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Learning Through Hardship: Emotional and Social Drivers of Academic Persistence among Gaza Graduate Students

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study explores the emotional and social motivations behind academic persistence among graduate students in Gaza, where war, economic collapse, and insecurity are daily realities. Despite immense challenges, around 70% of students remain committed to higher education, with further increase in those who are joining post graduate studies which often represents hope, empowerment, and psychological refuge. Through qualitative interviews, this research examines the symbolic value of education, the role of family, peers, and universities in fostering resilience, and how persistence in education can be viewed as a form of social and psychological resistance. The study highlights how universities can offer compassionate, supportive environments for students in conflict zones and reframes dominant narratives by emphasizing student agency and institutional care. Findings will contribute to global conversations on education in war-affected regions and offer practical recommendations for supporting academic resilience under extreme conditions.

Full paper

The Israeli war on Gaza, commencing on October 7, 2023, has been described as "the longest" and "most violent" in the series of conflicts that have afflicted the Gaza Strip since 2008. Already under a stringent blockade since 2007, the besieged enclave has endured devastating impacts across all facets of life, leading to repeated cycles of displacement. As reported by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in November 2024, over 1.6 million individuals are currently living in precarious temporary shelters, facing an urgent need for adequate housing. These dire conditions pose a direct threat to human lives, tragically resulting in the death of more than 51,090 civilians and injuries

exceeding 120,404, with women and children alarmingly constituting 70% of the casualties (PCBS, 2025).

The educational process at higher education institutions in Gaza was abruptly disrupted following the onset of hostilities on October 7, 2023. Students have been profoundly impacted by the ongoing war, both physically and educationally. Gazan students have suffered physical and psychological trauma, leading to the inability to continue their studies and widespread displacement from their homes. Disturbing statistics from August 2024 indicate that casualties among students have surpassed 9,839, including over 651 higher education students. The number of injured students exceeds 15,394, with over 1,317 enrolled in higher education. Tragically, the death toll continues to rise daily, and the number of students detained in Israeli detention camps remains undetermined (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024)

Amidst this devastation, tertiary education students found a crucial lifeline when universities in Gaza announced the resumption of the educational process in May 2024 through online education, even amidst the ongoing conflict (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024). Although many Gaza graduate students face severe obstacles, a significant number persist in higher education. These challenges range from displacement, insecurity, food and water scarcity, life in shelters challenges, limited access to internet and electricity (Aboudagga & Al-Mqadma, 2025). However, limited knowledge exists about the emotional, social, and institutional factors that sustain the students engagement with learning. Furthermore, it is unknown yet how can this perseverance be seen as a form of social and psychological resistance? Therefore, this study aims at

1. examining the emotional and symbolic value of higher education in times of war.
2. exploring the role of universities, peers, and families in supporting students' academic resilience.
3. proposing practical recommendations to enhance compassionate, supportive academic environments in contexts of conflict.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on education in war contexts, offering insights into how higher education functions not only as a knowledge system but as a psychological refuge and source of hope. It also reframes prevailing discourses on higher education in crisis and war contexts, highlighting student agency and resilience.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 15 Gaza university graduate students in war settings who are currently studying at Gazan universities at postgraduate levels (masters and PhD). Data will be analysed using thematic analysis to uncover recurring patterns and underlying themes.

The interview guide constituted from four sections, the first set of questions underlines the personal motivation and experiences during war, the second section set of questions focuses on the emotional and symbolic value of education, whereas the third part investigates the social support systems from the family and the community, finally the fourth section underscores the recommendation and support mechanisms that participants believe in to ease the challenges during educational experience amid and post war.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws on resilience theory which has been widely used to highlight and understand perseverance and ability to restore previous status at different levels, individual, institutional and organizational levels. Resilience is defined as the ability of individuals, organizations, and systems to manage threats due to unexpected external events or adversity (Weick, 1993).

The resilience will be deployed in this research to conceptualize how postgraduate students continue learning and use it as political expression in the face of war, destruction, and eradication. Resilience here is both an individual and collective phenomenon within the educational process in time of war and crises.