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Educating for Unknowable Futures The United Nations Relief and Works Agency-led Education for Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

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Abstract

Proponents of critical pedagogy aim to liberate oppressed populations through emancipatory forms of praxis (Darder et al., 2017). This article draws on this pedagogy, in particular Freirean pedagogy, to explore refugee education offered by The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Drawing on interviews with UNRWA teachers and other educational staff, alongside document analysis, this paper examines how UNRWA in Jordan enact its mandate. In particular, the article focuses on a policy program, 'Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT)' that UNRWA implements in their education. With an analysis shaped by core aspects of a Freirean pedagogy, the paper argues that the HRCRT program creates authentic possibilities for advancing Palestinian liberation. Despite the unknown future for both the Agency and the Palestinian refugees, findings from the interviews and other data materials reflected a shared consciousness of the purpose of the UNRWA-led education for Palestinian refugees, which is in accordance with both UNRWA's mandate and fundamental principles within Freirean pedagogy.



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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with longest standing experience in providing primary education for refugees on a world basis, providing services for more than 75 years. There are 9 million Palestinian refugees globally, 5.9 million of them under UNRWAs mandate, most of them residing in Jordan (Berg et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2023). UNRWA's education mandate for the Palestinian refugees may provide a good ground for the exploration of the premise of refugee education connected to global oppression and liberatory education. This article aims to critically reflect on how the policy orientation in UNRWA's education mandate is made sense of and carried out by UNRWA staff.

With a focus on Paulo Freire, this article is informed by decolonial theory, reflects on existing literature within research on refugee education, presents research data based on interviews with UNRWA staff, and identifies the dominant approaches that govern the institutions that shape the policies for refugee education globally. It takes inspiration from Yeo and Yoo (2022) and adopts a critical perspective, drawn from the work of Freire (2017), a Brazilian educator and philosopher, to view refugee students not merely as objects of educational interventions, but “subjects of the educational process” (p. 59). Freire is viewed as one of the most influential critical educators, and his thoughts have had a huge impact on the discourse of education for the oppressed and marginalized (Darder et al., 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022). He emphasizes the educational needs of the oppressed, including those in conflict areas, to ‘read their own world’ alongside elevating critical awareness of the dehumanizing context in which they are embedded, through education (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022). Freire argued that education can empower students to “transform their oppressive reality through active participation toward social justice” (Yeo & Yoo, 2022, p. 2204).

From a Freirean theoretical standpoint, the article analyzes refugee education provided by UNRWA, focusing on their Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) policy program to argue that this creates authentic possibilities for advancing Palestinian liberation. To support this argument, the following sections will place reflections found in existing literature in conversation with research interviews conducted with UNRWA and other NGO staff in Jordan (in the autumn of 2022 and spring of 2023).

The UNRWA Educational Mandate and Freirean Critical Pedagogy

UNRWA was established in 1949, as the United Nations (UN) humanitarian response to the extensive influx of Palestinian refugees after the creation of Israel the previous year (Berg, 2020). Al Hussein (2010) observed that, over the years UNRWA has become “a quasi-state institution, taking on responsibilities traditionally assigned to national governments in the fields of education, health and social services” (p. 51). However, Berg (2020) points out a gap in research focusing on UNRWA, especially when it comes to the Agency's part in Palestinian society and history. This is due in part to the political situation in which the Agency and its mandate are embedded, as they rely on donations. Therefore, both members of the Agency and researchers are concerned that criticism, even if constructive, can generate aid cuts. An example of this was seen during the first Trump administration when the United States (U.S.), as the largest donor, cut funds on short notice, worsening an already urgent funding crisis (Berg et al., 2022; Berg, 2020). The latest funding cuts due to accusations of UNRWA staff being involved in the events of the 7th of October in 2023, also shows the vulnerability in their funding situation (Al-Jazeera, 2024; UN, 2024b). Two international independent investigations, however have concluded that while in a minority of cases there “may have been involvement” (with these staff contracts terminated), the majority of accusations were either unsubstantiated or could not be verified or authenticated

because of insufficient evidence. Several countries have since resumed their funding to the Agency (Lazzarini, 2024; Macaskill, 2024).

UNWRA's educational mandate has been a specifically sensitive subject as the curriculum, alongside the teachers, have been politicized, accused of encouraging violence and antisemitism (see, for example, UNWATCH, 2023). As the world is facing a growing refugee population, of which Palestine refugees account for over 20 percent, knowledge about their education and its intended purposes is important (UNHCR, 2023). Education has the potential to give prospects and hope for the future, to promote social and gender equality, to enculturate children into citizens, and to empower both communities and individuals (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Hopper, 2018).

It is challenging to study education for Palestine refugees without placing the refugees and their current situation in a global context. Today UNRWA operates one of the largest NGO education systems in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Abdul-Hamid et al., 2016). Their education mandate includes both primary and vocational education. The focus of this paper will be their primary education of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, exploring the possibilities within this for a Freirean approach to refugee education. The data material comprise policy documents related to refugee education as well as interviews with UNRWA staff related to policy and practice in UNRWA schools in Jordan. In particular, the analysis is sectioned according to key concepts in Freire's work, and identifies how UNRWA promotes human rights education during the ongoing occupation and genocide, and how this work can be seen as contributing to an education for liberation (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; International Court of Justice (ICJ), 2024). As UNRWA is an organization for Palestine refugees, the ongoing struggle in the occupied territories also impacts the diaspora in Jordan, due to the relationship between national liberation struggle, historical self-knowledge, and identity (Sayigh, 2017).

Traditionally UN agencies and other NGOs have organized and delivered their aid work in three conceptual approaches, which has been reflected in Education in Emergency programs (EiE). Burde (2006) refers to these as the humanitarian approach, the development approach, and the human rights approach. The humanitarian approach emphasizes the role of education in immediate protection, the development approach focuses on education as a long-term social investment, and the human rights approach underlines education as a human right. Yeo and Yoo (2022) argue the need to see refugees as subjects of education, and thus present a Freirean approach to EiE. As Hammoud (2017) argued, as long as Palestinian refugees are alienated from their own struggle, they cannot be emancipated. Engaged with as subjects of education could, however, support Palestinian refugees to overcome this alienation.

This paper emphasizes Freirean pedagogy, combined with Yeo and Yoo (2022), Darder (2015), and Darder et al.'s (2017) interpretations of his work, as a framework for understanding UNRWA's education mandate, particularly their work in primary education. Freire focused on liberation for all within the context of different arenas, through an analysis of culture and power structures (Darder et al., 2017; Freire, 2017). As expressed by Yeo and Yoo (2022), Freire believed that through education students could be empowered to "transform their oppressive reality through active participation toward social justice" (p. 2204). Education for refugees could thus help the students to liberate themselves through questioning, and by obtaining the ability to view their circumstances in the midst of their oppressive situation (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022). Education for people displaced from their home under conditions of political oppression should thus have such an approach. Yeo and Yoo (2022) argue that a Freirean perspective on education seeks to teach individuals to read their reality and offer new possibilities for them to interpret it,

empowering them to critically examine the nature of their social and historical situation. Hence education can create a critical consciousness within their diaspora life, by offering a space for reflection on the ongoing occupation and genocide, and how it affects their life. Education for Palestine refugees is thus an arena where dictated capabilities are questioned, and the students are offered an arena where they can participate in the process that affects the enjoyment of their own rights (Freire, 2017).

Methodology

In seeking to understand the intended purpose of primary education through UNRWA, I examined staff's understanding of UNRWA's educational mandate. In the autumn of 2022 and spring of 2023, I engaged in 23 qualitative interviews and informal conversations with ten teachers and other educational staff working in UNRWA and different NGOs in Jordan. My sampling was meant to locate participants with specific knowledge of UNRWA and refugee education. Cohen et al. (2018) defined a sample as a smaller group or subset of the population. There are different types of sampling, but for this research I chose purposive sampling. My sample is thus selected purposely, based on the participants' knowledge in the field. I combined this with a snowballing approach, where one person led me to the another, who led me to another (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Potential weaknesses when using this approach can be the possibility of biases, including my own, and/or the participants' network can lead to participants with similar mindsets and values. Snowballing has nevertheless been crucial to recruit participants for my research.

Human interaction is central for knowledge production, and interviews can be central to produce and gain knowledge in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018). For this research, I conducted in-person and online semi structured synchronous interviews with NGO staff, supplemented by online open-ended structured, asynchronous interviews with teachers working in different NGO schools in Jordan. The synchronous semi structured interviews gave me the opportunity to be flexible in the interview and ask follow up questions (Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). The focus during my interviews with UNRWA staff was how the implementation of HRCRT was understood and adapted on a "national level" and classroom level. Combined with my interviews, I also included informal conversations in my data material. Swain and King (2022) refer to informal conversations as "conversations with a motive" (p. 9); on some occasions I found this more relevant than interviews, in order to get a broader understanding of UNRWA and refugee education in Jordan. The informal conversations were conducted during fieldwork in Jordan in the autumn of 2022. Doing research on an NGO, it has been important to keep in mind that I cannot ensure that all research participants answered in terms of their own opinions. It is possible that they might have answered according to guidelines the Agency might have. Therefore, informal conversations can be of great value in the data material.

In what follows, I first examine the intended purposes of UNRWA education, as evident in the official policy and as reported by participants. I then reflect on these in terms of a Freirean approach, which combines a sociocultural and decolonial approach. In a decolonial approach, the power imbalance between the Global South and the Global North is central. The divide between the Global South and the Global North has been shaped by patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism, as argued by Duvenage (2024). Freire (2017) challenges these power relations and calls for the (self-)liberation of the oppressed, and thus a Freirean approach can be viewed as a decolonial approach. To do so, Freire (2017) presents a problem-posing approach to education, with people's history and background as the point of departure to education. As Palestinians accessing education through UNRWA in Jordan live the reality of being intergenerational refugees due to the settler-

colonial creation of Israel in 1948, a decolonial approach is highly relevant. I am especially mindful of this as a white female researcher from the Global North.

Table 1

Formal Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation
Staff A	Female Staff	UNRWA
Staff B	Female Staff	UNRWA
Staff C	Female Staff	UNHCR
Staff D	Male Staff	War Child
Teacher A	Female Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher B	Female Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher C	Female Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher D	Female Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher E	Female Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher F	Male Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher G	Male Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher H	Male Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher I	Male Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher J	Male Teacher	UNRWA
Teacher K	Female Teacher	NRC
Teacher L	Female Teacher	NRC
Teacher M	Male Teacher	NRC
Teacher N	Male Teacher	NRC

In addition to the interviews, I analyze relevant documents concerning UNRWA's educational mandate and their HRCRT program. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents- both printed and electronic material" (p. 27). The purpose of this analysis is to gain knowledge and understanding, and to access meaning from the data. To find relevant documents for my research, I conducted literature searches through academic databases like Academic Search Ultimate, alongside getting relevant literature sent to me in emails from informal participant A. To supplement this, I gathered data through UNRWA and UN databases. The collected documents comprise reports and articles concerning Jordan, Palestine, UNRWA and refugee education. Central in my work are the surveys conducted by Åge Tiltnes, and Huafeng Zhang from 2014, "The socio-economic conditions of Jordan's Palestinian camp refugees: Summary of findings from two surveys, 2011," alongside Sarah Dryden-Peterson et al.'s article from 2019, "The Purposes of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems". These were supplemented by approximately twenty academic articles, reports, and strategic plans from different researchers in the field of Palestine refugees, as well as UNRWA and the Agency's web page: unrwa.org. I used a deductive approach

to organize the data material in broad topics, such as ‘funding’ and ‘purpose,’ and then inductive coding to organize these themes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022).

Table 2.
Informal Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation
Informal participant A	Female	Post-doctoral researcher in Norway
Informal participant B	Female	Local staff at Norwegian Embassy in Jordan
Informal participant C	Female	Staff NRC Jordan
Informal participant D	Male	Staff NRC Jordan
Informal participant E	Male	Staff UNICEF Jordan

Education for Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance

Naser-Najjab (2020) argued that resistance gains "renewed impetus and purpose within oppression" (p. 325), and that education holds the potential to drive transformation and social change. According to Freire (2017), to achieve liberation, the oppressed need to be aware of the nature and content of their oppression. He viewed literacy as a decolonizing practice, a central part in a “larger political struggle against hegemony, which entails a critical literacy that prepares students toward a more just life” (Darder, 2015, p. 103). UNRWA schools use the curricula of the host nations, adapted to fit UNRWA values. This is done through a supplement to the curricula on human rights, through a Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) program designed in collaboration with UNESCO (Shabaneh, 2012; *What we do: curriculum*). This makes UNRWA schools the only educational institution in the region that offers a program specifically focusing on human rights in their curriculum. Albhaisi (2022) argued that human rights are paradoxical in many ways, including due to the North/South dichotomy, and by focusing on human rights in education it “continues to be a form of coloniality” (p. 149). This is due to “the role played by UN institution in exercising the politics of knowledge production of human rights” (p. 149), Albhaisi (2022) explains. Following a top-down approach when it comes to the spread of human rights culture the UN does not meet the needs of marginalized communities. However, as the majority of UNRWA staff is comprised of Palestine refugees themselves, it is possible to argue that the explicit focus on human rights has the potential to question, challenge and contribute to overcoming the asymmetrical power relations within the schools, communities, and larger society (Darder, 2015; UNRWA, n.d.).

When the HRCRT policy was launched in 1999, it was a pilot project in UNRWA’s schools on the West Bank and Gaza that aimed to teach pupils to solve conflicts in a non-violent manner (Shabaneh, 2012). In this chapter I will analyze the HRCRT policy in light of different concepts central to Freire’s pedagogy. I begin with a presentation of the program in relation to a Freirean approach, before I divide the article into subheadings which focus on: expressed purpose of education, empowerment, liberatory education, a critical social consciousness, problem-posing pedagogy, the utopian character of a liberatory education, and conclude with the idea of hope.

In the section about the expressed purpose of education section, the purpose of UNRWA's education, as it is reflected in policies and in the teacher's intention with their teaching, will be the focus. The empowerment section will focus on the agency to act in, and on the world, while the section about liberatory education emphasizes conditions that can liberate students from oppression. The critical social consciousness section focuses on the development of critical awareness, and the problem-posing pedagogy section will look into Freire's ideas on how to educate out of oppression. In the utopian character of education section, the focus lies in the role of education for a better future, while the idea of hope presents UNRWA teachers' hope that one day Palestine will be free.

HRCRT Policy

According to Staff B (see Table 1 above), the pilot project of the HRCRT program was a success, and thus UNRWA established the policy in all its fields of operation, with the aim of promoting knowledge about non-violence, student participation, and fundamental rights. The program is meant to give their education a rights-based approach to the curricula, with empowerment of their students to exercise their rights alongside being proud of their Palestinian identity as the objective (*What we do: curriculum; What we do: Education*). From a Freirean perspective, UNRWA's approach creates a space where students and teachers, together, can rethink and discover material and social contradictions impacting their world. This is the essence of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, which he argues is central in the achievement of liberation (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2017).

Staff A and Staff B explained that, to support the teachers in embedding this rights-based approach to their teaching, the Agency developed a toolkit, alongside hiring "Human Rights Educational Specialists" responsible for supporting the teachers, principals, and the student parliament on how to use the toolkit and implement the policy in their practice. The toolkit is based on seven themes: community links, diversity, respect, participation, equality, conflict resolution, non-discrimination, and general human rights according to Staff B and policy documents from UNRWAs webpage (UNRWA, 2013a; *What we do: Education*). Teacher C further explains:

The HRCRT-program provides a practical guide that helps the teachers in strengthening human rights culture and embed it in the class. It consists of a general guide on human rights, planning tools for its integration at schools, and a lot of interesting, useful, and practical activities about human rights that develop the students' personalities.

She has found this useful in her own work. Freire (2014) argues that the "main responsibilities for educators are for changes in education" (p. 18) that is shaped by the situation in which the educator and education are embedded, such as UNRWA's HRCRT program.

Holding the position as a Human Rights Education Specialist, Staff B explained that the specialists have an overarching aim to achieve a human rights culture both at the schools and in the communities. To connect with the parents and communities, they started to organize a Human Rights Day once a year, and the parents are invited to the schools where the students and teachers have prepared different activities. Staff B noted that this has been enjoyable for the parents, children, and communities. Initiatives like this may contribute to a Freirean project of empowering students to "transform their oppressive reality through active participation toward social justice" (Yeo & Yoo, 2022, p. 2204). One could also argue that by including the local community in this

sense, the communities become places where change can happen through praxis and solidarity (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022).

Teacher C understands the policy as a program that “aims to educate UNRWA students about Human Rights”. She emphasized that the program makes the students aware of their own rights, when to speak up for their rights, and to respect others’ rights. Alongside teaching tolerance and conflict resolution, Teacher C also emphasized communication skills: “Also it leads the students to have good communication skills that help them to be tolerant and able to solve any conflict or problem.” In their interviews, Teacher E and Teacher J echoed this, and highlighted the importance of students knowing their rights as humans when their people are subjected to oppression.

Expressed Purpose of Education

Teacher A observed that “Palestine refugees have to learn in order to keep their issue alive, they should be aware and well educated, so that they can build Palestine once again”. Even if the end purpose of their education is to rebuild Palestine, be integrated into the Jordanian society, or something else, Palestinian refugees are educated for an unknown future. Wallerstein (1990) argued that this unknown, one could call it an uncertainty within the world system, could be liberating; at the same time it could be disconcerting. How the situation is viewed is then key, as the unknown could be a place where growth happens.

As previously discussed, when NGOs dependent on international donors are providing education for refugees, the education can be unstable due to the unpredictability of funding (Berg et al., 2022; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). With the UNHCR Global Education strategy (GES), the need for including refugees in the education systems of the host nations was therefore argued (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). The intention was to create a future of opportunities; however, most refugees live in contexts surrounded by conflict areas. These countries, including Jordan, are often suffering from overstrained education systems; and thus including refugees in the host nation schools could do the opposite. Sometimes the low quality of education in host nations schools can end up limiting refugees’ future opportunities (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

At a national level refugee education is seen as a “strategy to navigate the unknowable futures refugees faced” (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019, p. 360). Due to UNRWAs role as a quasi-state for Palestine refugees living in the MENA region, one could claim that the Agency’s education program is both on a national, and school level. As such, UNRWA helps Palestine refugees to navigate into their unknowable future, including the unknowable future of Palestine and the refugees’ future in Jordan. Teacher I agrees, as he claims that the purpose of education in UNRWA schools is “to create a generation that is prepared for the future, and that is aware of all the relevant rights and responsibilities”. Teacher J, however, points out that there has been a “massive decay in the quality” of the education offered at UNRWA schools since he started working as a teacher there over 20 years ago. This is due to funding, he explained. As a result of shortages in funding, the number of students per class is higher, and many schools work in double shifts. Teacher C and Staff A support this view. Staff A said that

the first thing, is that it minimize the schooling time or the schooling day. And for example, sometimes we give the class section 30 minutes only. And sometimes they don't have the five minutes between classes, there is no breaks between classes. And this makes a pressure on the students and on the teachers. Some activities we

can't do it by the last periods or the last sections, like physical education, because the schoolyard is filled by the coming students. This makes a pressure and minimize some activities.

Teacher C emphasized the negative effects the double shift schools have on both quality and access to the education UNRWA schools offer. Double shift schools operate with one shift in the morning, and one shift in the evening in the same school building, often with the same teacher working both shifts, Teacher A explained. Teacher G pointed out that “double-shift schools are a big problem that leads to chaos in education and creativity, shortening the duration of classes”. Teacher A supports this, as she pointed out that the shift in the morning starts too early, and the shift in the evening starts too late. According to her this has an impact on the achievements of the students. The double shift schools seem to be creating insufficient learning arenas for the children in both shifts. This was mentioned by all the participants and supported by all the reviewed documents (e.g., MoE, 2018; Salem, 2021; Tiltne & Zhang, 2014).

During the 1960s, UNRWA's education program grew to become their flagship program. Al Hussein (2010) argued that education was then emphasized as “an investment for the purpose of developing the potential of a human being” (p. 14). The teachers working with Syrian refugees that were interviewed in this research all agreed that they were educating the children just to keep them busy now, but not with the purpose of a long-term outcome. The data collected from UNRWA staff for this research show that the teachers in these schools show a greater hope for the future of their students, and focus on the long-term outcome of their education. UNRWA schools thus create both stability and hope for the future, with a strong emphasis that one possible future is to rebuild Palestine when the occupation comes to an end. Teacher G affirmed that the Palestine refugees' future is “not easy, and full of challenges, but the Palestine refugees are educated for a long-term outcome”. Education of refugees, thus, can not only provide opportunities for the refugee itself, but also for the community to navigate the unpredictability and limitations they face in the future. As such, aspiration, social cohesion, belonging, and learning can be developed within schools (Salem, 2021).

The primary objective for education, according to Freire (2017), is that everyone becomes “fully human”, that the oppressed are liberated without becoming oppressors. To do so it is crucial that the oppressed are aware of their oppression, and hence guide the world towards liberation (Freire, 2017). Palestine refugees in Jordan could be argued to be oppressed in two ways, both as people from a land under occupation, and as an oppressed group within another nation state (El-Abed, 2014, 2021; Farah, 2009). A central vulnerability within refugee education is the lack of grounding in the refugees' own culture. One could argue that to educate refugees with liberation as the purpose, a foundation in the culture the students possess could be valuable. With their own culture at the core of education, it is possible to believe that this could foster a sense of belonging to the refugee child, which is key when it comes to prospects for the future (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Freire, 2017; Kirk & Cassity, 2007). As UNRWA adapts the curriculum with their own values, they arguably foster a sense of belonging for the Palestine refugees. As mentioned, they also highlight a sort of problem-posing pedagogy. In that sense one could claim that they educate for liberation.

INEE (2022) argues that when quality education is provided during conflict, it can counter underlying causes of violence, alongside fostering tolerance, inclusion, and human rights awareness. Through their HRCRT program, it is possible to argue that UNRWA builds on this and takes it further by including an explicit focus on allowing their students' voices to be heard. This

is, for instance, done through their focus on the school parliament where they make space for student initiative, and teach them communication skills to reflect on and speak up about their situation, which was mentioned by all UNRWA staff and teachers interviewed.

On a national level, quality education for refugees focuses on knowledge, competencies, and skills that could prepare the students to participate in the society alongside finding and creating jobs (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). The object of education here is to help guide the students for the unknowable future. Within quality education on a global level however, the focus is on the future of integration in the host country. Hence, this is meant to foster inclusion, with a focus on language, teachers, and access to the curriculum of the host nation (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). As a quasi-state, UNRWA offers quality education on both levels, but they foster inclusion within the culture, language, and history of Palestine, alongside providing the Palestine refugees the opportunity to find and create jobs, and thus participate in Jordanian society (see, for example: Abdul-Hamid et al., 2016; Al Hussein, 2000, 2010). Education that fosters inclusion, could also foster unity within the Palestinian refugee community in a complex situation such as the one UNRWA and its refugees are embedded in (Al Hussein, 2000, 2010; Irfan, 2019). In essence, this is a central aspect in the quest for liberation, as Freire (2017) argued.

Through this policy, UNRWA is arguably inviting and creating conditions in which refugees can transgress and challenge boundaries which they find themselves embedded in (Freire, 2017). As such, they are in line with the Freirean perspective which “calls for the refugee learners to be regarded as the transformants of their own destinies in and through refugee education” (Yeo & Yoo, 2022, p. 2209). One could therefore claim that the purpose of education for Palestine refugees is to create critical thinkers who question, shape, and form their reality (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022). This is supported by OCHA (2024), which highlights the Agency’s role in creating critical thinkers able to “achieve their full potential under the difficult circumstances in which they live”.

Empowerment and Agency to Act in and on the World

As mentioned by all staff and UNRWA teachers interviewed, one of the most important things they initiated when implementing the HRCRT policy was the school parliament. Staff A explained that through the school parliament, the children learn both leadership and communication skills they can use for further education and life in general. Staff B agreed and highlighted the role of the student parliament in implementing student initiatives in the schools. One could say that this makes the school an arena where dictated capabilities are questioned, as the children have the opportunity to participate in the process which affects the enjoyment of their own rights (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022) - in essence, a Freirean approach to their education. Through the seven themes, the children are encouraged to see the needs of the school, and act accordingly, as pointed out by Staff B. As an example, she mentioned a student who, after the budget cuts by the US during the first Trump administration, travelled to New York to advocate for their right to education at the US congress. The arguments she used were based on the HRCRT-program, which Staff B said is meant to equip students with life skills.

Liberatory Education

In the traditional approaches to providing education for refugees, refugees are subject to choices made by others, to the extent that their decisions are not their own (Yeo & Yoo, 2022).

However, Frymer (2005), inspired by Freire, argued that there is a need to consider students as a “conscious social actor who has the ability, the desire and the opportunity to participate in social and political life” (p. 4). This can be seen as central within refugee education, and has alignments and potential for a sort of Freirean education. With a Freirean approach, refugee students would be considered as subjects of education, not simply objects of interventions (Freire, 2017; Yeo & Yoo, 2022). This is what UNRWA could be argued to do through their HRCRT program, where Palestine refugees are viewed as subjects of education, taught to view the world in a critical manner, particularly in their focus on the student parliament, as many of the informant highlighted. This could help refugees to be liberated from conditions that oppress them, in accordance with Freire’s pedagogy. The way the HRCRT program integrates the experiences of the children, alongside creating a space for dialogue and critical consciousness, is in essence a Freirean approach to refugee education. Maadad (2019) additionally argued that this approach provides “inspiration, knowledge and practical learning pathways for refugee students to pursue their own envisaged futures” (p. 21).

Conscientização — Critical Social Consciousness

According to Yeo and Yoo (2022), a Freirean approach to refugee education enables “the refugee teachers and learners to raise questions, identify their own set of problems and to seek for their own solutions” (p. 2208). The program gives Palestine refugees a place to exercise their right to be heard, and enables them to develop a new awareness of self, according to Staff B. Through the HRCRT program, the children are encouraged to raise questions, especially concerning human rights, and identify their own issues within this, as data highlighted earlier shows. It creates a space for dialogue within the classrooms, schools, and communities. By doing so, students are included in a process of both questioning and shaping their reality (Freire, 2017). Thus, Palestinian refugees are engaged in their process of reaching a critical consciousness. As such, it is possible to argue that the HRCRT policy connects with the essence of the philosophy central in Freire’s (2017) work, which he called conscientização- a critical social consciousness. Darder et al. (2017) argued that this is a “process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them” (p. 14). With the dominant narrative of Israelis vs Palestinians in the world today, a narrative which is often misleading and favors Israel particularly in the Global North (see, for example: Hawari, 2024; Said, 1984), this critical social consciousness could be of great value to the children in UNRWA schools to be able to have an impact on their own futures.

Problem-Posing Pedagogy

Of the seven themes in the policy, participation is central; this is present in all the remaining themes according to Staff B and Teacher F. In the toolkit of the program, participation is featured as an “integral aspect of all teaching and learning inside and outside the classroom” (UNRWA, 2013a, p. 28). As such, the program can be seen to be in accordance with Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy, which according to Darder (2015) aspires

to an integral awareness of self and others and an emergence of consciousness, which arms teachers and students with the critical objectivity necessary to allow ourselves and others “to be”, so that together we can explore the consequences of relationships and their material circumstances (p. 100).

This concept of dialogue supports students and teachers to improve the way they view power inequalities, and discover new prospects of free humanity (Freire, 2012, 2017). Hence the program creates a learning space, where participation, and thus cooperation, between teacher and student is central. As Freire (2017) argued, we seek to understand the world through dialogue, and as a result the world is seen more clearly.

By elevating human rights through their education program one could argue that UNRWA involve “a constant unveiling of reality” (Freire, 2017, p. 54), in the sense that they place an emphasis on human rights in the current situation in which their country and people are embedded (Hawari, 2024; Naser-Najjab, 2020; Said, 1984). Freire (2017) accentuates that when there is a focus on making students aware of issues that are related to “themselves in the world and with the world” (p. 54), students will have a feeling of being more challenged, and thus motivated to respond to the challenge. Hence the HRCRT policy is calling for students to respond to the situation in which they are embedded, like the student who traveled to New York to advocate their rights.

As the Jordanian curriculum is adapted with UNRWA’s values and principles, including with a focus on making their pupils proud of their Palestinian heritage (UNRWA, 2013b), one could argue that this way of educating is to a larger extent relevant for students than a traditional banking model would be. The traditional banking model would not support Palestine refugees to question the oppressive situation that they are embedded in, hence they could then adapt their situation to the world as it is, without questioning it (Darder, 2018; Freire, 2017). According to Darder (2018), the “problem-posing pedagogy creates the space, place and time for teachers and students to discover and rethink together the social and material contradictions that impact their world” (p. 115). This is done by a dialogical enactment of praxis: that is action, reflection and naming the world (Freire, 2017).

UNRWA has an aim of education “which develops the full potential of Palestine refugees” (UNRWA, 2011, p. ix). As argued previously, could UNRWA’s HRCRT program be seen as a problem-posing pedagogy. Through this, pupils are developed into critical thinkers, who do not simply accept the world as it is, but have an urge to change the world, in other words into students who are awakened. When they are awakened, there is an inevitable call to become fully human, the only option for the students is thus to eliminate oppression, as being oppressed prohibits the potential for full humanization, which is the “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” according to Freire (2017, p. 57). As such with one intended purpose of their education being to develop their students’ full potential, one could claim that UNRWA aims to educate their pupils for full humanization and to, as Staff B stressed, educate them out of their oppressed situation.

The Utopian Character of a Liberatory Education

Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) argue that “the purposes of education are fundamentally political, tackling identification and prioritization of goals that schools should pursue” (p. 347). The future, and therefore the “kind of society we have in mind” as Dewey (1916, p. 97) framed it, is eminently unpredictable. Access to education is central when it comes to reducing or preventing poverty (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Data in this research illustrates that Palestine refugees that access education through the UNRWA schools usually come from a lower socioeconomic status (see, for example, Tiltne & Zhang, 2014). Education could thus be key to preventing poverty amongst Palestine refugees. With recent developments regarding Israel’s ban on UNRWA and their

services in Israeli territories, this could have a huge impact. The cost of providing similar services for other NGOs are much higher, and they have not developed the same trust and knowledge in Palestine and with Palestinian refugees as UNRWA (Jensehaugen et al., 2025; UN, 2024a).

According to Griffiths and Williams (2020) one part of raising the pupils' critical consciousness about the social reality they are embedded in, as well as their role is to "take action in the world to change the world" (p. 140). By engaging students in activities that enable them to create their imagined, utopian, alternatives to how the world is, students can imagine actions that can be taken in order to transform reality and urge for better futures; thus critical education can have an utopian character. The concept of utopia also presents an idea of an "utopian force" which guides and inspires to action (Griffiths & Williams, 2020). In the current situation for Palestine and its refugees, either living under settler colonial occupation, or in diaspora, this "utopian force" via critical education can provide an anchor for the movement towards change (Griffiths & Williams, 2020; UN, 2022). Freire (2012) noted that

It is certain that men and women can change the world for the better, can make it less unjust, but they can do so only from the starting point of the concrete reality they "come upon" in their generation. They cannot do it on the basis of reveries, false dreams, or pure illusion. What is not possible, however, is to even think about transforming the world without a dream, without utopia, or without a vision ... Dreams are visions for which one fights (p. 45).

This utopian force within projects based in socialist ideas of, amongst others, equality and peace with justice is much needed in today's world, and within refugee education.

The Idea of Hope

Freire "maintained that hope, as an ontological need, must be at the heart of what all the progressive educator does, as an impetus for transformative action" (Maadad, 2019, p. 21). Similar to Teacher G's focus on education for a long term outcome, all the teachers from UNRWA schools, that participated in this research, expressed a hope for the future of their students. As such, it could be argued, one intended purpose could be as a way to transform the oppressive reality they find themselves embedded in. It is possible to conclude that the UNRWA-led education in Jordan could help Palestinian refugee children to liberate themselves by obtaining the ability to both see their own situation in the midst of the oppressive nature of their reality, and question it. As Maadad (2019) argued, peace will be the byproduct of hope as an energy for transformation. Could one purpose of their education be peace? With their focus on the HRCRT program in their education, the Agency supports the pupils to develop a new self-consciousness and awareness of their place in the world, which could be central on a course towards peace with justice (Freire, 2017).

Education Towards Liberation

The HRCRT program, alongside the toolkit, could be seen as a way of introducing a problem-posing pedagogy in their education program. If so, this could be beneficial for the children on the path towards liberation (Freire, 2017). As argued by Yeo and Yoo (2022), it is essential to view students as subjects of education, not just objects of interventions if the aim is for refugee children to become "fully human". By having this approach, refugee students will more likely become conscious social actors, with the ability and desire to participate in political and social life. Kirk and Cassity (2007) argue that in the "Minimum standards for quality education for refugee

youth”, dialogue between refugee student and teacher could benefit education for refugees, as it could help create a mutual understanding of the situation in which they are embedded. That refugee students find what they are being taught relevant is key in quality education. Most of the teachers in the UNRWA schools are themselves Palestinian refugees, thus it is possible to conclude that there is a mutual understanding between teachers and students as they are more likely to be in similar situations. By applying a problem-posing pedagogy, learning happens in a dialogical space (Freire, 2017). This, as the above illustrates, can be claimed to be present in UNRWAs HRCRT policy.

As the second largest host nation for refugees in the world, Jordan hosts the majority of the Palestinian diaspora (Berg et al., 2022; UNJordan, 2021). Education is viewed as one of the most central development and humanitarian initiatives, especially for those that live in uncertain times and places, because it can provide protection, stability, hope, and prospects for the future (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). UNRWA is the main provider of education for Palestine refugees, therefore the main purpose of this paper has been to shed light on aspects of UNRWA’s education that potentially contribute to a liberatory education for Palestinian refugees. Their focus on the student parliament was particularly highlighted by research participants as a way to support Palestinian refugees to pursue their own envisaged futures. The nature of official refugee education policy and mandates is often general and conventional, which could be seen in constant tension with what staff on the ground say. This is a process to be worked through, but it has significant potential in what refugee education can offer students. Such an approach is valuable for a wider project of social transformation, as is required for Palestinians, and for humanity more broadly. Findings from this research suggest that the Agency invites its refugees to transgress and challenge the boundaries they are embedded in, through the HRCRT program, which can be seen as a problem-posing pedagogy. As such, UNRWA’s education program reflects the Freirean perspective, which argues that students should be seen as transformants of their own futures, in and through education - to the extent possible in their refugee situation. Thus, I would argue that the purpose of their education is to create critical thinkers that are capable of shaping and questioning their reality.

UNRWA, Palestinian refugees, and the MENA region as a whole have uncertain times ahead. For now, Jordan remains a stable hub in the region. However, as a lower-middle-income country that is contending with a huge influx of refugees, the country is highly dependent on international aid and the services provided by UNRWA to Palestinian refugees. If UNRWA were to cease to exist, without a just solution to the Palestine refugee problem, Jordan could end up being responsible for providing education and other services to approximately 2.3 million Palestine refugees currently residing in their Kingdom. The unresolved question of the Palestinian refugees continues to be an underlying cause for the lack of stability in the region. As the main provider of services to Palestinian refugees, UNRWA could be key in keeping the situation stable (Berg & Jensehaugen, 2021).

The situation for Palestinian refugees is different than other refugee populations; however other NGOs can benefit from UNRWAs long standing experience with education in emergency situations. The Agency was first at using curricula from the host nation, and with their HRCRT program one could argue that they are providing education with the aim of their students becoming “fully human” (Freire, 2017). Despite the unknown future for both the Agency and Palestinian refugees, findings from this research reflect a shared consciousness of the purpose of the UNRWA-led education for Palestinian refugees, which is in accordance with both UNRWA’s mandate and fundamental principles within Freire’s pedagogy. As Teacher A stressed, “Palestine refugees have

to learn in order to keep their issues alive, they should be aware and well educated so that they can build Palestine once again”.

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