity. In the first case, the dimensions of love and hope clearly feature as permeating narratives of Palestine as a subject. In the second case, humility appears to be the predominant component in the familial accounts shared among students. Love, hope, and humility constitute the Freirean characteristics of dialogical relations, namely the relations in which the process of naming the world can unfold, presupposing students as creative agents of their own diasporic positioning rather than passive subjects who merely acquire an externally imposed one.

6.4.1 Naming Palestine

The discursive occasions among students emerge in the interviews as particularly influential in the process of positioning their national culture. More specifically, discussions about Palestine appeared to embody two fundamental features in the interviews: love and hope. As illustrated in Interview 5:

“there was a mixed atmosphere of excitement and sadness. [...] Well... we didn’t have much space to talk about it. Also because not all the students wanted it. And, yes, when it happened it was always a beautiful moment... We could talk about our families... we all share trauma and... you know... one thing is when you only face it with your family, another thing is doing it with other people, peers especially”.

This passage clearly reveals a further dimension of love, expressed through “*excitement*” and “*sadness*.” Here, it finds its fullest expression in dialogical encounters, which, as previously discussed, can only occur among equals: “*another thing is doing it with other people, peers especially*.” The peer-relations of love characterising the informal interactions among students make this “informal setting” reluctant to power dynamics and facilitate the free construction of a Palestinian identity.

In addition to love, another key element emerging from the interviews is hope, exemplified in the following excerpt from Interview 7:

*“No, our connection to Palestine broadly... [...] The cities, the things we know...
Almost never political things... but... mainly our future, our ideas and hopes. [...] I
mean hope for our land...”*

This quotation highlights the centrality of hope within dialogical interactions among students. The fact that these exchanges revolve around “*future, ideas and hopes*” underscores how hope itself constitutes one of the foundations of the process of naming their Palestinian universe. It is precisely this feeling that constitutes the second element of Paulo Freire’s dialogical relations, enabling the very process of “naming” the world. As Freire argues, “Hope is rooted in men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search, a search which can be carried out only in communion with other men” (1969). This implies that fostering dynamics of hope within students’ discussions surrounding Palestine would already, in itself, entail a movement toward the process of naming one’s identity as a collective and creative act. For this reason, the presence of love and hope in conversations about Palestine determines their dialogical nature, as well as the interpersonal contribution these moments make to processes of construction - or, in Paulo Freire’s terms, the “naming” - of identity.

From the perspective of Stuart Hall, this also involves aspects of a “positioned” Palestinian identity that cannot be fully articulated within the family sphere or through formal, orthodox, and externally shaped educational pathways.

6.4.2 Naming Palestinian Family Histories

Another recurring theme in the interviews concerns the sharing of family stories as a means of making sense of one’s Palestinian belonging. As it emerges, participants frequently engage in dialogical exchanges where the other is recognised as a source of exchange, and family histories are understood as a form of cultural capital that can be drawn upon and interwoven with one’s own experience in the process of “naming the world”. Before navigating the actual exchange, it is worthwhile to show how the family itself constitutes, in accordance

with the previously discussed Gramscian conception of family in educational processes, an initial repository of understandings that shape the child's interpretative codes, upon which further experiences are later layered in order to make sense of children's world:

"... also my family... I mean my family told me about their displacement... [...] It means that I learnt from them Palestinian traditions, Palestinian stories before '48, Palestinian belonging... but also, specifically, like... how to say... they told me their story so I learned many things about traditions and I also developed my ideas about rights, my personal ideas about Palestinian human rights... okay?" (Interview 6)

This extract exemplifies how children are endowed with an initial consciousness and body of knowledge that, if not brought into relation with other narratives but only with official education, risks remaining at the level of formalism and giving rise to a kind of Gramscian rhetoric school. It is precisely the encounter with other students that marks this transition. The following quotations illustrate this shift:

"I remember once a classmate shared a story about her grandparents leaving Palestine, and it made all of us feel emotional and more connected to each other. [...] This made us close to each other and to our families' stories. We are already connected to Palestine since we are children, but the fact that you [...] find people and share certain stories... well... they make you also close to other people... you recognise them in you... it's beautiful". (Interview 1)

"Yes. I heard from my classmates (about) the city or village their families were from and when this happened I learned many things... for example names of villages or what people did there. For example... I say that my grandmother told me that she was always at the beach... [...] If another classmate told me that his parents worked in a market in a city, I learned that Palestine was also a city and not only a beach... because my family told me about the beach and maybe another family before the Nakba did different things". (Interview 8)

In both excerpts, the constructive dimension of dialogical relations among students clearly emerges and is possible through symmetric relations, in contrast

to donor visits, formal curricula, and textbooks. Moreover, these specific quotations introduce another fundamental element: humility. According to Freire, the third constitutive element of dialogical relations in the naming of the world is humility, understood as the force that leads students not to project ignorance onto fellow students, but rather to recognize their own incompleteness and openness to being complemented by others. This is made visible in the tacit, *a priori* trust that characterizes their encounters, enabling them not only to share experiences but even to “*recognize themselves in others.*”

Observing how students engage in informal, dialogical exchanges about Palestine and their family histories makes clear that such processes, imbued with love, hope, and humility, constitute the foundation of their ongoing effort to name their Palestinian identity. This identity, precisely because it is shaped through a dynamic and participatory process involving multiple peer subjectivities, resists both verbalism and up-to-down patterns of fixed historical and social categories influenced by power asymmetries.

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Answers to the Research Questions

This study focuses on the power dynamics surrounding the UNRWA funding system and its impact on the identity processes of young Palestinians in diaspora. By examining the institutional school system and the pedagogical practices implemented in UNRWA camp schools in Jordan refugee camps, the study identifies the spaces in which such political and cultural influence manifests itself. In light of the theoretical framework employed, the study argues that donor influence - manifested through school monitoring mechanisms, curriculum reviews, and agreements with host countries - primarily operates within school curricula and textbooks. Nevertheless, the interviews clearly reveal students' strong awareness of being subjected to such dynamics, as well as their marked need to articulate their Palestinian self outside these institutional spaces. While curricula and textbooks appear to reflect a "banking" approach to the teaching of Palestine - characterized by a conception of education as a gift delivered by the educational system to students, who are only authorized to internalize notions legitimized by that system - informal education and spontaneous exchanges among students emerge as the primary spaces through which students gradually free themselves from external forces and construct their own sense of identity.

With regard to informal education, the research debates on how, through a variety of educational practices such as events, celebrations, seminars, and competitions not directly derived from institutional directives, students are able to engage with Palestine through a "problem-posing" approach; that is, one which conceives education as a constructive rather than inductive process. This process unfolds in two distinct phases: an initial phase in which students are exposed to a series of notions connected to the Palestinian imaginary through practices not directly associated with formal classroom instruction, and a second phase in which, by confronting these notions with their own family backgrounds and those of their

fellow students, they gradually develop meaning and situate their Palestinian background within broader identitarian processes. These two phases correspond to what Gramsci defines as the “active school” and the “creative school,” and are articulated through symmetrical relationships with fellow students and through a transformation in the role of the teacher. The latter shifts from being the representative of an upper culture to becoming a constructive element in the negotiation of a “situated” Palestinian diasporic identity, in Hallian terms.

The dialogical nature of this extracurricular space ultimately finds its fullest expression within the informal networks students build inside the school environment yet beyond strictly educational dynamics. It is through interpersonal relationships and the exchange of experiences among students that their self-construction acquires its greatest freedom of expression, detached from external influences. Within these connections - conceived by Freire as “dialogical” and described as grounded in love, hope, and humility - the process of “naming” Palestinian identity takes place, enabling students to achieve their fullest degree of “humanization” in constructing and negotiating a self-definition free from controlling dynamics and asymmetrical power relations.

7.2 Main Contributions

This research contributes to the field of Middle Eastern Studies, and particularly to the study of Palestinian identity beyond national borders. More specifically, the study proposes a hegemonic perspective on funding systems for education within refugee agencies, alongside a conception of Palestinian belonging as negotiable and open to external influence. In doing so, it contributes to the analysis of the relationship between economic power and education, an interplay that remains largely underexplored within academic discussions of humanitarian aid contexts. By applying this framework to identity processes, the research opens a largely unexplored dimension within the field and may provide an important analytical lens for adjacent disciplines such as philosophical pedagogy and post-colonial studies. To situate it within the existing scholarship, this research positions itself

at the intersection of sociological studies on refugee camps, philosophical and post-colonial pedagogical studies, as well as research on cultural hegemony in education. In relation to these fields, however, its distinctive contribution lies in incorporating the voluntariness and conditionality of funding within humanitarian aid contexts as an active agent in Palestinian identity processes. In doing so, it engages with significant debates both within Palestinian studies and, more broadly, within the field of international political science, thereby adding a contribution to the ongoing academic debate.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

As specified in the methodological section, the principal limitation of this research lies in the difficulty of generalizing findings derived from such a limited sample of interviews. Moreover, a further limitation concerns the study's tendency to examine students' identities exclusively through the lens of national origin. More specifically, Palestinian self-identification constitutes the sole dimension taken into consideration, while the external power contingencies of the school system are treated as its primary source of influence. In doing so, the research overlooks other relevant components, including gender, social class, socio-economic differences among refugee camps, and citizenship status - given that some participants legally hold Jordanian citizenship while others do not. The use of the theoretical framework employed inherently limits the analysis of identity by focusing primarily on economic aspects as its underlying premise. Although it subsequently broadens its scope to include more explicitly pedagogical and sociological dynamics, it nevertheless maintains an approach grounded in historical materialism, thereby underestimating other influential factors involved in identity processes.

7.4 Future Directions

This research opens new avenues that may be further explored by scholarship. In particular, the previously mentioned intersection among the different vectors shaping individual self-perception may open new perspectives in the study of Palestinian identity formation. Moreover, a comparative analysis of power relations within refugee education systems could provide additional insight into the development of Palestinian national belonging sentiments in schools across Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza, while also potentially paving the way for examining the influence of national education systems on Palestinian identity within the Western diaspora.

The study may also generate an interesting line of inquiry if approached from the perspective of teachers or institutional actors operating within the agency itself. Finally, from a more explicitly political perspective, future research could investigate how the precarious financial structure of United Nations agencies reflects the broader precariousness experienced by the Palestinian population in diaspora, which, after more than seventy-five years of displacement from its territorial context, continues to be defined as an emergency refugee population and treated differently from local populations across much of Southwest Asia.

To conclude, if school is, as this study has suggested, a site where knowledge, power, and identity are continuously negotiated, then future scholarship on humanitarian education should remain attentive to what is not only taught, but also silently authorised, transferred, or excluded in the process of “naming the world”. Since identity is what sustains a people even in the absence of a territorial base, future scholarship should continue to invest in the study of education within such contexts, with the awareness that, as Antonio Gramsci notes, “instruction is never neutral” (1999).

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APPENDIX 1 - Guide to Interviews

I am a student in the Master's program in Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Sweden. For my thesis, I am researching how Palestinian identity is formed and negotiated in UNRWA schools in Jordan.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes. With your permission, I would like to record the interview to ensure accuracy.

Your participation is completely voluntary. **You will remain anonymous**, and all your answers will be treated confidentially. After the interview, I will transcribe our conversation and then **delete the recording**.

If there is any question you do not wish to answer, that is perfectly fine, just let me know. You may also stop the interview at any time if you wish.

Respondents' Information

1. How old are you? What is your gender? What do you do for a living?
2. Which schools did you attend with UNRWA (grade and specific institution) and in which years? What was your legal status at that time?
3. What is your family background? Where does your family come from, and can you give a brief overview of your family's history/migration trajectory?

Personal Position Towards Palestinian Identity

1. How do you perceive the Palestinian issue? In what way do you feel connected to it? Are you politically active? How have your family and the neighborhood you live in influenced these perceptions?

School and Palestine:

1. What do you think about the way Palestine was treated in textbooks?
 2. Do you remember any spaces at school where the Palestinian issue was discussed? Please share anecdotes.
 3. How did teachers talk about it? Was there room for discussion during lessons or in extracurricular activities? Please share anecdotes.
 4. Did you share moments of discussion or expression with your classmates? If yes, what kind? Please give anecdotes if there are any?
 5. Did you feel completely integrated with Jordanian society at the time? Please share the reasons for yes or no.
-

Final remarks

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much for participating, this has been really useful. I might be doing a couple of follow-up interviews, would it be ok to contact you again if I need clarifications? Thank you so much for your time.

APPENDIX 2 - Participants Profile

Participant 1 is a 24 years old boy. He attended Jerash Camp Boys Preparatory School No. 1, affiliated with UNRWA, from 2008 to 2018.

Participant 2 is a 23 years old girl. She attended Baqa'a Camp Girls Preparatory School No. 2, affiliated with UNRWA, from 2011 to 2021.

Participant 3 is a 25 years old girl. She attended Prince Hasan Camp Girls Preparatory School, affiliated with UNRWA, from 2005 to 2016.

Participant 4 is a 21 years old girl from Jerash/Gaza camp in Jerash. Attended UNRWA Preparatory School from 2010 to 2020.

Participant 5 is a 21 years old boy from the Gaza camp. Attended UNRWA preparatory schools in Jerash Camp from 2010 to 2020.

Participant 6 is a 22 years old girl from Amman New Camp. She attended female preparatory school from 2019 to 2019.

Participant 7 is a 24 years old girl from Gaza Camp, she attended Jerash Camp Girl Preparatory School from 2008 to 2018.

Participant 8 is a 21 years old boy from Gaza Jerash Camp. Attended UNRWA schools from 2011 to 2021.