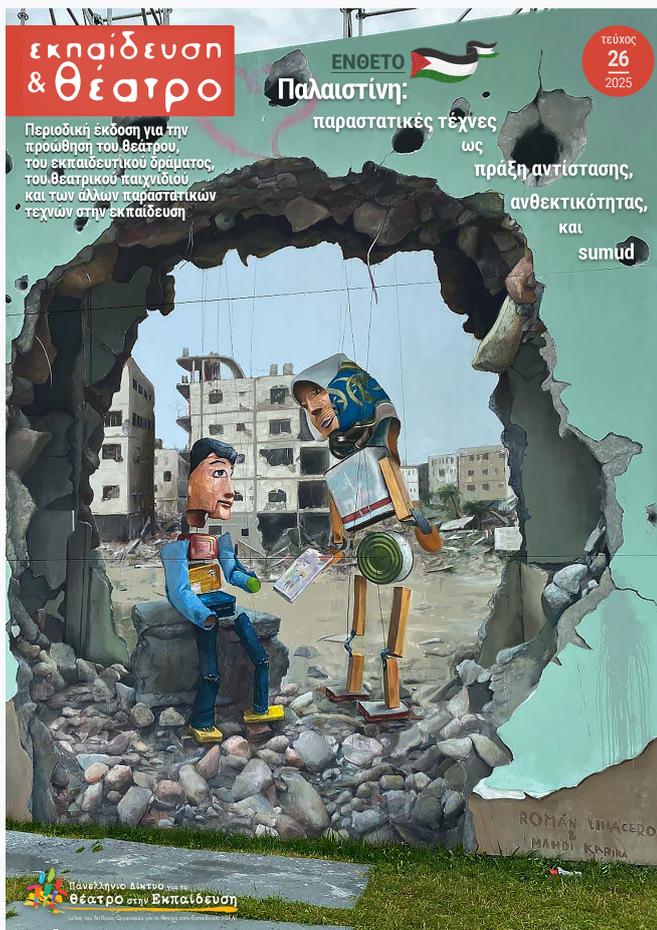# Education & Theatre

Education & Theatre

Rehearsing Pedagogy: Arts-Based Education as Creative Practice in Palestinian Higher Education

Rand Barakat

Rehearsing pedagogy: Arts-based education as creative practice in Palestinian higher education
A case study of the MA Programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University

Rand Barakat
Bethlehem University, Palestine

Abstract

This study examines the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University, situating arts-based education as a tool for personal, pedagogical and community development in Palestinian higher education. Employing a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduates and current students to explore participants' motivations, experiences and engagement with creative practices. Thematic analysis highlights how the programme fosters critical reflection, personal transformation and innovative teaching approaches, while providing a supportive space for navigating complex social and institutional challenges. Findings demonstrate how arts-based pedagogy can reshape teaching practices and inform understandings of learning, identity and community engagement within contexts marked by cultural and structural constraints.

Keywords: *Creative pedagogy, arts-based education, teacher training, critical pedagogy, educational transformation, creative agency, Palestine*

Introduction

In Palestine, the arts constitute a critical medium for expression, resilience and the preservation of cultural identity, particularly within higher education, where they are increasingly recognised as instruments for professional development and reflective practice. This study investigates the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University, examining how its pedagogical strategies cultivate students' creative, social and reflective competencies.

Learning within the MA programme is often embodied and participatory; students form circles, articulate personal narratives, respond through movement and enact memories, thereby generating spaces characterised by reflection, emotional engagement and collective meaning-making. Situated within the broader sociopolitical context of the city, with its calls to prayer, quotidian rhythms and proximate checkpoints, these practices facilitate students' navigation of challenges and exploration of identity. For this paper, semi-structured interviews with students and graduates explored programme motivations, pedagogical impact and the role of the arts in everyday life, with thematic analysis revealing how the programme supports professional growth, personal resilience and the continuity of cultural identity in Palestinian higher education.

Arts-based education in Palestine: Historical and pedagogical foundations

Arts in Palestine have long functioned as more than aesthetic expression; they have served as powerful tools for resistance, cultural preservation and political commentary. From community-based storytelling to politically engaged theatre, artistic practices offered Palestinian ways to rehearse freedom, assert presence and sustain hope, aligning with Boal's (1979) concept of "rehearsal for transformation". As Shaik (2024) notes, since 1948, art has played a central role in expressing national identity and countering cultural erasure. Performing and theatrical arts, in particular, exemplify how communities employ creative practices to reflect critically on social realities, resonating with Freire's (2000) principles of dialogue and participatory learning.

The First Intifada (1987–1993) marked a significant shift in how the arts functioned within Palestinian society. According to a study on the artistic production in the First Palestinian Intifada, Elayyan (2023) argues that visual arts, theatre and music during the First Intifada served not only to express national identity, but also to actively counter the narratives imposed by occupation. Artists across Palestine collaborated on projects that documented everyday struggles and embodied collective memory through performance and image-making. Cultural institutions like El-Hakawati Theatre and community centres provided spaces for artistic production despite censorship and closures. These practices illustrate how arts functioned as informal educational spaces fostering reflection agency and critical engagement.

In the Second Intifada (2000–2005), artistic production became more symbolically layered, addressing trauma, displacement and social fragmentation (Shuman, 2024). Institutions such as The Freedom Theatre (https://thefreedomtheatre.org/) and Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society (https://alrowwad.org/) expanded community-based arts education, providing psychosocial support, creative engagement and critical learning opportunities. These organisations worked primarily with youth and marginalised communities, demonstrating that arts-based education can serve as both a method of expression and a pedagogical tool for critical thinking and social transformation.

Despite this rich tradition, the role of the arts within formal education remains limited. Palestine's national curriculum prioritises core subjects, leaving little room for critical, creative or student-centred artistic approaches (Rowe, 2016; Shinn, 2012). This dynamic reflects Freire's (2000) critique of the "banking model" of education, where students are positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants in meaning-making. Research by Wong et al. (2021) highlights how arts-integrated educational experiences can promote critical citizenship, dialogic learning and reflective practice, offering alternatives to conventional schooling constraints.

In this context, Bethlehem University's MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices emerges as a timely intervention, operationalising arts-based approaches to foster creativity, reflection and cultural engagement in higher education. The following section examines the programme as a uniquely Palestinian model of educational innovation, grounded in community, creativity and care.

Bethlehem University's MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices: A model of arts-based education

Rooted in learner-centred approaches and arts-based research, the MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices was launched in 2021 as a 37-credit-hour programme[1] designed to foster critical, creative and community-responsive educators. It blends interdisciplinary coursework across drama, theatre, music and visual arts, alongside foundational studies in philosophy, pedagogy, research and community engagement. According to the programme's formal description on the university's official website, students are encouraged to develop pedagogical tools that are both contextually responsive and socially engaged, reflecting principles of participatory dialogic learning (Freire, 2000) and embodied, transformative practice (Boal, 1979) intended for application in schools, community centers, refugee camps or cultural institutions across Palestine (Bethlehem University, n.d.).

More than a degree, the programme functions as a space for critical reflection, co-creation of knowledge and community-centred action. Through intensive summer residencies, fieldwork and sustained engagement with local artists and international scholars, students are invited to ground theory in lived experience. In this context, the arts operate as both a language and a method, aligning with arts-based research principles, enabling students to reclaim voice, resist fragmentation and imagine alternative possibilities.

The curriculum reflects this vision. Courses include Philosophy of Education, Creative and Critical Thinking, Current Debates in Education, Participatory Action Research Methods, and two levels each of Drama in Education and Creative

Learning Practices. Specialised courses in Culture and Practice through Arts-Based Research, Community Engagement and Practices, Theatre in Education, Visual Arts and Music Education provide students with both theoretical grounding and practical application. The programme culminates in a dissertation, an education placement and a final research project, all of which are integrated into a wider framework of arts-based inquiry and educational transformation (Bethlehem University, n.d.).

Developed in response to the limitations of traditional teacher preparation in Palestine, the programme invites educators to rethink their roles and relationships to knowledge, students and community. Creative pedagogies are not framed as perspective techniques, but as orientations to learning that begin with care, curiosity and cultural relevance, reflecting Freirean dialogic pedagogy and arts-based research principles. At its core is an emphasis on arts-based research, not as illustration, but as a generative mode of inquiry. Here, knowledge is co-created through image, sound, movement and story. Educators are trained to work with communities rather than on them, drawing from learners' lived experiences as the foundation of meaning-making.

Within a context where top-down reforms often fail to reach the practices of everyday teaching, this programme offers a rare and sustained space for transformation. By embedding creative, reflective and transdisciplinary practices in teacher training, it fosters not only professional development, but the possibility of a more humane, relational and liberatory model of education.

Voices from the programme: Lived experiences as pedagogy
Research methodology
This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived experiences of students in Bethlehem University's MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices. The case study design was chosen to allow in-depth exploration of how arts-based pedagogical practices are enacted, experienced and reflected upon in context, aligning with principles of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three women affiliated with the programme, two graduates and one currently enrolled student at the time of the interviews. The interviews were conducted via Zoom between May and June 2025, in Arabic, recorded with permission and translated into English by the author for analysis.

To ensure participant safety and ethical rigour, anonymity is maintained throughout this paper. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms: Layla, Noor and Sara. This approach protects their identities while allowing their experiences to be meaningfully represented.

Participants gave verbal informed consent at the beginning of each interview after the study's purpose, procedures and sensitive nature of the topic were fully explained. Confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time were assured.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data following a six-phase model, as outlined by Terry et al. (2017). This process included familiarisation with the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, refining themes and selecting representative excerpts. The analysis revealed recurring themes including personal transformation, critical consciousness, arts as resistance, pedagogical unlearning and the tensions of applying creative education in constrained environments. These themes shape the presentation of the participants' narratives that follow, which are offered not merely as testimonials, but as embodied pedagogical texts.

Framing the voices
In order to understand the lived impact of this pedagogical model, we turn to the voices of three participants, Noor, Sara and Layla (pseudonyms), whose journeys through the MA programme reflect both its potential and its limitations. Their narratives illustrate how creative pedagogy, when grounded in the Palestinian context, becomes not only a tool for educational practice, but also a vehicle for personal transformation, social awareness and cultural resistance. Across their stories, recurring themes illuminate the relationship between education, identity and activism under occupation.

While each participant brought her own context and perspective, they shared a deep engagement with the programme as a space of unlearning, experimentation and redefinition, not only of teaching practices, but of the self.

In what follows, their experiences are presented as personal testimonials as well as pedagogical texts, offering insight into how learning becomes meaningful when it is tied to context, embodiment and collective struggle.

All three participants entered the programme with a background in education, but with varying exposure to the arts. Yet, their motivations shared a common thread, a desire for more meaningful approaches to teaching and self-expression. Noor described her initial interest as a search for "something different, something strange and more aligned with what I love, music, arts, drama". Sara

saw the programme as an opportunity to expand her pedagogical practice and explore education as a participatory and socially engaged process. Layla, already immersed in early childhood education, viewed the programme as a space to rethink her role as a teacher within an educational system shaped by daily intrusions of occupation.

Shifting perceptions:
From arts as expression to arts as praxis

As the programme progressed, all three participants described a profound shift in their understanding of the arts, not as a decorative or supplementary element in education, but as a central mode of critical engagement and pedagogical praxis.

Sara reflected on how the programme pushed her beyond traditional teaching, stating, "Pedagogy became something else; it was about creating spaces for dialogue, for shared inquiry, not only delivering knowledge". Noor described how the programme "opened my eyes to new ways of thinking, critical awareness, creative exploration and a deeper engagement with what lies beneath the surface of things".

Layla echoed this shift, particularly in how she began to relate to the learning process of her three-year-old students. She noted, "before I entered the programme, I thought I was giving my students the freedom to be creative, but I now realise that I was still drawing the path for them. The programme made me understand that I needed to respect each child's learning style". Layla further emphasised that the programme "made me live, see and experience things I had never encountered before".

Taken together, the reflections of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal a collective movement from instrumental views of education toward more transformative, embodied and contextually responsive understandings of pedagogy. Each participant underwent a shift from seeing the arts as tools for engagement or creativity to understanding them as modes of meaning-making, relationality and critical inquiry.

Noor's awakening to "what lies beneath the surface of things" signals a deepening of critical consciousness, where art functions as a method of inquiry into power, memory and identity. Sara's emphasis on dialogue and shared inquiry marks a clear departure from transmissive models of teaching, pointing toward Freirean, participatory learning spaces. Layla's recognition that she had previously limited her students' freedom highlights the internalisation of hierarchical pedagogy; her subsequent shift toward respecting diverse learning styles reflects the programme's impact on both epistemological and ethical levels.

In each case, learning was not merely about acquiring new methods, but about unlearning inherited assumptions, confronting complicity and embracing the vulnerability required to teach with openness and integrity.

Pedagogy as challenge:
Rooting the arts in the Palestinian context

Moving beyond personal transformation, the participants' narratives reveal how creative pedagogies in this programme became deeply connected to the Palestinian context. Rather than treating the arts as neutral or apolitical, they engaged them as living practices of survival, resilience and identity-making within a fragmented reality. The classroom, in this sense, functioned not merely as a site for learning, but as a space for cultural expression and critical engagement.

Noor, for example, reflected on how her awareness of structural and social dynamics deepened over the course of the programme. She described how it "opened my eyes to things I hadn't seen before," referring to her growing understanding of systemic challenges, collective memory and the everyday politics of space, language and representation. She emphasised that "art isn't something separate or secondary. It became part of meaningful engagement. When we dance, act or write, we're not just expressing; we are exploring, questioning and responding to our context".

Sara echoed this connection between art and critical awareness, particularly through her work with children. For her, artistic engagement was not only a tool for developing skills, but also an entry point into difficult conversations about social realities, belonging and resilience. She described performance as a way of reclaiming space and asserting presence, a method of saying "we are here" in environments that often limit expression.

For her MA thesis, Sara led a community-based project with children exposed to trauma. Using drawing, movement and storytelling, she supported them in processing emotions through non-verbal expression. She observed that many "would jump at every loud sound" or depicted collapsed buildings and helicopters without prompting. Sara reflected that "art became not just a means of emotional release, but a pathway to understanding. I wasn't offering therapy, yet the children revealed emotions they couldn't articulate with words".

Layla, in turn, spoke about how the programme helped her reconsider her role as a teacher within constrained educational systems. She began to see pedagogy itself as a site of engagement, particularly in contexts where classroom practice is limited

or closely monitored. "The programme helped me realise that my responsibility isn't just to teach," she explained, "but to create a space that is free, safe and reflective. That space might be the only place where a child can fully explore who they are".

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how creative pedagogies function not only as strategies for teaching, but as forms of cultural and social engagement. In contexts marked by fragmentation and constraint, the arts become a radical practice of connection and reflection. Through embodied performance, critical dialogue and collective inquiry, participants positioned themselves not only as educators or artists, but as facilitators of learning that is socially responsive, critically aware and culturally rooted.

Between vision and reality: Tensions, limitations and possibilities

While the MA programme offered participants new ways of thinking about education, applying these ideas in real-world settings often exposed difficult tensions. Creative pedagogy, centred on freedom, criticality and expression, frequently collided with institutional restrictions, social norms and political censorship. These challenges unfolded on multiple levels, in the implementation of creative practices within constrained school systems, and in the participants' negotiation of social and cultural resistance within their communities. The following analysis explores these tensions on both levels.

Implementing Pedagogy: Institutional and political constraints

Sara, for instance, found herself torn between the ideals of student-centred learning and the rigid expectations of the school system. "I realised I was still drawing the path for children", she explained, even when trying to offer them space. Her challenges were not only pedagogical but political. Working in an Israeli municipality-run kindergarten, she is explicitly forbidden from addressing anything related to Palestine, not even symbolically. This silencing underscores how structural power constrains the scope of educational freedom for Palestinian educators.

Noor also faced resistance, especially when working with war-affected children through theatre. Some parents dismissed her methods as mere play, and broader societal taboos made it difficult to discuss sensitive topics around childhood and trauma. Still, she found power in dialogue: "I learned how to create simple, shame-free spaces for mothers to talk and think together".

These stories reveal how transformation is never straightforward. Participants were not only innovating pedagogically, but also carrying the emotional burden of navigating censorship, social expectations and their own vulnerability as educators. And yet, they persisted, not by applying theory rigidly, but by adapting it with sensitivity, courage and care.

Facing cultural resistance: Social norms and entry barriers

While institutional constraints shaped the classroom context, cultural and familial dynamics posed barriers at the level of personal legitimacy. Layla, for example, encountered resistance from her community around her engagement with the arts, particularly singing and performance. Her family only began to accept her involvement when it was framed as part of her teacher training. Yet this seemingly minor shift in framing became a crucial entry point. Through storytelling and creative exploration, she moved from self-doubt to confidence, ultimately crafting her own expressive voice.

These layered tensions, between theory and application, freedom and constraint, social expectation and personal growth, underscore the complexity of practising creative pedagogy in Palestine. Rather than a frictionless implementation of theory, these narratives highlight creative pedagogy as a practice forged in tension – one that makes its greatest impact precisely because it operates in contested spaces. This insight has significant implications for future work at the intersection of education, culture and political struggle in Palestine.

Discussion

The narratives of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal that Bethlehem University's MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices is not merely a site of teacher preparation, but a space of political awakening, cultural resistance and epistemological transformation. Their experiences suggest that arts-based education in Palestine does more than prepare skilled educators, it actively challenges dominant educational paradigms that prioritise control, efficiency and standardised outcomes over context, creativity and community.

These findings resonate strongly with Paulo Freire's (2000) theory of critical pedagogy, which rejects the "banking model" of education in favour of dialogical, co-constructed learning that cultivates critical consciousness. For these participants, pedagogy emerged not only as a professional practice, but as a political and ethical stance. Their

accounts exemplify Freire's notion of praxis, reflection and action upon the world, in a context where education itself is deeply politicised.

The participants' shift from viewing art as mere expression to embracing it as pedagogical and political praxis aligns with Clover and Kaya's (2025) argument that the arts are central to radical adult education. Creative practice, they contend, allows for embodied, affective forms of learning that expose systems of power while opening spaces for imagination and resistance. In this study, participants engaged storytelling, drama and visual art as tools of transformation, strategies that enabled them to navigate trauma, reclaim identity and foster critical dialogue in colonised spaces.

These findings also speak to the field of arts-based research, which, as Barone and Eisner (2012) argue, challenges positivist traditions by valuing the interpretive, affective and sensory dimensions of knowledge production. Noor's and Sara's use of performance and drawing with children affected by conflict exemplifies arts-based research in action, demonstrating how art can function both as a method of inquiry and as a mode of knowledge creation in contexts of social injustice.

Equally important are the tensions that surfaced between participants' pedagogical ideals and the institutional and political constraints they encountered. These experiences mirror Davies' (2004) observations that peacebuilding and critical pedagogy often collide with bureaucratic and state-imposed structures of control, leaving educators in a state of constant negotiation. Sara's experience in a municipality-run kindergarten highlights this dilemma, her efforts to enact critical pedagogy were curtailed by surveillance and censorship, yet she found ways to subvert these limits through relational and child-centred practices.

The gendered dimension of these struggles also warrants attention. Each participant navigated cultural and familial expectations around performance, professionalism and propriety, reflecting findings by Alayan et al. (2012) on Palestinian women educators who straddle multiple, often conflicting, identities under occupation and patriarchy. Layla's negotiation of her community's disapproval of performance, and Noor's creation of "shame-free spaces" for dialogue, underscore the intimate entanglement of gender, pedagogy and emotional labour in educational resistance.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that conceptualises education in Palestine as a site of cultural and political struggle rather than a neutral, technocratic process (Said, 1993). The MA programme under study demon-strates how higher education, when rooted in local realities and artistic practice, can serve as a generative space for resistance and renewal. Its emphasis on embodied learning, community engagement and critical dialogue provides a counter-narrative to both militarised occupation and depersonalised schooling, positioning education as a vital practice of freedom.

In sum, the findings from these interviews illuminate the complex work of Palestinian educators who seek to bring critical, arts-based pedagogies into spaces marked by occupation, censorship and deeply rooted social norms. Far from being a linear process, this work emerges through negotiation, between theory and lived reality, between institutional restrictions and personal agency, between vulnerability and courage. This suggests that the power of creative pedagogy lies not only in its ability to inspire new ways of teaching, but also in its capacity to sustain educators through these tensions, allowing them to carve out spaces of freedom and dialogue even under constraint.

Research scope and limitations

While these insights offer a valuable window into the programme's impact, they are drawn from a small group of participants and may not represent all graduates' experiences. The study focused on women educators and relied on self-reported reflections, which, while rich, are inevitably shaped by memory and personal interpretation. Moreover, the research explored the implementation of creative pedagogy primarily in early childhood and community settings; further work could examine how these approaches are adapted in secondary schools or higher education. Future studies might also include longitudinal data or comparative perspectives to explore how these tensions evolve over time and across different Palestinian contexts.

Conclusion: Holding space for change through creative pedagogies

In the face of occupation, fragmentation and an educational system often driven by control and standardisation, the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University emerges as a living alternative, one that centers creativity, dialogue and contextual learning. The lived experiences of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal how arts-based pedagogy can function not only as a teaching method, but as a political, ethical and cultural intervention.

Through their narratives, we witness how education rooted in local realities and artistic practice becomes a site of resistance, healing and redefinition.

Participants shifted from traditional views of teaching toward more embodied, participatory and transformative understandings of learning. In doing so, they encountered both possibility and tension, negotiating systemic constraints, gendered expectations and emotional vulnerability, while continuing to forge new pedagogical paths.

This study suggests that meaningful educational transformation does not occur solely through theory, but through lived, creative engagement with the world. The programme's commitment to unlearning, imagination and care points to a model of education that is urgently needed, not only in Palestine but globally.

As creative pedagogies continue to be marginalised in formal education, this research affirms their critical role in cultivating consciousness, resilience, and hope. Future research might explore how such models can be sustained, scaled or adapted in other communities navigating oppression, displacement or transition. For now, the stories shared here stand as a testament to the quiet revolutions that unfold when education dares to be human, artistic and free.

———

Note

1. Based on the U.S. credit-hour system, commonly used in higher education, 37 credit hours correspond to approximately 925-1,110 hours of structured academic and field-based learning.

References

Alayan, S., Rohde, A., & Dhouib, S. (2012). *The politics of education reform in the Middle East: Self and other in textbooks and curricula*. Berghahn Books.

Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts-based research*. SAGE Publications.

Bethlehem University. (n.d.). *MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices*. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from https://www.bethlehem.edu/degrees/new-mocp/

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed* (C. A. & M. O. L. McBride, Trans.). Pluto Press. (Original work published 1974)

Clover, D. E., & Kaya, S. (2025). Adult education and the aesthetic turn: (Re)Imagining for a troubled world. *Cuestiones Pedagógicas, 1*(34), 31–46.

Davies, L. (2004). *Education and conflict: Complexity and chaos*. Routledge.

Elayyan, K. (2023). *The artistic production in the first Palestinian uprising*. Institute for Palestine Studies. https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1636747

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed., M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1968)

Rowe, N. (2016). Threshold concept theory and nonformal education: Community-based arts learning in Palestine. *Educational Research for Social Change, 5*(1), 94–106. https://scielo.org.za/pdf/ersc/v5n1/07.pdf

Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Shaik, R. (2024). *Cultural resistance in Palestine: An analysis of the ongoing conflict through the lens of resistance literature*. Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, The University of Texas at Austin School of Law. https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/projects/cultural-resistance-in-palestine-an-analysis-of-the-ongoing-conflict-through-the-lens-of-resistance-literature/

Shinn, C. (2012). Teacher education reform in Palestine: Policy challenges amid donor expectations. *Comparative Education Review, 56*(4), 608–633. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/667434

Shuman, J. (2024). *Palestinian art in time of war.* Institute for Palestine Studies. https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1655126

Terry, G., Hayfield N., Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 17–37). SAGE Publications.

Wong, S., Tu, T., & Nasser, I. (2021). Transformative pedagogy in occupied Palestine: International student discoveries and awakenings. *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies, 3*(1), 68–101. https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/jems.3.1.05

Rand Barakat is an educator, researcher and writer based in Jerusalem. She holds an MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices from Bethlehem University, Palestine, where her thesis examined the role of interactive story-telling in fostering environmental awareness among students. With a background in English language and literature, and over six years of experience in formal and non-formal educational settings, Rand explores how creative, student-centred methodologies can support meaningful learning and community engagement. Her current work focuses on the role of the arts in education in contexts of social and structural challenges, with an emphasis on identity, resilience and cultural expression. Through both academic inquiry and field-based research, she contributes to interdisciplinary discussions bridging pedagogy, creativity and empowerment, investigating how arts-based education can serve as a tool for dialogue, critical thinking and collective transformation.