

The Palestinian Curriculum and European Foreign Aid: The Challenges to Preserve National Content

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Abstract

The continuous and controversial arguments about any relationship between foreign aid and the national content of the learned curricula in new and emerging entities in post-conflict areas in general, and in the Palestinian case in particular, have been a source of apprehension for many educators, stakeholders, educational experts, and even school children's parents. This study aims at investigating the challenges to preserve authentic national and historical content in the light of receiving European foreign aid, taking Palestine as a case. The researcher adopted a mixed-methods approach to achieve the study's goals. The national content of the school textbooks of the lower basic stage was analysed as a purposive sample of the Palestinian national curriculum. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a) curriculum professionals and policymakers from the Ministry of Education to find out the direct impact of European aid on the national content of the Palestinian curriculum, and b) with Palestinian teachers to investigate their attitudes towards the adequacy and efficiency of the national and historical content of the Palestinian curriculum. The results of the content analysis present many national themes and values, yet with diverse dominance and distribution. The semi-structured interviews revealed the continuous pressure on the Ministry of Education to change the content of Palestinian curricula, and its impact on the national content. As for the teachers' interviews, the results demonstrate that Palestinian teachers do not have positive perspectives on the national and historical content and look forwards to fundamental improvements in the national and historical curriculum.

Keywords: European aid; the Palestinian curriculum; national content; textbook analysis



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Introduction

The educational process in Palestine has gone through different crucial stages. Before 1994, the date that marked the arrival of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Palestinian territories after the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian education system including schools was managed by the Israeli Civil Administration. During this long period that extended from 1967 to 1994, the adopted curriculum in the West Bank was the Jordanian one. On the other hand, the Egyptian curriculum was taught in the Gaza Strip (Brown 2001, 2). Israel tried to control the school curriculum in the West Bank and Gaza to eliminate and diminish the national spirit among Palestinian school children and teenagers (Adwan 2001). The Jordanian and Egyptian curricula were distant from Palestinian students' reality and identity, and they did not reflect their aspirations. Hence, Palestinians tried to compensate for the absence of nationalism in the official curriculum by teaching their children about the history of Palestine, the occupation, their dreams of liberty, and by evoking their national and historic symbols. This was the hidden curriculum that was taught by teachers, parents, friends, and old people to instil the national identity and patriotism in the consciousness of the youth (Nazzal and Nazzal 1996).

Palestinians were looking forward to establishing their national education system and introducing their own national curriculum that could entrench their national identity and be expressive of their future aspirations for a free state. Hence, the first step after they established the Ministry of Education (MOE) was founding the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre in 1994 that had a paramount task of establishing a national Palestinian curriculum (Santisteban 2002, 146). In 1996, the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre submitted a 600-page report to the Ministry of Education and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with a plan for the creation of the first national Palestinian curriculum. This plan had two main volumes: the first one showed a thorough representation of Palestinian history, identity, and the wished content for a national curriculum, whereas the second volume concentrated on the scholastic subjects and methodology of teaching them (Pina 2005, 5).

The year 2000 witnessed the birth of the first and experiential Palestinian curriculum after the Oslo Accords, which targeted the 1st and 6th grades. Then, from 2001 until 2006, other grades' new curricula were issued successively as follows: in 2001, the 2nd and 7th grades; in 2002, the 3rd, 8th, and 10th grades; in 2003, the 4th and 9th grades; in 2004, the 5th and 10th grades; in 2005, the 11th grade; and finally, in the last phase, in 2006, the 12th grade was introduced (Pina 2005, 4). The novice curriculum had been founded according to basic principles that were set by the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre and corresponded with the main purposes of establishing a national curriculum. These principles were approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council and also reflected the general educational philosophy of the Palestinian-Arab society (Nasr 1999). In the meantime, from 1994 to 2000, Palestinian schools continued teaching the Jordanian curriculum in the West Bank and the Egyptian curriculum in Gaza, but under

the motto of the Palestinian National Authority and the Ministry of Education printed on the textbooks. In addition, a series of National Education handouts for the classes from the 1st to the 9th grades were also used in alignment with the main curriculum. The new Palestinian curriculum was developed by a team of Palestinian educational specialists, supervisors, curriculum professionals, and teachers. The team was also keen to take students' perspectives into consideration.

Since 2000, the Palestinian MOE and the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre have been working on improving and updating the curriculum by keeping in touch with schools and teachers and doing several studies that can reveal the true effectiveness of the curriculum on improving students' basic and advanced learned knowledge, their critical thinking skills, their abilities to solve daily problems, and their attachment to their national identity. This phase of construction and renovation was combined with unprecedented Western and international financial support to the Palestinian Authority to help Palestinians build the institutions of their emerging state (European Union [EU] 2020).

International aid is often defined as “the international transfer of capital, goods, or services from a country or international organization for the benefit of the recipient country or its population” (Williams 2023). Western aid is aid that developed and that wealthy countries usually give to weak, poor, and emerging entities to help them develop and achieve progress for their citizens. This aid and the true intention behind it have always been open to question. It has been suspected of being a masked tool of exploitation and domination of poor nations under the guise of humanitarian help (Sraieb 2016, 64). Others have considered this aid as a new colonising tool steered by colonial powers and distributed in a way that simulates former colonial policy priorities (Becker 2020, 161). Thus, this aid can turn into a means of a novel and soft colonisation that guarantees dependency and loyalty to the donor countries. Countries and nations that receive grants and aids will continue abiding by the terms and standards imposed by the giving countries. Among the threats that have always paralleled foreign aid is interference in educational systems and national curricula in newly emerging entities (Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa 2016, 23). This has prompted different scholars to concentrate their research work on studying and analysing the content of curricula in new educational systems in emerging post-conflict entities.

Content analysis is defined as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti 1969, 14). This definition implies that content analysis is not solely related to written texts. On the contrary, any content can be subject to analysis as long as it is analysed objectively and based on specific criteria. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO 1996) asserts that content analysis is fundamental and helpful since it provides easy techniques for researchers to analyse in-depth lengthy books and volumes throughout a systematic search. Hence, it is a useful method of discovering and understanding several messages and crucial hidden content in a scientific and organised way (Stemler 2000, 1). Content

analysis is a powerful tool for examining the degree of alignment between the declared objectives of an educational programme or curriculum and the actual content of that programme or curriculum based on measuring the occurrences and frequencies of specific words, statements, visual aids, or themes. This makes content analysis a fundamental tool for evaluating the effectiveness of a school curriculum and determining the degree or extent to which the curriculum serves the stated learning objectives. Consequently, content analysis has been widely used in the educational field to evaluate school curricula and track their effectiveness and efficiency.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims at investigating the potential impact of European financial aid to the Palestinian Authority and the Ministry of Education on the national content presented in the Palestinian curriculum. The national content of the *National and Life Education* textbooks for the first and the second grades and the *National and Upbringing Education* textbooks for the third and fourth grades for the lower basic stage were analysed as a purposive sample. The lower basic stage was purposively selected for content analysis as this stage is highly significant in shaping learners' personality, their values, beliefs, and culture at a very early age. The views of some Palestinian curriculum professionals and policymakers at the MOE on the potential impact and interference in the content of the Palestinian curriculum were observed. Furthermore, views and perspectives of some Palestinian teachers were also surveyed through interviews to find out their perspectives on the adequacy and efficiency of the content of the Palestinian National Education curriculum.

Research Questions

This study aimed at answering the following basic questions:

1. To what extent does the National Education curriculum present national content?
2. What is the relationship between European financial aid and the national content of the Palestinian curriculum?
3. What are Palestinian teachers' perspectives on the national content of the school curriculum?

Definition of Terms

European Aid: In this study, European aid is the financial aid provided by the European Union and other European agencies to the Palestinian Authority institutions and ministries including the MOE after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

The National Content: This refers to the educational content that relates to a whole country and its people. In this study, the national content is related to Palestine and the Palestinian nation and history.

Palestinian Curriculum: This refers to the unified national Palestinian curriculum, which has been applied and taught in the West Bank and Gaza after a series of implementation phases that extended from 2000 to 2006. This happened when the Palestinian Authority took over control after the Oslo Accords. This curriculum was built after long years of using the Jordanian curriculum in the West Bank and the Egyptian curriculum in Gaza. The Palestinian curriculum was developed, and a second issue was released in 2017 (MOEHE 2017).

The Significance of the Study

The heated debate about foreign aid and its impact on education and the curriculum has been continuous for a long time. Ministries of education in emerging entities and states have always worked hard to prove the independence of their curricula, which were composed under critical political and economic conditions. The Palestinian case of developing its national curriculum after the Oslo Accords is a case that is worth studying. It is noteworthy that this research is considered the first to discuss the potential impact of foreign financial aid on the national content of the curriculum in emerging states and entities by taking Palestine as a case. This research aims to provide a clear idea about possible relations between financial donations and interference in Palestinian educational and national affairs. It has also highlighted the national content of the Palestinian curriculum for the lower basic stage. In addition, it has surveyed some Palestinian teachers' perspectives on the sufficiency and adequacy of the national content of the Palestinian National Education curriculum. This study may also have policy relevance by providing important insights to Palestinian curriculum professionals and policymakers about the national content of the lower basic stage as a sample, and also Palestinian teachers' perspectives on the National Education curriculum. This can help the Curriculum Development Centre with future plans for further improvements in designing and composing the National Education curriculum.

Method

In order to achieve the objective of the study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted (qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied). The content of the National Education of the lower basic stage (1st to 4th grades) was analysed as a purposive sample based on extracting the values and themes expressed directly in the text.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with some policymakers and curriculum professionals from the MOE to find out the impact of foreign aid on designing and composing the Palestinian curricula and the national and historical content included in the textbooks.

Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with Palestinian teachers from the MOE who teach the National Education and History curriculum for different stages, to understand their perspectives on the adequacy and efficiency of the national and historical content of the Palestinian National Education and History curriculum they teach.

Sampling

I decided to analyse the content of the National Education textbooks for the lower basic stage as a purposive sample. I selected this stage as it is considered fundamental to and effective in shaping the national identity of Palestinian young learners at a very young age (1st to 4th grades). These included both *National and Life Education* and *National and Social Upbringing* textbooks for the above-mentioned grades including their first and second semester parts. These textbooks were published by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (then) in 2016/2017. As for the semi-structured interviews, I purposefully interviewed curriculum professionals and policymakers at the Ministry of Education. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers teaching the National Education and History curriculum at different stages to find out their perspectives on the national content of the Palestinian curriculum they teach.

Criteria of Analysis

To analyse the content of the National Education textbooks, the researcher adapted the method and units of analysis used in the works of both Dughmush and El-Holy (2020, 1328) and Koroğlu and Elban (2020, 59), in which the authors analysed the national content of the Palestinian National Education textbooks for the high basic stage and the national content of university English books, respectively, by classifying the content into written and visual components. According to the criteria of analysis, the national content was analysed according to a series of elements including cultural and folkloric items; national leaders, heroes, popular and historical figures; social relations and values; national symbols, structures, and institutions; solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured; religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society; adhering to the right of return; strengthening the religious and national status of Jerusalem; promoting Palestinian national products; preserving public facilities; confirming the legitimacy of the Palestinian struggle for liberty and freedom; appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine; preserving national unity; awareness of rights and duties; and compliance with general regulations and laws.

Unit of Analysis

The units of analysis adopted in this study were textual (words and sentences) and visual (pictures and images) representations of the national values and themes of the criteria of analysis mentioned above.

Table 1: Definition of the national themes and values analysed in the study

#	Category	National Value	Definition
1.	Values of Cultural and Historical Heritage	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	The traditional stories, beliefs, customs, food, proverbs, jokes, tales, songs, dances, crafts, and celebrations of a group of people or a whole nation
2.		Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	Awareness of significant individuals who had their remarkable touch and played crucial roles in the history of their nation. Awareness of significant persons who are well-known in the society for their remarkable contributions in different fields (politics, education, science, military, health, literature, etc.)
3.	Values of Citizenship	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	Standards that individuals and social groups employ to define personal goals and essentially shape the nature and form of social order in a society
4.		Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	These include names of Palestinian cities, villages, and camps; symbols that represent the nation, for example, the flag, the national anthem; governmental buildings, national institutions, ministries; symbolic statues; memorials, and monuments
5.		Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	This refers to the personal responsibility of preserving the surrounding environment and maintaining all the public facilities, including schools, public transport, public institutions, buildings, and spaces

6.	Values of National Belonging and Struggle History	Awareness of rights and duties	Educating society members on their rights and responsibilities as good and responsible citizens
7.		Promoting national products	Encouraging purchasing and supporting Palestinian national and local products
8.		Compliance with general regulations and laws	Abiding by the state's general laws and rules
9.		Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	Increasing the national awareness of the significance of national unity and rejecting all aspects of disintegration or division. Increasing the awareness of the strong bonds between Palestine and the Arab and Islamic worlds
10.		Quest for freedom and national independence	Affirming the Palestinian national pursuit of freedom and national independence
11.		Adhering to the right of return	Adhering to the right for all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, villages, towns, and cities they were expelled from in 1948 and 1967
12.		Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine	Increasing the national awareness of Palestine's significant and outstanding geographical and natural diversity
13.		Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem	Promoting the national feeling towards Jerusalem as Palestine's only capital city and strengthening its religious status for Muslims and Christians
14.		Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle	Confirming the Palestinian legitimate right to defend their occupied land and affirming the legitimacy of their struggle to get their freedom and independence
15.	Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism	Patriotism and loyalty refer to the feeling of loving your country more than any others and being proud of it	
16.	Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured	Showing solidarity and support to all Palestinian prisoners in the Israeli prisons and all the injured	

17.		Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society	The condition of permitting people to worship according to the practices of the religion they choose (Christianity and Islam) and showing respect for their own religious practices and beliefs
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Sources: Dughmush and El-Holy (2020, 1328) and K rođlu and Elban (2020, 59)

The Study Instruments

- a. To analyse the content of the National Education textbooks, the researcher adapted the criteria and units of analysis used by both Dughmush and El-Holy (2020, 1328) and K rođlu and Elban (2020, 59). The study adopted the word, sentence, and image as units of analysis. This aimed at conducting an intensive and deliberate analysis of the textbooks as the national values can be presented through textual and visual representations.
- b. To find out the perspectives of policymakers and curriculum professionals, the researcher composed a group of questions for the sake of conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were curriculum professionals and policymakers at the Palestinian Curriculum Centre. These were selected for interviews as they are in charge of policymaking, writing, and designing the Palestinian national curriculum.
- c. To investigate the perspectives of teachers of National Education, another series of interview questions was prepared by the researcher. The interviewees were teachers selected from different governmental schools in the Directorate of Ramallah and Al-Bireh. These teachers teach social studies at different stages and levels, varying from the lower basic stage, to the higher basic stage, to the secondary stage. This procedure aimed at finding out Palestinian teachers' perspectives on the national content of the Palestinian curriculum at various educational stages.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments of the Study

Validity of the Analysis

The content analysis was carried out based on a list of national themes and values adapted from Dughmush and El-Holy (2020, 1328) and K rođlu and Elban (2020, 59). However, to ensure the validity of the content analysis tool for this study in particular, the list of national values and themes was validated by a group of educational and curriculum experts, who suggested minor changes and modifications. The very first list of values included some values that were then removed based on the recommendations from the curriculum experts. For example, the first list included "Awareness of the

national history” and “Adherence to historical Palestine”. These values were removed as they do not suit the age and thinking abilities of the lower basic stage learners. Another recommendation was to categorise the values, for example, cultural and historical heritage, values of citizenship, and national and struggle history. The steps and procedures adopted for the analysis process were also arbitrated and approved.

Reliability of the Analysis

To ascertain the reliability of the analysis, two significant steps were taken:

- a. After two weeks of the first analysis, the content was analysed again by the author herself (intra-rating). The frequencies were detected and the percentages were extracted. The reliability coefficient of the analysis was calculated, which was sufficient and reached 85%.
- b. Random samples were analysed by an inter-rater based on the same measurement and units of analysis to ascertain inter-rater reliability and to obtain the degree of agreement in analysis. The same samples were analysed by the researcher and the results were compared to get the inter-rater reliability coefficient, which was sufficient and reached 80%.

Validity of the Interviews

- a. The two sets of interview questions (for curriculum professionals and teachers) were also validated by two educational experts.
- b. Pilot interviews were conducted with the help of a group of volunteers to ensure the clarity of questions and to detect any possible vagueness and ambiguity in the questions.

Reliability of the Interviews

To ascertain the reliability of the semi-structured interviews, the following steps were taken:

- a. The researcher ensured that the interviewees were fully willing to conduct the interviews voluntarily by contacting them in advance and asking for their willingness to be involved in the interviews.
- b. The researcher made sure that the interviewees understood the questions asked by asking the questions in different ways to ascertain that they understood the questions well.
- c. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and the responses were translated into English.

- d. After the interviews were conducted, the researcher summarised the interviewees' responses; then the responses were sent to the interviewees and were approved by them.

Steps of Analysis

To ensure getting objective and accurate results of analysis, the researcher followed the following procedures:

- a. All the targeted textbooks of National Education for the lower basic stage (1st to 4th grades) were read and comprehended thoroughly and deliberately. The researcher read the books twice before starting the analysis process. I also contacted an expert teacher of social studies to get her consultation and help when needed.
- b. The units of analysis were determined: words, sentences, and images were defined as units of analysis.
- c. The words or sentences with the potentiality of confusing meaning were subject to careful judgement based on the main topic of the lesson and the main idea being presented in the title of the lesson and the educational unit.

Results and Discussion

To what extent does the Palestinian National Education curriculum for the lower basic stage present national content?

The following findings were concluded after analysing the sample textbooks:

As is shown in the following tables (2, 3, 4, 5 and 6), the National Education textbooks (*National and Life Education* for the first and the second grades, and *National and Social Upbringing* for the third and fourth grades) for the lower basic stage were analysed thoroughly and deliberately based on Holsti's formula (1969) to obtain the frequencies and percentages of the determined national values and themes. The textbooks were read intensively and deeply. The represented national values were detected, and their frequency was counted according to their appearance in different units of the books. All the frequencies for each national value were counted and gathered on a special sheet for analysis. Finally, the percentages were calculated and obtained according to Holsti's formula. The analysis included all values' representations in words, sentences, photos, and pictures.

Table 2: The national values of content analysis included in the National Education textbook for the first grade

#	Category	National Value	Frequency	Relative Weight
1.	Cultural and Historical Heritage	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	87	8.55%
2.		Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	0	0%
3.	Values of Citizenship	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	82	8.06%
4.		Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	91	8.94%
5.		Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	347	34.11%
6.		Awareness of rights and duties	93	9.14%
7.		Promoting national products	1	0.09%
8.		Compliance with general regulations and laws	18	1.76%
9.		Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	1	0.09%
10.		National and Struggle History	Quest for freedom and national independence	6
11.	Adhering to the right of return		0	0%
12.	Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine		240	23.5% ⁹
13.	Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem		16	1.57%
14.	Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle		0	0%
15.	Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism		13	1.27%
16.	Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured		14	1.37%
17.	Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society		8	0.78%
		Total	1017	100%

As Table 2 shows, the frequencies of the national values obtained from the first grade *National and Life Education* textbooks (parts 1 and 2) were (1017) distributed over several themes and values. As is shown, awareness of the natural environment and public facilities has the highest frequencies of 347, followed by appreciating the

geographical and natural diversity and importance of Palestine with 240 frequencies. Table 2 also reveals that other national values have good representations in the textbooks. Awareness of rights and duties has 93 frequencies, awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them has 91 frequencies, followed by awareness of cultural and folkloric items and awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values with 87 and 82, respectively. However, many national themes including promoting national products, preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging, quest for freedom and national independence, and promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society have very low frequencies. Moreover, awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, adhering to the right of return, and confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle are not represented entirely.

Table 3: The national values of content analysis included in the National Education textbook for the second grade

#	Category	National Value	Frequency	Relative Weight
1.	Values of Cultural and Historical Heritage	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	175	22.17%
2.		Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	0	0%
3.	Values of Citizenship	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	14	1.77%
4.		Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	150	19.01%
5.		Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	109	13.81%
6.		Awareness of rights and duties	6	0.76%
7.		Promoting national products	40	5.06%
8.		Compliance with general regulations and laws	0	0%
9.		Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	1	0.01%

10.	Values of National Belonging and Struggle History	Quest for freedom and national independence	3	0.38%
11.		Adhering to the right of return	0	0%
12.		Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine	224	28.39%
13.		Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem	11	1.39%
14.		Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle	0	0%
15.		Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism	54	6.84%
16.		Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured	0	0%
17.		Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society	2	0.25%
		Total	789	100%

Table 3 shows that the frequencies of the national values obtained from the second grade *National and Life Education* textbooks (parts 1 and 2) are 789. The value of appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine has the highest frequencies of 224, followed by awareness of cultural and folkloric items, which has the second rank with 175 frequencies, while awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them and awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them have achieved the third and fourth ranks, respectively. It is also apparent that some national values that were absent in the first grade have shown acceptable existence, for example, promoting national products. Nevertheless, there are still some national themes that were absent and not represented at all. These include awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, adhering to the right of return, and solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured. These values have zero frequencies. Other national themes such as preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging, promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society, and quest for freedom and national independence show very low representations of 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Table 4: The national values of content analysis included in the National Education textbook for the third grade

#	Category	National Value	Frequency	Relative Weight
1.	Cultural and Historical Heritage	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	9	0.7%
2.		Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	11	0.82%
3.	Values of Citizenship	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	251	19.12%
4.		Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	224	17.7%
5.		Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	130	9.90%
6.		Awareness of rights and duties	173	13.2%
7.		Promoting national products	0	0%
8.		Compliance with general regulations and laws	77	5.86%
9.		Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	16	1.21%
10.		National and Struggle History	Quest for freedom and national independence	75
11.	Adhering to the right of return		11	0.83%
12.	Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine		72	5.48%
13.	Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem		95	7.24%
14.	Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle		34	2.6%
15.	Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism		16	1.21%
16.	Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured		56	4.26%
17.	Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society		62	4.72%
		Total	1312	100%

Table 4, which describes the frequencies and percentages of national themes related to the third grade, shows the total number of frequencies is 1312. Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values has the highest frequencies of 251, followed by the value of awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols,

structures, and institutions and showing respect to them as the second most dominant national theme with 224. Interestingly, the results of the analysis of 3rd grade textbooks show the existence of some national values for the first time. These include, for instance, solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured, which has its first appearance with 56 frequencies, confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle with 34 frequencies, preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging with 16 frequencies, awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, and adhering to the right of return with 11 frequencies for them both. The only national value that has no representations at all is promoting national products.

Table 5: The national values of content analysis included in the National Education textbook for the fourth grade

#	Category	National Value	Frequency	Relative Weight
1.	Cultural and Historical Heritage	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	324	25.19%
2.		Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	0	0%
3.	Values of Citizenship	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	29	2.25%
4.		Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	73	5.67%
5.		Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	222	17.26%
6.		Awareness of rights and duties	314	24.41%
7.		Promoting national products	25	1.94%
8.		Compliance with general regulations and laws	35	2.72%
9.		Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	41	3.18%

10.	National and Struggle History	Quest for freedom and national independence	39	3.03%
11.		Adhering to the right of return	90	6.99%
12.		Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine	57	4.43%
13.		Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem	6	0.46%
14.		Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle	2	0.15%
15.		Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism	26	2.02%
16.		Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured	0	0%
17.		Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society	3	0.23%
		Total	1286	100%

As shown in Table 5, the total frequencies of national values and themes for the 4th grade are 1286. The most dominant national value as shown in the table above is awareness of cultural and folkloric items with 324 frequencies. Awareness of rights and duties has the second highest frequencies with 314, followed by the value of awareness of the natural environment and public facilities with 222 frequencies. For the first time, adhering to the right of return has shown a very good rank, with 90 frequencies. However, some values have very low ranking, mainly confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle, promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society, and strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem, with 2, 3, and 6 frequencies for them, respectively. In addition, awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them and solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured are not represented at all.

Table 6: The national values in descending order according to the degree of their recurrence in the national curriculum (1st–4th grades)

#	National Value	Frequency	Relative Weight
1.	Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them	808	18.34%
2.	Awareness of cultural and folkloric items	595	13.51%
3.	Appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine	593	13.46%
4.	Awareness of rights and duties	586	13.30%
5.	Awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them	538	13.23%
6.	Awareness of social relations, behaviours, and values	376	8.53%
7.	Compliance with general regulations and laws	130	2.95%
8.	Strengthening the national and religious status of Jerusalem	128	2.90%
9.	Quest for freedom and national independence	123	2.80%
10.	Deepening love, loyalty, and patriotism	109	2.47%
11.	Adhering to the right of return	101	2.29%
12.	Promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society	75	1.70%
13.	Solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured	70	1.58%
14.	Promoting national products	66	1.49%
15.	Preserving national unity and deepening Arab and Islamic belonging	53	1.20%
16.	Confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle	36	0.81%
17.	Awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them	11	0.25%
	Total	4404	100%

Table 6 above shows the total frequencies for all national values in the four textbooks. In this table, the dominance of some values over others is obvious. Awareness of the natural environment and public facilities and preserving them has the highest dominance with 808 frequencies, followed by awareness of cultural and folkloric items, appreciating the geographical and natural importance of Palestine, awareness of rights and duties, and awareness of national places (cities, towns, villages, camps), national symbols, structures, and institutions and showing respect to them, with 595, 593, 586, and 538 frequencies, respectively. Next in the list comes the value of awareness of social

relations, behaviours, and values with 376 frequencies. Table 6 also illustrates the poor representations of other values, mainly confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle with 36 frequencies, and awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them with only 11 frequencies, which means a poor relative weight of 0.25%.

Considering the results displayed in the above tables, it is obvious that the national curriculum has presented all the national themes and values presented in Table 1. The dominance of particular values and themes in the analysed textbooks is also apparent. The most dominant values and themes are the values of citizenship with 3034 frequencies, that is 68.89% of all the values and themes, followed by the values of cultural heritage with 595 frequencies, a relative weight of 13.51%. Lower basic education is a crucial developmental stage, which makes it essential to strengthen and deepen the representation of citizenship values as an integral part of the good upbringing of young learners. Young children must get enough education about basic values of citizenship, so that they can effectively contribute to building their country and be active citizens in their society. Thus, the lower basic stage is characterised by the dominance of citizenship values.

Nonetheless, it is fundamental to acknowledge the special and crucial state the Palestinians have been living in since 1948, which demands instilling more national values in the *National and Life Education* and *National and Upbringing Education* textbooks for the lower basic stage. The presence of such values is justified as it reflects the daily lives of young Palestinian learners. Moreover, it paves the way for shaping the national character of young learners who can cope with life challenges, which are strongly relevant to living under occupation, and actively strive for national independence.

Introducing national and historic figures has paramount importance in the national upbringing. In some countries such as England, children start learning History as a separate school subject from the first grade and it is regarded as a foundation subject. In stage 1, children should learn about a wide range of historical topics, including the lives of significant individuals who made a remarkable contribution to the history of Britain, such as Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, and many similar historic and national figures. They should also be taught about significant historical events (Roberts 2021). This is also essential in Palestine as it makes young Palestinian learners aware of their grandparents and ancestors and their sacrifice and achievements in their continued striving for national independence. This value is fundamental as it promotes young learners' confidence in their strong and profound roots in their land. Surprisingly, it is evident that the poorest value in dominance is awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, which corresponds with poor presentations of national, historical, and popular figures.

Another critique of the representations of national values in the lower basic stage is the random and irregular distribution of some national values. As shown in Tables 2 to 5, some pivotal national themes are repeatedly absent in some textbooks, for example, confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle, awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, and solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured, whereas other themes have remarkable superiority in all textbooks. Despite its importance in the national and historical Palestinian scene, adhering to the right of return was completely absent in the first and second grades, which is similar to the value of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons and confirming the legitimate right of the Palestinian struggle. These two values were repeatedly not represented at all in some textbooks in spite of their close association with real Palestinian life and daily suffering. At the same time that some important national values were absent, others recurred in a striking and exaggerated manner.

This noticeably haphazard distribution and lack of gradual presentation of some national values and themes can affect young learners' learning negatively. According to Wat (2015, 15), consistency in presenting learned material is essential for children's mental development and early learning. One apparent example is the total absence of three important national themes in the first and second grades, while in third grade they were presented with high frequencies (solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and the injured, awareness of national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures and showing respect to them, and promoting religious tolerance and coexistence in the Palestinian society) and then again became absent or appeared with very low frequencies in the fourth grade.

What is the relationship between European financial aid and the national content of the Palestinian curriculum?

To answer this question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers and curriculum professionals from the Palestinian Ministry of Education. The following questions were posed and the answers were collected as follows:

Has the Curriculum Development Centre received any direct financial aid from the European Union or any European countries, and, if yes, how has this aid been utilised?

Both interviewees asserted that the Curriculum Development Centre has never received any direct financial aid from the European Union or any European or Western countries. There was a national and educational decision to keep the Palestinian curriculum separate from any foreign aids. From the beginning of developing the Palestinian curricula, it was decided to keep this process from any foreign aid to guarantee its complete independence from any foreign interference and to make it chime with the Palestinian national will. Of course, financial aid has been presented to the Palestinian Authority and the Ministry of Education and has been utilised in different ways,

including training teachers and qualifying them, but none of that aid was utilised in writing, designing, or printing the curriculum textbooks.

Has European aid had an impact on the national content of the Palestinian curriculum?

Both interviewees made it clear that the Palestinian curricula were not composed through dependence on foreign aid. The main reference according to which the Palestinian curricula were written and composed is the Palestinian Declaration of Independence (*Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question* 1988), in addition to the Ministry's educational vision for educational reform, which has raised the motto of establishing a Palestinian society that possesses values, culture and sciences, and employs technology in the liberation and development processes. One interviewee says, "The sovereignty of our curricula is extremely important. Our curricula are 100% Palestinian, and were made and written by Palestinian hands; they should reflect our Palestinian vision and aspirations." He adds that "the Palestinian national awareness cannot be bargained over". Nevertheless, both interviewees confirmed that there has been a lot of pressure on the Ministry of Education to change the content of the Palestinian curricula.

What forms of interference has European aid had on the Palestinian school curricula?

The interviewees asserted that the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre did not allow any interference in the Palestinian curricula. It is clear that there have been strong demands from the European Union to change the content of the Palestinian curricula as it was accused of incitement and causing hatred. However, these demands are relatively new. One interviewee confirms, "The Palestinian curricula were approved by the Quality and Curriculum Committee, and the general framework of the Palestinian curriculum was discussed frankly and clearly with UNESCO, and no notes or objections were posed from them. On the contrary, they approved it completely."

Why do Europeans impose conditions on the Ministry of Education?

The interviewees believed that this is not an educational issue and has nothing to do with educational purposes. On the contrary, it is a political issue. This fierce campaign against Palestinian curricula was organised and led by Israel claiming that the Palestinian curricula encourage violence, terrorism, and are anti-Semitic. One interviewee believes: "The Zionist lobbies in Europe and America have been leading campaigns against Palestinian curricula. Unfortunately, these smear campaigns against the Palestinian curricula have received strong attention in Europe and America." Both interviewees confirmed that such campaigns were carried out, pushed, and fuelled by Israeli campaigns against Palestinian curricula. Unfortunately, these smear campaigns were seized by the occupying power side and were marketed globally to agitate against Palestinian curricula.

Has there been any similar interference in the Israeli curriculum?

The interviewees agreed that despite the constant demands from the Palestinian Ministry of Education to the European Union to study the Israeli curricula, the European Union has never interfered in or carried out any studies on the Israeli curricula. The European Union did not put the Israeli curricula under the deliberate process of analysis in the same way that it did to the Palestinian curricula. Both interviewees mentioned the only study to evaluate the Israeli curricula in comparison with the Palestinian curricula, which was carried out by Adwan, Bar-Tal, and Wexler (2014) in co-operation with Tel-Aviv University. The results of this comparative study were in favour of the Palestinian curricula and revealed that the content of the Palestinian curricula is better than and less violent towards the “other” than the Israeli curricula. The interviewees also asserted that the Ministry of Education demanded that the European Union carry out a similar study on the Israeli curricula as the one that was conducted on Palestinian curricula, but they [the EU] refused this demand. One of the interviewed professionals added that “there were similar demands to the European Union to study the Israeli curricula. However, the Europeans refused to put the Israeli curricula under study and investigation, justifying this as they do not help pay for salaries of Israeli teachers, but they do for the Palestinians.”

How fundamental is it to help Palestinians have their free choice and independent will to present their national history and emphasise their nationalism in their school curriculum?

Both interviewees confirmed that all international laws and conventions have asserted and confirmed the right of all nations and countries to choose their own curricula that will be taught to their children and future generations. Moreover, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is declared that children have the right to be taught a curriculum that reflects their daily contexts (UN [1948] 2021). Both interviewees expressed that it is unacceptable to teach children content that is detached from their daily life contexts or their culture. One adds:

The school curricula should reflect the daily contexts of students’ lives. How we can write and teach our children about peace, coexistence with Israelis, and the two-state solution while they face the cruelty of occupation on a daily basis. Moreover, the school curricula should prepare Palestinian future generations for the upcoming stage of the independent state, thus, it should instil and deepen all the relevant national values and issues.

The most significant remarks can be summarised as follows. The interviewed Palestinian curriculum professionals and policymakers made it clear that no direct European or foreign aid was received by the Curriculum Development Centre, and this was based on a national and educational decision to keep Palestinian curricula away from any foreign interference. Financial aid was given to the Palestinian Authority and the Ministry of Education, but none of that aid was directed to writing or printing textbooks. However, it was concluded that there have been serious demands from the

European Union to the Palestinian National Authority and the Ministry of Education to change the content of the curriculum, and these demands were pushed by several Israeli campaigns that targeted smearing the Palestinian curriculum. It was also found that there was no direct impact on the Palestinian national content. The curriculum professionals and policymakers asserted the sovereignty of the Palestinian curriculum. However, the interviews have revealed the immense pressure that the Palestinian Authority and the Ministry of Education have been subjected to. This pressure that threatens to cut off the financial aid has in one way or another impacted Palestinians' free will in writing their national curriculum. The Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre are fully aware of the continuous Israeli attempts to agitate against Palestinian curricula in order to cut off any European aid to the Palestinians. This made the Palestinians cautious while writing and composing their curriculum and has certainly restricted their freedom. This implies interference in the content of the Palestinian curriculum. This result is in line with the finding of Sraieb (2016, 64), who suspects foreign aid of being a masked tool to interfere in the affairs of poor and emerging entities. This finding corresponds with teachers' views of the Palestinian curriculum, which is stated in the next part of the research.

What are Palestinian teachers' perspectives on the national content of the National Education school curriculum?

To answer this question, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Palestinian teachers who teach Social and National Studies and History at different stages from the first to the twelfth grades. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online with eight different teachers from different schools. The interviewed teachers teach different stages. After introducing themselves and the stage they teach, the following questions were asked:

What is your perspective on the national content of the Palestinian curriculum for the stage you teach? Do you think that the National Education curriculum is sufficient for the stage you teach? If yes, why? If no, please clarify.

The interviewed teachers perceive the curriculum they teach as "weak, shallow and incomplete". They believe that the "curriculum does not present sufficient and effective national content". They believe that "the national content of the curriculum they teach is poor and weak". The curriculum "ignores many important national topics and themes that are crucial and must be presented to the Palestinian students".

What other values or themes would you recommend to be added, and for which grades in particular?

All interviewed teachers agreed that there are many national values and national topics that are not well represented or that are totally absent in the Social and National Studies and History curricula. There is a general consensus among all interviewed teachers that the Palestinian national curriculum for National Education, Social Studies and History must be intensively reviewed so that more important national themes, values, and topics

can be added with greater focus and better sequencing. One of the interviewed teachers asserts that “there are many national values that are missing from the national curriculum, for example, the curriculum does not teach students about the national leaders, heroes, martyrs, popular and historical figures”.

If you feel that the national content of the book you teach is not sufficient, do you usually add to or enrich your lesson with supplementary materials, national content or educational aids?

All interviewed teachers confirmed their constant readiness to provide their students with supplementary and enrichment materials when they feel that the content they teach is insufficient or does not contribute to providing complete knowledge about Palestinian national and contemporary issues.

Do you think the Palestinian curriculum presents incitement content? If yes, why? If no, please clarify.

There was a strong consensus from all interviewed teachers that the Palestinian Social and National Studies and History curricula do not present any incitement content at all. On the contrary, all teachers assert that the Palestinian curriculum is deficient and presents shallow and incomplete knowledge regarding the national and historical content that is of great importance to the Palestinian nation, who have been suffering under Israeli occupation, and striving to achieve their independence like other nations in this world. One of the interviewed teachers explains:

Palestinian students as all other students in this world have the right to learn about their national history, their cultural heritage and the history of their national struggle to achieve their national independence. This is a right that is guaranteed by international laws and conventions and should not be begged from anyone or depicted as a sign of incitement.

The findings show that Palestinian teachers have negative perspectives towards the national and historical content of the Palestinian curriculum. The interviewed teachers believe that the presented national and historical content does not satisfy the needs of learners. The findings also reveal that teachers are not satisfied with the way the content is presented and arranged. They affirm the urgent need for the curriculum to be reorganised, taking into consideration the presentation of important national values and historical events with greater focus and better sequencing. All of this will raise the national awareness of Palestinian learners in a way that suits the stage of national liberation that the Palestinian people are going through. One of the important findings of the study is the Palestinian teachers’ assertion that the Palestinian curriculum does not present any inciting or violent content, but rather the Palestinian national historical narrative that is proved in historical books and references.

The researcher attributes the teachers’ negative perspectives towards the Palestinian national and historical curriculum to the fact that teachers do not feel that it presents

appropriate national content that aligns with the sensitive political and national stage the Palestinian cause is going through. The teachers believe that the curriculum should be a more powerful tool to strongly enhance the national and cultural values and enable the Palestinian national and historical narrative. Palestinian teachers are daily witnesses to the violations of the occupation, and its continuous efforts to defeat any chance to establish a Palestinian free state through the annexation and expansionist policy of the Israeli state. Palestinian teachers have been suffering under Israeli occupation and its policies against Palestinian nationalism and education since 1948. They are the first *guard* of national values, national identity, and historical heritage. This may explain teachers' readiness to enrich the curriculum with supplementary national and historical knowledge when needed.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there have been explicit attempts to interfere with the content presented in the Palestinian curricula by explicitly threatening to cut off European aid to the Palestinian National Authority and the Ministry of Education. Of course, these attempts are motivated by continuous Israeli incitement against the Palestinian curriculum. These continuous threats from the European Union undoubtedly have contributed to restricting the Palestinian will while writing the national curricula. They must have limited Palestinians' freedom to include important historical events of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or include parts about significant national Palestinian figures who had an important role in the Palestinian national struggle against the Israeli occupation, of course, to avoid any collision with the Europeans or attack on the Palestinian curricula.

Another important conclusion is the Europeans' colonial mentality that still dominates their attitudes and practices towards other nations and countries in the Middle East. The European Union has given itself a licence to interfere in the Palestinian curriculum, justifying this interference on the basis that they help pay Palestinian teachers' salaries. On the other hand, they have never interfered in the Israeli curriculum, arguing that they do not help pay the Israeli teachers, which is not true. Since 1948, many European countries and the United States of America have given Israel massive financial aid that cannot be compared to what they gave to the Palestinians. Nevertheless, they are silent about that huge and continuous support. It is the colonial mentality that still characterises Europe in the twenty-first century. Hence, they give themselves the right to interfere in Palestinian national affairs. This is the arrogance of colonial mentality.

Recommendations

The Palestinian educational system is an integral part of Palestinian political and economic sectors, and it cannot be fragmented or separated from these, no matter how strong and fierce the Israeli and Western attempts are. Moreover, the educational curriculum is supposed to be a tool that reflects the life contexts in which students live, therefore it should build upon this context for a bright and promising future. The

educational curricula must be closely related to the history and culture of students, as it is part of their lives, their reality, and their aspirations. How can Europeans ask Palestinians to teach their children about peace and coexistence with the “other” while they live under the worst occupation in the twenty-first century? It is as if they are asking Palestinians to teach their children a distorted educational curriculum that has nothing to do with their real-life contexts. Furthermore, changing the Palestinian curricula according to European desires and standards should be preceded by true change of the Palestinian reality on the ground. Instead of the continuous threats to cut off aid to the Palestinians, who already suffer politically and economically, the European Union and European countries are seriously advised to apply similar pressure to the occupying power to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories and to carry out its duties as an occupying force. These duties, which were approved by international laws and legislations, were meant to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians and grant them an independent state. Only then could they be entitled to demand a change of curricula.

Additionally, the study recommends that the Palestinian Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre review the National Education and History textbooks so that better distribution and stronger presentation of the national themes and values can be obtained, and Palestinian historical events are better presented and sequentially distributed according to age and level. Moreover, it also recommends that the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre keep in close contact with teachers and take their perspectives and views into consideration, as they are the ones in direct contact with the curriculum and learners, and their feedback notes are of great importance.

The study strongly recommends that the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre preserve the total independence and sovereignty of the Palestinian curriculum as it is a part of Palestinian sovereignty and the cornerstone for achieving national awareness and preserving the Palestinian national identity under occupation. Finally, the European Union and European countries must change their approach and their superior colonial attitude in dealing with the peoples of the Middle East. Otherwise, they are asserting that their financial aid is nothing but a disguised modern colonial tool for the continued manipulation and domination of other nations.

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