

Cultural Heritage and Education: A Place-Based Educational Project in Jericho, Palestine

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CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EDUCATION: A PLACE-BASED EDUCATIONAL PROJECT IN JERICHO, PALESTINE

BART WAGEMAKERS

ABSTRACT

Many efforts are under way around the world to make children aware of their cultural heritage, as stated in the 2018-2021 strategy of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2017). One reason children should have awareness of their heritage is that, in combination with a sense of place, it can play an important role in their process of identity-building (Crocetti et al. 2024; Ashworth and Graham 2017; Spiridon, Kosic, and Tuci 2014). Education can be an important way to involve children in their local cultural heritage, but education systems in unstable and conflict-affected areas are repeatedly under pressure, due to the ongoing tension and violence that endanger cultural heritage (Gallagher et al. 2018; UNHCR 2016). In this field note, I argue that a place-based education project to increase children's awareness of the significance of cultural heritage and of their sense of place may be a promising approach to take in conflict-affected areas. I demonstrate this thesis through the Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho project, which was carried out in the West Bank, Palestine, in December 2021. In this field note, I describe the project's intention, explain how the project team customized the place-based educational approach to the specific circumstances, and discuss the constraints that emerged from the pilot.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of identity-building is unequivocally related to acquiring a sense of place (Locke 2023). “Place” can be defined for an individual as being “geographically located, emerging in a specific context through meaningful social interactions, and consisting of a bidirectional process by which the individual gives meaning to place and place gives meaning to the individual” (Akesson 2012, 248). Children need their lived environment to give meaning to place, as their local settings provide them with a set of affordances that complement individual identity-building, including awareness of environmental features and their functional meaning (Heft 1988; Akesson 2012).

Cultural heritage also plays a key role in giving children a sense of place and helping them build an identity; it is what makes them unique.¹ It manifests in their way of perceiving the world and enables them to express their capacity for cultural creativity (Bleibleh and Awad 2020). Understanding their cultural heritage also strengthens children’s awareness of their roots and of their cultural and social identity. Official sites teach us about the beliefs, values, and knowledge of the peoples and civilizations that created them or interacted with them (UNESCO 2002). The cultural heritage and collective memory of each locality or community are irreplaceable, as they provide an important foundation for development in both the present and the future. This serves to connect people’s heritage to their commitment to place and to their identity.

Education provides a way to involve children in their local environment and cultural heritage. However, in unstable and conflict-affected areas where the education system is repeatedly under pressure due to ongoing tension and violence, youngsters’ lives are full of uncertainty and their cultural heritage often is endangered (Gallagher et al. 2018; UNHCR 2016). This is the case in Palestine, as I will point out briefly.

ENDANGERED CULTURAL HERITAGE IN PALESTINE

Over the last two decades, as archaeologists and experts in Palestinian heritage have been fostering awareness and spreading knowledge about this cultural heritage, local Palestinian communities and people of Palestinian descent have shown a growing interest in their origins. Archaeology and heritage are now increasingly viewed as a means of documenting and sharing stories that reflect local and national narratives, which local communities in turn are recounting to the world (Taha and Saca 2022; Sayej 2019).

¹ Cultural heritage can be defined as the legacy of physical artifacts (monuments, groups of buildings, and sites) and as the intangible attributes of a group or society that are of outstanding universal value in terms of history, art, science, aesthetics, ethnology, and/or anthropology (UNESCO 1972).

Despite this growing interest, the preservation of Palestine's cultural heritage is still endangered by politically and ideologically motivated violence. As noted elsewhere, the occupying power appears to use archaeology to contest concepts of cultural heritage and, consequently, people's identities (e.g., Abu El-Haj 2001). Scholarship has shown that collaboration among the Israeli army, border guard, police, and archeological survey teams allowed for enhanced claims to territory (Stokes 2021). This resulted in the selective preservation of certain heritage sites and the lack of protection—and thus the erasure—of others (Stokes 2021; Hammond 2020, 5; Sayej 2019; Greenberg and Keinan 2009). As heritage represents the history and identity of a people and of a territory, it is significant in the process of nation-building (Taha and Saca 2022). Violence against cultural heritage, therefore, can be interpreted as an attempt to erase connections between a people and their land (Bleibleh and Awad 2020). The removal, destruction, and neglect of Palestinian archaeological cultural heritage has been used to delegitimize Palestinians' precedence in the land, as well as their political agency in efforts to achieve national self-determination (Stokes 2021; Bleibleh and Awad 2020).

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN PALESTINE

The ongoing tension and violence in Palestine also affect education, teachers, and students. Days of schooling are lost due to restricted access, checkpoints, and curfews; teachers and students are attacked and arrested; and schools are closed, demolished, or taken over for military use (Occupied Palestinian Territories-Education Cluster 2020; Naser-Najjab and Pappé 2019; UNICEF 2018; Ramahi 2015; Nicolai 2007). Some Palestinians in the West Bank even consider attending school and becoming educated individuals to be a nonphysical form of resistance to the occupying power and a way to support their communities (Akesson 2015).

For a long time, the conflict in Palestine has hindered the educational objective of making Palestinian children aware of their cultural identity. From 1967 to 1994, the Israeli administration placed strict limitations on teaching certain subjects, such as history and geography, and censored Palestinian schoolbooks that contained any reference to Palestinian heritage (Nicolai 2007). Since the founding of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Palestinian teachers have been allowed to teach about their culture and their cultural heritage. One guiding principle of the Palestinian curriculum and the textbooks introduced since 2001 implies that Palestinian national and cultural identity must be fostered and developed through education (Bernard and Maître 2006).

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EDUCATION-JERICHO

Palestine's children are living under extremely tense conditions. Due to the violence against their cultural heritage and the constraints the education system in Palestine is facing, there is an urgent need for education programs that engage children in their community, including cultural heritage, and stimulate a sense of place. Community-based

education is one such program (Taha and Saca 2022; Sayej 2010). The Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho (CHE-J) project is a community-based education program for children ages 11 to 14.² By incorporating familiar and (hopefully) accessible themes into these children's school experiences, the CHE-J project helps them see what is valuable in their home communities (Smith and Sobel 2010). The purpose of this process is to support the children's understanding of their commitment to place, to their cultural heritage, and, subsequently, to their identity.

In this field note, I first address the concept of place-based education, then describe the project design and the content of the project. Finally, I discuss my reflections on the pilot.

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

The culture children are familiar with helps to enlarge, diminish, shape, or transform the place they live in. However, before children's sense of belonging to a place can be linked to their emotions and a sense of commitment, they first must come to fully know it and embrace it (Read 1996). Several studies (e.g., Semken and Freeman 2008; Smith and Sobel 2010) have shown that place-based education is an effective approach for letting children explore their lived environment and to stimulate a sense of belonging between children and a place. Place-based education is a learning process that uses the local community and environment as a starting point for teaching concepts in subjects across the curriculum. This educational approach also emphasizes hands-on and real-world learning experiences and helps students to acquire, practice, and apply subject-matter knowledge and skills, which creates stronger ties between the children and their community (Melaville, Berg, and Blank 2006; Sobel 2004).

CHE-J elaborates on this concept of place-based education. It considers the local community and environment to be the basis of a learning process that relates to several topics across the curriculum and includes a special role for cultural heritage. This learning approach enables students to get to know and understand their place and, subsequently, to develop a sense of belonging to it. The hope at CHE-J is that having a sense of belonging will give the children an awareness of the significance of their Palestinian cultural heritage and the importance of preserving it. This awareness is not only important now; it also will be a crucial foundation stone in the building of a historic landscape in any future Palestinian state (Stokes 2021).

² The project focuses on the Jericho Oasis, situated in the West Bank. Jericho is considered one of the oldest cities in the world, and the Jericho Oasis houses numerous components of this cultural heritage. Therefore, this location was a suitable case study for this project.

THE PROJECT DESIGN

Palestinian heritage expert Hamdan Taha and I were jointly responsible for supervision of the project team, which consisted of 32 students who designed the project. These students were affiliated with four institutes in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and were pursuing degrees in teacher education, graphic design, and digital media. In order to develop a balanced and feasible curriculum, the project team collaborated intensively with Palestinian and international experts. Accordingly, before and throughout the design process, the team had both face-to-face and online meetings with representatives of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and with the students and staff members of schools in Jericho. The key questions considered in these meetings were what and how the students wanted to learn about their lived environment. We processed the subject-related and pedagogical requests put forward by the students about nature, climate change, heritage sites, implementing assignments, and information and communication technology (ICT) tools.

The CHE-J project's standards generally are centered on place-based education principles, as defined by Vander Ark, Liebttag, and McClennen (2020). This means that the community is considered an extension of the classroom, and the inquiry-based elements in the program are meant to stimulate curiosity, encourage critical thinking, promote awareness of civic participation, and enable students to express their opinions and discuss them in a constructive way. CHE-J also challenges the participants not only to learn about, discuss, and reflect on local matters but to make connections with phenomena at the regional and global level every now and then. Finally, the project has an interdisciplinary nature, which features modules in the fields of geography, archaeology, history, and cultural heritage.

We added one more standard to the principles defined by Vander Ark, Liebttag, and McClennen (2020). Since teachers and students in conflict-sensitive areas are frequently prevented from teaching or attending school in a normal way, we created an online platform that offers the complete project.³ By offering an online platform along with the hard-copy version of the program, CHE-J guarantees access to schooling even when schools are closed or difficult to access, such as during curfews, air strikes, or pandemics. Distance learning and e-learning platforms have already produced positive results under these circumstances (Occupied Palestinian Territories-Education Cluster 2020; Traxler 2018).

3 The platform is available at www.culturalheritageeducation.hu.nl.

THE CURRICULUM

While executing the program, students in grades 6 to 9, who generally are age 11 to 14, will encounter the Jericho Oasis from several perspectives and at different time periods.⁴ The Jericho Oasis, which includes Jericho, one of the oldest cities in the world, houses numerous components of Palestinian cultural heritage. By approaching the students' lived environment from different perspectives, in conjunction with shifts from the present to the past and to the future, we hope to stimulate their engagement with place. As one might expect of a place-based educational project, the program includes activities that can be performed on and off the school grounds. The curriculum aims to achieve 36 learning outcomes, including specific knowledge, skills, insights, experiences, and levels of awareness. A description of the learning outcomes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: A Selection of the CHE-J Learning Outcomes

Module	Learning Outcomes
Geography	The student is able to interpret maps, graphics, and elevation profiles.
	The student is aware of the importance of the presence of water in an arid region.
	The student can formulate and exchange his/her own opinion about climate change and the consequences for the Jericho Oasis.
Archaeology	The student knows what archaeologists do and for what reason.
	The student understands the archaeological methods and techniques used in the excavations of Tell es-Sultan and Khirbet al Mafjar, such as stratigraphy, absolute and relative dating, and interpreting artifacts.
	The student is able to create a scale model of a local heritage site.
History	The student knows about the way of life of the first cultures in the Jericho Oasis.
	The student is aware of the importance of the Jericho Oasis for the development of human civilization in the distant past.
	The student is able to make pottery and to create his/her own mosaic floor.
Cultural Heritage	The student is able to describe the different kinds of cultural heritage.
	The student is aware of the current dangers to cultural heritage and the techniques for how to preserve cultural heritage for the future.
	The student is aware of the relation between cultural heritage, his/her environment, and himself/herself.
Excursion	The student has visited an archaeological park.
	The student is aware of the fact that an archaeological park protects and preserves cultural heritage.
	The student is familiar with aspects of daily palace life in the Umayyad period.
Applicable to All Modules	The student has experience with collaborative learning, transforming macro processes into personal views, and underpinning his/her views.

⁴ The project focuses on this age group because the teacher education students in Utrecht who designed the program have been trained to educate children of this age.

A school can consider CHE-J an extracurricular project and organize a project week in which the entire program is completed. An alternative is to spread the individual modules (see “Setup of the Project,” below) over the school year and link them to the school subjects that are most suitable, such as geography, history, and English (the project is bilingual, Arabic-English).⁵ When teaching these subjects, teachers can add appropriate assignments from the CHE-J program to their lesson plan.

As teachers at the school are responsible for executing the project, the project team provides a teachers’ handbook. This handbook includes background information, the project’s objectives, and lesson plans. A workbook for each module has been developed for the students, who can process the information and do the exercises and challenges in the workbooks by themselves or in learning teams. The teacher can have a guiding role. Students also use an activity book that offers various activating assignments related to the modules, such as baking a cake, creating a scale model, and experiencing the past with the help of a virtual reality application.

SETUP OF THE PROJECT

CHE-J consists of three phases (see Figure 1). Phase one includes two short animated videos that aim to stimulate the students and explain the project to them at the same time. The first video introduces the general project, and the second highlights several features of the Jericho Oasis.

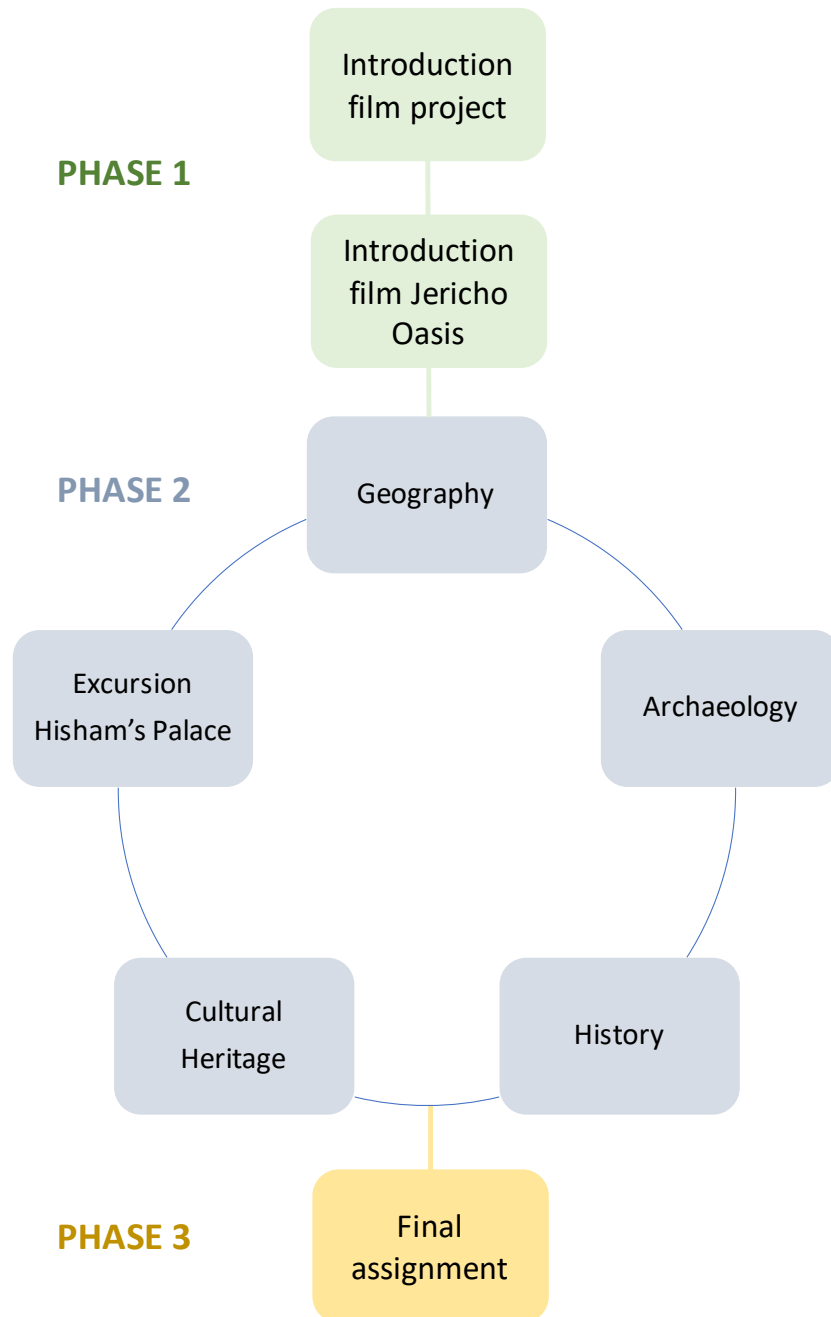
The second phase, the core of the project, is designed within a framework that includes five modules. Each module deals with a particular aspect of the Jericho Oasis. The geography module zooms in on geological features, flora and fauna, and related current issues, such as climate change. The significance of local archaeological research in terms of providing data on the past and the way to deal with artifacts is addressed in the archaeology module. The history module looks at the way people used to live in the Jericho Oasis. The cultural heritage module deals with different kinds of heritage, the ways they are being endangered today, and how they can be protected and preserved for future generations.⁶ Experience is key in the fifth module, which includes an excursion to the local cultural heritage site, Hisham’s Palace.

5 The time spent on the separate modules varies from 2.5 to 4 hours per module.

6 In the program, we indicated two types of cultural heritage: tangible (physical artifacts that are important for a community, such as historic buildings) and intangible (the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills of a community). We also paid attention to natural heritage, the unique elements of biodiversity, including flora and fauna, ecosystems, and geological structures.

Phase three of the project is the final assignment, which combines the students' acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies. As part of this assignment, students prepare a theater production and/or exhibit about *their* Jericho. This final product gives them the opportunity to present their views on, and how they belong to, their place in the present, past, and future.

Figure 1: The Three Phases of Cultural Heritage and Education-Jericho



PILOT

Between December 5 and 16, 2021, the project team, in cooperation with the UNRWA Education Department of the West Bank and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, organized a pilot at Ein el-Sultan refugee camp in Jericho (Figure 2).⁷ The project was offered as an extracurricular activity at the Ein el-Sultan Coeducational School, which has about 40 employees and offers education from grades 1 through 9. With more than one thousand students, it is one of the largest UNRWA schools in the West Bank, and is also one of the few UNRWA coeducational schools (UNRWA 2015). Since most of the students were born in Ein el-Sultan refugee camp or in the area surrounding Jericho, they consider Jericho their city, which fits the project’s target group well.

Figure 2: A Project Banner Created by the School, Showing the Activities Performed during the CHE-J Project



Source: UNRWA

For the purpose of the pilot, two experienced Palestinian teachers at the Ein el-Sultan Coeducational School volunteered to run the project. At the request of the project team, the teachers formed a mixed group of 30 students, 16 girls and 14 boys, who were in grades 7 to 9. The parents or guardians of all students selected signed a consent form giving the students permission to join the pilot, including an excursion to a cultural heritage site in Jericho.

⁷ There the school had to take into account the exams for the students that were already scheduled, so UNRWA’s staff members decided to spread the project over a period of 11 days.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team was not able to participate in the pilot in Jericho in person. Therefore, they set up a guidance program for the two teachers, which included lesson plans that provided a clear overview of the steps to be taken while executing the modules, as well as tutorials for the most complicated assignments. The lesson plans and tutorials were available in both Arabic and English. Furthermore, prior to the start of the pilot, the project team organized conference calls held via Microsoft Teams to discuss the complete project.⁸ The online meetings were attended by members of the project team, the two teachers, and by staff members of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit in the West Bank. When ambiguities or questions arose throughout the pilot, the full team got in touch with each other via WhatsApp. The teachers documented the progress of the pilot with photos and videos. All communication took place in Arabic and in English.

During the pilot, the students—under the guidance of the Palestinian teachers—executed all the assignments for the four modules and went on an excursion to the eighth-century Umayyad Hisham’s Palace. They completed the pilot by doing the final assignment, for which the students either performed their own play and/or presented an exhibit about *their* Jericho (Figure 3). This event was attended by teachers, parents, and staff members of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit in the West Bank.

Figure 3: Students Posing at Their Exhibition Table Showing a Scale Model, Ceramics, and Flyers



⁸ By choosing Microsoft Teams, the supervisors are following their institutional guidelines, which consider it a secure platform.

The pilot’s objective was twofold. First, we wanted to find out whether the students’ awareness of and commitment to their place—including the local cultural heritage—had increased. Second, the pilot was intended to indicate which features of the project did and did not work in the way we had in mind.

Since the project team could not attend the pilot due to the pandemic and a physical field study was therefore not an option, we decided to base the results of the pilot on online focus group interviews. The interviews were also organized via Microsoft Teams, and they were conducted in Arabic after the project had been completed. There was one interview with the two teachers and one with eight students, who were selected by the teachers and were a good representation of CHE-J’s target group: five girls and three boys attending grades 7 (n=2), 8 (n=5), and 9 (n=1). One staff member of the UNRWA Professional Development and Curriculum Unit who observed the pilot submitted an evaluation by email. The respondents provided their written consent for their participation in this evaluation and the way it was conducted.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PILOT

Although the pilot is not an evaluation, it does offer valuable insights into the potential of the CHE-J project. The teachers and students were mainly positive about their participation in the project. The teachers felt that the education program aligned well with the students’ interests and perceptions. The students, meanwhile, had acquired knowledge, learned a variety of skills, and developed several competencies. The practical and activating assignments in particular got a positive response. These were assignments that required the students to apply their acquired knowledge, which indicates that the students seemed to prefer learning by doing. The cultural field trip to the Hisham’s Palace Archaeological Park impressed them the most of all the activities (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Students Making Assignments at Hisham’s Palace Archaeological Park



Based on the reflections of the participating students, teachers, and the UNRWA staff member who observed the pilot in Jericho, we suggest that the CHE-J project has made a positive contribution to these children's awareness of their living environment, the significance of cultural heritage, and their sense of place. The project even had a positive influence on the process of identity-building. The observing staff member concluded that the project gave the students experiences that "enriched them, developed their personalities, and enhanced their citizenship competencies...The students also reflected good knowledge on the geographical, historical, architectural, and environmental context they are living in. Their perceptions were very positive and serious on stressing their role to preserve these as well" (personal communication with the author, March 4, 2022).

The focus group interview held with the students made it clear that they had become more aware of the presence and significance of local cultural heritage and that they felt more responsible for its preservation. The students stated that they appreciate living in Jericho more than they did before participating in the project. Because of that, some students were motivated to share their experiences and discuss topics related to the Jericho Oasis with fellow students, friends, and family. The examples these students provided during the interview made it clear that they have inspired their fellow citizens to value the unique features of the Jericho Oasis.

Although the pilot demonstrates the potential of the project, attention must be paid to the challenges encountered in the pilot. The main bottlenecks in the pilot were caused by a discrepancy between the pedagogical assumptions the project team made and the current educational and technological circumstances in Palestine. For example, based on the signals we received in meetings with students and school managers in Jericho prior to the start of the project, we erroneously assumed that the staff had extensive experience with student-centered pedagogy and competency-based education. However, during the pilot it became clear that the teachers had mainly been trained to practice teacher-centered education and were prone to focus on cognitive skills. Another challenge seemed to be education technology, the use of ICT in the classroom specifically. After completing the pilot, the participating teachers indicated that their students were not yet skilled enough to work with digital tools by themselves. With the students not able to execute by themselves, the teachers had to demonstrate ICT-based assignments to the entire group.

Consequently, the project asked a lot of the teachers' time and energy. They had to discuss most of the content with the entire class, instead of guiding the individual student learning teams to process the subject matter and proceed with the reading and the ICT assignments independently. This finding led to the insight that, in the future, the program's expectations in terms of the intended student-centered pedagogy and students' ICT skills must be tailored more accurately to the actual situation prior to the start of the inception phase.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we feel confident about the success of the CHE-J pilot. Although the project could have been better aligned with the current teacher training and the level of educational technology available in Palestine, the students still gained knowledge and noncognitive skills and competencies. That was achieved through a combination of lesson materials, activating assignments from the activity book, and a variety of tools, and through the participating teachers' hard work. Furthermore, the place-based educational project is paying off; by studying and experiencing their living environment from various perspectives, the students acquired a more comprehensive view of their place and its unique features—including cultural heritage—and became more aware of their commitment to it and responsibility for it. This awareness of local heritage and appreciation of a sense of place may play a considerable role in the students' process of identity-building over the long term (Crocetti et al. 2024; Ashworth and Graham 2017; Spiridon et al. 2014).

However, one should also take into account some serious points of attention when implementing this kind of education in conflict settings. While place-based education considers the community an extension of the classroom and stimulates teachers and students to explore their surroundings (Vander Ark et al. 2020), the circumstances in conflict-affected areas can be too hazardous for inhabitants to move about freely and without risk. Military barriers or travel restrictions can also hinder field trips (Akesson 2015). Second, the implementation of this type of pedagogy requires a lot of time, effort, and resources (Yemini, Engel, and Ben Simon 2023), which can be a challenge for education systems in conflict-affected areas, which are frequently under extreme pressure.

As the UNRWA Education Department of the West Bank acknowledges the project's value to students' development, the organization has decided to integrate CHE-J into the curriculum of their schools in Jericho in the near future. The department will pay attention to the areas of concern that arose from the pilot. For instance, the pressure on the curriculum will be reduced by spreading the project modules out over the school year and connecting them to matching subjects in the curriculum. Now that UNRWA has decided to adopt CHE-J, it is up to this place-based project to support Palestinian teenagers as they explore their place by stimulating their sense of belonging and encouraging their process of identity-building.

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