

PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

Teaching Critically

About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

With Suburban Seventh Graders

Andy Beutel

andrew.r.beutel@gmail.com

Teaching critically about politically charged topics in an affluent, suburban middle school requires a careful approach. Grounded in critical pedagogy theory and historical literacy pedagogy, the inquiry-based project described in this article is an attempt to help seventh-grade students analyze and understand the historic and modern conflict between Israel and Palestine. Questions framed the inquiry to help students go beyond the dominant narrative and analyze the topic from multiple perspectives. Students then applied their new understanding by generating solutions for peace rooted in justice. The culmination of the project was a student-led discussion focused on their collective analysis and individual solutions. After the discussion students connected back to the original questions and reflected on how their thinking evolved from the start of the project. Samples of students' discussion comments and writing reveal the extent to which it is possible to effectively confront dominant narratives and teach critically about contemporary issues in a time when such teaching is being widely challenged.

Keywords: critical teaching, difficult history, perspective, inquiry, Israel, Palestine

Teaching seventh graders about contemporary issues and difficult history through a critical lens requires a careful approach. Most 12- and 13-year-olds are only beginning to think independently about the world and their place in it; they need exposure to issues in a way that is honest, justice-oriented, and leads them to

deeper understanding and empowerment rather than confusion and cynicism. Teaching through this lens in an affluent, suburban, public school setting requires an even more careful approach. Most of these students come from families of relative privilege who benefit from the structural inequities in our country and

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Andy Beutel, andrew.r.beutel@gmail.com

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world. Most of these students have also not personally experienced injustices like those who are comparatively underserved (Seider, 2009a). Critical teaching with this student population in our current moment of fierce backlash against teachers poses even more challenges.

In the last year, what ostensibly began as opposition to the teaching of critical race theory, devolved into suppressing the teaching of truthful history more broadly. As this became a national issue, some states proposed bills and even passed restrictive laws related to the teaching of racism and history (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). However, even in states spared from new legislation, this rhetoric has had a chilling effect on those engaging in critical teaching. In a time when it is increasingly difficult to teach critically, the need for this approach is as clear as ever. Students need the space to grapple with complicated and controversial topics and teachers need to maintain autonomy over their instruction and challenge dominant narratives.

One issue that has required a critical lens is the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Earlier this year, Amnesty International (2022) issued a comprehensive report titled: *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: A Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity*. The report detailed the many ways in which Palestinians experience mistreatment including Israel's seizures of Palestinian land and property, killings of Palestinian people, denial of nationality and citizenship, and restrictions on movement. However, this report contradicted the dominant narrative in the United States, as made clear by several members of the Biden administration immediately following its publication. For example, the U.S. State Department spokesman, Ned Price said, "I reject the view that Israel's actions constitute apartheid" while U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Tom Nides, called the report "absurd" (Samuels, 2022).

The reaction to the Amnesty report was one recent example of the U.S. government and media defending Israel at the expense of Pal-

stinian human rights. Narratives that center Israel and downplay human rights abuses suffered by Palestinians have been common in the American media (Hussain, 2019; Ismail, 2021). I have seen the effects of this narrative on my own seventh-grade students. In May 2021, one of my students said to me, "Can you believe what's happening in Israel?! The Palestinians are killing innocent people with rockets." I asked if he knew why this was happening and if he was aware of the events that happened days earlier at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem; he did not know, and he was not aware. His framing was telling, albeit not surprising in this broader context.

Teaching honestly about this historical and modern conflict must include challenging the dominant narrative of the U.S. government and media about the state of Israel and centering the history and lives of Palestinians. Unfortunately, too many educators have avoided teaching about Palestine for fear of parent backlash (Sokolower, 2013). However, a careful and critical analysis of this topic could help young people understand justice-oriented ideas that transcend time and place such as the implications of colonization, the plight of refugees, and the effects of oppression on a marginalized population. Close study of this topic could also help increase students' disciplinary literacy by considering how historical narratives are constructed and recognizing the need for examining issues from multiple perspectives. The inquiry-based project described in this article was my attempt as a middle school teacher to help students critically analyze and understand the historical and modern conflict between Israel and Palestine. Using essential questions to frame the inquiry and focus questions to guide instruction and research, students explored a variety of historical and contemporary texts to understand the topic from multiple perspectives and generate solutions for peace rooted in human rights. The culmination of this work was a student-led discussion in which they shared their analysis and solutions, followed by reflective writing to help students connect back to our original

questions and consider how their thinking about the topic changed or deepened through the inquiry process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching is not and cannot be a neutral endeavor (Apple, 1990). As teachers we can choose to either perpetuate the dominant cultural norms and power structure embedded in schools or embrace a different approach that explicitly confronts misconceptions, inequities and injustices, while centering students in the process. Friere (1997) described a pedagogy of liberation for the oppressed in which people are engaged in a constant process of reflection and action toward greater consciousness about the world. While this pedagogy has been historically associated with empowering the underserved, it is also applicable for young people of relative privilege to develop a critical lens through which to analyze the world. Swalwell (2013) noted that it is students from privileged communities who will likely occupy positions of power when they are older, and it is this group that must critically analyze society through a justice-oriented lens as part of the broader goal of creating a more equitable society. When exposing students to issues of injustice, it is important to ground that developing understanding in empathy rather than a distant sympathy or an outright disregard. Mirra (2018) developed the theory of critical civic empathy that calls for “imaginatively embodying the lives of our fellow citizens while keeping in the mind the social forces that differentiate our experiences” (p. 7). An empathy rooted in equity and justice can help students of relative privilege move beyond feelings of sympathy or tolerance and toward solidarity.

Middle school is the ideal time to engage students in this type of teaching and learning. According to the National Middle School Association (1995), young people between the ages of 10–15 have the developmental capacity to consider multiple ideas at one time, carry

out their own learning, and think more abstractly. As such, the goals for middle level educators should include helping adolescents become actively aware of the world, ask questions, consider big ideas that do not have one answer, and learn to think more independently, rationally and critically (National Middle School Association, 2010). However, Harrison et al. (2019) argued that middle level educators must think beyond this developmental perspective and attend to issues of power and equity, asserting that those “involved in the education of young adolescents must devote themselves to the critical examination and understanding of the historical and current sociocultural factors affecting all young adolescents” (p. 16).

Facilitating this kind of critical thinking and disposition of students necessitates going beyond textbooks and other sanitized accounts of history and delving into content that challenges conventional narratives. Epstein and Peck (2018) defined difficult history as that which integrates “contested, painful, and/or violent events into regional, national, or global accounts of the past” (p. 1). Gross and Terra (2018) offered a more expansive criteria, asserting that difficult history is central to a country’s history, challenge widely accepted versions of a nation’s past, connect with issues in the present, involve violence, and challenge how we understand history. By nature, content focused on violence and challenges long-standing historical thinking has the potential to make the teaching and learning process uncomfortable for both educators and students. Harris et al. (2022) built on this research to develop a framework for teaching difficult history in the K–12 classroom. They argued that teaching difficult history involves content that is focused on injustice and dehumanization, but also specific curricular decisions made by the teacher and the context in which the teaching and learning is occurring. Teacher decision-making is central to this process. Of course, teachers must be thoroughly well versed in the content they teach but they also must have the ability to make controversial

and sensitive content accessible and age appropriate. This is particularly important with middle school students who enter class with varying levels of maturity and prior historical knowledge. Ultimately, the challenge is the unpredictability; teachers cannot know exactly how each of their students will be affected by these difficult topics (Gross & Terra, 2018; Harris et al., 2022). To this point, the context in which difficult history is being taught is significant. Not only are the students and school important factors, but the global and national events relating to said history are also important.

Teaching students to be critically conscious and embrace a justice-oriented disposition when studying difficult history requires a specific instructional approach. Friere (1997) called for a rejection of the banking model of education in which students are vessels to be filled with information from the teacher as that would inhibit the development of transformative consciousness. Relatedly, hooks (1994) described an engaged pedagogy that goes beyond teaching for critical awareness by focusing on the well-being and empowerment of students; teaching in a way that “respects and cares for the souls of our students” (p. 12). Through inquiry and dialogue students could take ownership over their learning and engage with one another as they seek to critically understand the world (Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994). This type of instructional approach could also help build the socioemotional skills that students report schools are now lacking, including understanding different perspectives, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions and handling challenging situations (Prothero, 2021).

A student-centered, inquiry-based approach must also be grounded in the pedagogy of historical literacy. Downey and Long (2016) asserted that “historical literacy requires an active engagement with facts, the goal being a conceptual understanding about the past and about how the past is related to the present” (p. 7). This pedagogy includes analyzing texts, writing, and participating in student-led dis-

cussions for the purpose of deeper thinking and understanding. An essential piece of historical literacy is perspective analysis. It is important for middle school students who are just beginning their study of history to understand that accounts of the past and present are constructed from multiple sources and reflect different points of view and experiences. Analyzing information from different perspectives helps students understand why events occurred and enables them to gain a broader and deeper understanding of conflicts between different groups (Downey & Long, 2016).

It is equally important for students to understand that the perspectives or accounts of different groups are not necessarily given the same weight or exposure. According to Trouillot (1995), the production of historical narratives and even determining what is considered a historical fact is an inherently unequal process based on the power dynamics between different groups. Epstein and Peck (2018) developed a critical sociocultural approach to studying difficult history specifically to highlight the influence of power on shaping historical narratives. The researchers claim that a disciplinary approach is limited for not considering these power relations and conceptualizing historical thinking from the “inside out” instead of the “outside in” where historical accounts are constructed within a specific context (Epstein & Peck, 2018, p. 4). However, I argue that a disciplinary approach is appropriate for helping students develop skills as historical thinkers and that the power relations highlighted by a sociocultural approach can be uncovered through instruction grounded in critical pedagogy theory. To this end, to meet the needs of all learners and create an inclusive learning environment for adolescents, teachers must explicitly focus on issues of cultural identity, power, and equity (Harrison et al., 2019). Therefore, a teacher-guided but student-centered inquiry process is ideally suited for helping middle school students analyze and understand difficult historical and modern controversial issues through a critical lens.

Projects are the best structure for facilitating student inquiry into complicated and complex topics. According to Downey and Long (2016), the most effective inquiry activities are project-based assignments that “engaged students in finding, manipulating and presenting information to the rest of the class” (p. 33). I would add that the most successful projects are focused on key guiding questions, incorporate student choice and collaboration, include resources to facilitate analysis, and create opportunities for divergent thinking. Nagle and Andrews (2019) argued that inquiry-based projects in which students take an active role in their learning can also help create space for middle school students to examine cultural identity and societal issues. Through this project-based structure, along with ongoing teacher feedback, students can gain a better and more critical understanding of the world in the past and present.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

I teach in a suburban town in northern New Jersey. The average home value and individual income are both well above the state average, positioning the town as upper-middle class relative to other towns in the state and wealthy relative to other towns in the country. The education level of adults living in the town is higher than the state average, and the town is more ethnically diverse in comparison to its neighbors, but the population is still over 80% white. The K–12 school district in town is well resourced and high achieving with an active parent community. In the summer of 2021, like in many comparable school districts, a loud group of parents began attending the board of education meetings challenging the teaching of critical race theory, any emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, and even the teaching of state standards related to the history of slavery, and discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Despite many parents being supportive of the schools and teachers, this group and their message became the focus of public

meetings and parent social media pages heading into the 2021–2022 school year.

I teach seventh-grade world history at the district’s middle school. The socioeconomic demographics and learning culture of the school reflects what Anyon (1980) characterized as an “affluent professional school” where there are high expectations for student success and many learning opportunities in and outside the classroom for students to grow. In this context, inquiry-based learning and the development of higher level thinking skills are encouraged but teaching critically about politically charged topics comes with risk. Swalwell (2013) noted the challenge for teachers working with this population in finding the balance between engaging in social justice pedagogy while avoiding alienating the students and being accused of indoctrination by parents. This challenge is even greater in our current moment.

The participants in this study were the 89 students I taught in 2021–2022 across four sections of a year-long, seventh-grade social studies course focused on world history, geography, and culture. I assigned the inquiry project in class over 7 days, and the following writing and discussion comments from work students completed in class related to different parts of the project. The names of all students quoted and referenced below are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted an action research study based on the inquiry project that I created for my students. Utilizing this approach, I helped guide student learning while also collecting and analyzing evidence of their learning to determine effectiveness and inform future instruction (Sagor, 2000). Several questions guided this study: (a) To what extent can I use an inquiry-based approach to help students critically understand the Israel/Palestine conflict beyond the dominant narrative? (b) To what extent will students develop solutions grounded in

equity and human rights after analyzing this conflict from multiple perspectives? and (c) To what extent will this project lead to a critical shift in students' thinking? I began the inquiry project by introducing the students to three essential questions:

1. When does a story begin?
2. Who has a right to land?
3. Why does perspective matter?

As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) explained, essential questions help to bridge the gap between big ideas and more narrow questions. These questions transcend any one time or place and help students develop as historical thinkers who can analyze the past and present. The questions are also particularly useful when exploring the Israel/Palestine conflict. For example, the history of Israel and Palestine looks very different if we begin the story in 1947 with the post-World War II U.N. Partition Plan than 1917 with the Balfour Declaration and subsequent British Mandate of Palestine. Similarly, when evaluating land rights, we must consider how and when each group came to control the land. The final question undergirds the entire inquiry; ultimately, the modern conflict looks very different if we only focus on the security concerns and land claims of the Israelis but not the humanitarian concerns and right of return of the Palestinians.

While these essential questions set the scope of the study, the following focus questions helped guide students through the inquiry process:

1. What are the claims to the land of the Israelis?
2. What are the claims to the land of the Palestinians?
3. What are the concerns of the Israelis?
4. What are the concerns of the Palestinians?

I embedded these questions in each of the learning activities throughout the inquiry project to help students build their knowledge of this topic and deepen their thinking (Downey

& Long, 2016). I wanted students to keep perspective in mind throughout their analysis which is why they answered the same pair of questions through the lens of both Israelis and Palestinians. The students then used their new understanding to answer the culminating question of the project:

- How do you think this conflict can be resolved in a way that is fair and protects the human rights of all people?

The students answered the culminating question during the discussion at the end of the inquiry study. According to Downey and Long (2016), effective inquiry questions must “provide students with a focus as they learn more about the topic, yet be sufficiently open-ended to invite students to contribute their own ideas” (p. 31). The goal of this question was to help students apply their understanding of the topic to generate a thoughtful and informed solution to the conflict that considers the historical claims to the land and modern concerns of both the Israelis and Palestinians. Goldberg (2018) cited the benefits of a multiperspective approach when teaching about the difficult history of Israel and Palestine but cautioned against giving equal legitimacy to human rights violations. To that point, my specific focus on fairness and human rights was intentional. A solution embedded in equity and justice necessitates centering the people who are most marginalized and helps students avoid the pitfalls of relativistic thinking. As Grey (2019) noted, providing adolescent students with the space to create counternarratives can help dispel myths about marginalized groups that tend to appear in dominant narratives.

After the discussion, students reflected on their learning by responding to three questions. The first asked them to revisit the three essential questions of the project and choose one to explain their overall understanding of the Israel/Palestine conflict. The students then responded to these two broader reflection questions:

- How did your view of this conflict change or deepen as a result of the class lessons, research and discussion?
- How does understanding this conflict help you better understand the world (even if we are not able to solve the conflict)?

Student responses to these reflection questions served as the data source for the analysis of this study and evidence of students embracing a more critical disposition.

Description of the Inquiry Project

In this section, I provide descriptions of (a) the historical context and teacher-guided lessons, (b) student research and synthesis, and (c) student-led discussion.

Part 1: Historical Context and Teacher-Guided Lessons

This project was situated within a broader study of the Middle East. For the introductory activity to the project and a segue from the larger unit, students analyzed 10 maps of Jerusalem, spanning from the Babylonian conquest in the 500s B.C.E. to the end of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, showing the different religious groups and empires that controlled the city over time. The point was to help students see that control of Jerusalem, like the Middle East in general, has changed over time and that many groups lay religious and historical claims to the land.

I designed the next 2 days to prepare students with the historical context necessary to begin their own investigation into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Miles and Thind (2022) asserted, “to truly disrupt the dominant narrative and begin to meaningfully engage with historical injustices, we need to start thinking of these histories as intertwined and embedded in the entire story, rather than taking place in a dark or sad chapter” (p. 139). To that point, we began the lesson by discussing the end of the Ottoman Empire and the Sykes-Picot Agreement that led to British control of

the area after World War I under the Mandate of Palestine. Next, students read the Balfour Declaration from 1917 in which the British government explicitly supported the Zionist position of Palestine becoming a Jewish homeland. Throughout this part of the lesson, I asked students to make predictions about the impact of these events and how they thought the Arabs in Palestine and the Jews would have seen these events.

Students then analyzed two texts: one summarizing the waves of Jewish immigrants to Palestine from the late-1800s up to the mid-1900s and the other describing the Great Arab Revolt of 1936–1939. Again, the questions were simple: How do you think each group viewed the Jewish immigration? How do you think each group viewed the Arab revolt? Using these texts, the students were able to understand the motivations of each group. For example, the waves of Jewish immigration made sense in the context of the pogroms and anti-Semitism in Europe at the time. Similarly, in the context of the drastic population shift due to Jewish immigration, the students were able to understand the causes of the Arab revolt.

I focused the next part of this historical overview on analyzing the creation of the state of Israel from Jewish and Palestinian perspectives. I briefly explained the impact of World War II from the start when the British restricted Jewish immigration due to fears of a continued Arab revolt, to the end when the effects of the Holocaust led to broader support for a Jewish state. The students then analyzed the United Nations Partition Plan through two maps: one showing the location of Jewish settlements in 1947 and the other showing the proposed territory for the Jewish and Arab states. Again, I asked students to make predictions about how each side viewed the proposal. With this context established, the students then read and analyzed the events that followed from 1947–1949, describing the war and its aftermath from Jewish and Palestinian perspectives. My intention using this dual-perspective lens was to help students better

understand the events leading up to and including the creation of the state of Israel and the subsequent dispossession of Palestinian land.

Part 2: Student Research and Synthesis

The next part of the project was the research phase. The typical seventh-grade student enters my class with relatively little experience conducting research (this was especially true during the 2021–2022 school year after more than a year of remote/hybrid learning due to the pandemic). To help the students learn these skills while also building their knowledge, I provided them with specific research questions and preselected sources. This approach streamlined the process for the students by allowing them to focus on the analysis of sources that are reliable and relevant rather than having them spend time finding sources. This also modeled for the students examples of quality sources for later use in the year when they shift to finding their own. Additionally, by including a variety of sources for students to choose from, I exposed students to critical sources of information without being accused of indoctrination (Swalwell, 2013).

I tasked students with answering the four focus questions introduced on the first day about each group's claims to the land and each group's current concerns. I designed these questions to help students analyze this topic from multiple perspectives to develop a thoughtful and well-informed solution to this conflict. These questions focused on specific information that would help deepen student knowledge but open-ended enough that allow for multiple correct answers (Downey & Long, 2016). Providing students with the space and support to engage with different sources and make their own decisions about what information is most important helped them build their knowledge and prepare them for the discussion about this difficult historical topic (Weisend et al., 2022).

I created a four-part, three-column note-taking organizer to help students through this process. The four parts were:

1. Overview of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict;
2. The Gaza Strip;
3. The West Bank; and
4. Refugees.

The three columns were:

1. Source(s) used for the information;
2. Notes in the student's own words; and
3. Guiding question(s) their notes for that part answered

My objective was to help students analyze this conflict as comprehensively as possible by considering the different land claims and concerns in the Gaza Strip versus the West Bank and pay particular attention to the claims and concerns of Palestinian refugees. For each of the four topics, I included a range of sources to balance accessibility with critical analysis. Seider (2009a) cautioned against only using radical readings with this population to avoid turning students off. Each topic featured an article from *Kiddle* (an information site specifically for young students), a mainstream media site like the *Washington Post*, *BBC*, or *NPR*, and more critical sites such as *Al Jazeera*, *Human Rights Watch*, and *Amnesty International*. This structure and process enabled students to understand this complicated topic through different perspectives.

The final part of the project before the discussion was the synthesis, the “capstone of historical learning” where students considered how they could use their understanding to answer our big question (Downey & Long, 2016, p. 154). The students reviewed their research notes and briefly summarized their responses to the four focus questions. After students summarized their research notes, they used the information to answer our big question: How do you think this conflict can be resolved in a way that is fair and protects the human rights of all people? Solution-oriented thinking is important for middle school students because it provides them with the space to think divergently and reinforces the ideas of

agency and hopefulness. This approach helped avoid what Seider (2009b) warned about the immobilization that can take effect on this population of students when not enough support is provided toward generating solutions.

Part 3: Discussion

The culmination of the project was a student-led discussion. According to Hauver et al. (2022), a discussion is a particularly valuable instructional model when helping students grapple with difficult history “as it invites students to share, to collectively carry what is heavy, and to generate ideas for positive steps forward” (p. 199). I set up the discussion in each of my four classes into two, 10-minute segments. I divided the students into two groups and arranged the desks into two concentric circles. When the students sat in the inner circle, they were the only people allowed to talk for 10 minutes. During that time, the other half of the students sat in the outer circle listening to the discussion. At the end of the 10 minutes, students around the outside gave shout-outs to students on the inside who made particularly insightful comments or helped to keep the conversation going. Then, students switched seats and roles for the next 10-minute discussion. I projected the questions that guided our inquiry on the screen and reminded students of good discussion strategies (e.g., building off ideas, actively listening, being mindful of the verbal space). From there, I turned the discussion over to the students and only interjected to correct misinformation or answer a content question, if necessary. This approach was reflective of hooks’ (1994) description of an “engaged pedagogy” where the voices of students are centered and valued in the classroom.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

At each stage of the project, I tracked students’ verbal comments and their written responses to determine their learning progress (Sagor, 2000). The focus of my analysis was on two parts: the students’ preparation for and contri-

butions during the discussion, and their written reflections after the discussion. The students’ discussion preparation responses, described as the synthesis part of the project, combined with their contributions in the student-led discussion, demonstrate the extent of the students’ analytical and solution-oriented thinking. I analyzed these responses to evaluate the depth and critical nature of students’ thinking, as well as the extent to which they were embracing different perspectives.

The students’ reflection responses, completed after the discussion, revealed how their positions on the topic changed or deepened, and the degree to which they applied their learning to a broader understanding of the world. My analysis of their self-reporting was the basis for determining the extent to which students made a critical shift in their thinking. As part of this analysis, I created a three-level critical consciousness progression scale to interpret the students’ reflections:

- Level 1: Students have developed an understanding of the topic but embraced the dominant narrative and support the continuation of the status quo.
- Level 2: Students have developed a deeper understanding of the topic, including embracing a perspective that counters the conventional narrative and support a change to the status quo.
- Level 3: Students have demonstrated a clear and nuanced understanding of the topic and embraced a perspective grounded in equity and justice.

I used this progression scale to evaluate and explain the extent to which students made a critical shift in their understanding and disposition as a result of the inquiry project.

FINDINGS

I organized my findings in three sections: analysis through multiple perspectives, solution-oriented discussion, and student reflections and critical shifts in thinking.

Analysis Through Multiple Perspectives

For the research part of the project, students responded to the following questions:

- What are the claims to the land of the Israelis?
- What are the claims to the land of the Palestinians?
- What are the concerns of the Israelis?
- What are the concerns of the Palestinians?

Student responses indicated that the dual-perspective lens led to a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict. For the Palestinian claims to land, students focused on the fact that the Palestinians were there before the creation of Israel and had their land taken away. Mark's response was reflective:

They had it (the land) until it was taken away and given away to another group of people and as you could imagine they didn't like that. Imagine your house just being taken away from you out of nowhere then you have to fight for it, I would be mad too.

Mark clearly identified the unjust effects of settler colonialism. For the Israeli claims to land, students focused on the religious connections of the Jews and the fact that Israel won the land through war. For example, Rebecca wrote:

As a religious claim the Israelis want this land and this was where Abraham lived and they believe that god wanted them to live there and they can live there. Another claim would be that they won the war between them and the Palestinians, so they won the land fair and square.

For Israeli concerns, students focused on the safety from Palestinian rocket fire and the potential population influx if Palestinian refugees return. For instance, Dorene wrote, "Israel says that letting refugees return to Israel would overwhelm the country and threaten its existence as a Jewish state." While Advik stated, "Currently, there have been

thousands of rockets shot toward Israel. 90% have been intercepted but many have caused damage." As a group, students identified many more concerns of the Palestinians. Terry focused on a few points in his summary, writing "Palestinian families were evicted from their homes. Another concern is that Israel locked down all trade routes so they have to trade through Israel. Also Palestinians are being killed while protesting." While Nate was struck by the living conditions of Palestinians, stating, "The parts of Palestinian control is very over populated with 1.85 million people living in the Gaza Strip which was only 25 miles long.... Also millions of Palestinians became refugees and had to live in refugee camps with poor conditions." Vireena offered the most succinct and sober assessment:

The Palestinian concerns are that Israel has complete control over them. They are being watched at all times—and their property could be burned down at any given moment. They feel that they are losing the land that they 'rightfully' own.

These responses revealed the depth of the students' analysis of a complicated topic and their willingness to embrace information that counters the dominant narrative.

Solution-Oriented Discussion

The focus of the discussion was based on students' answers to our big question:

- How do you think this conflict can be resolved in a way that is fair and protects the human rights of all people?

The students offered a range of logical and creative solutions to this conflict informed by their research. The solution proposed repeatedly across classes was to split the land and give half to the Israelis and half to the Palestinians. For instance, Abby said, "I think they should split the land equally so they each get half and they wouldn't have to fight any more." Carmela went further with her solution:

I think they should divide the land equally, not 55% for the Jews and 45% for the Palestinians because that is not fair. 50% for Jews and 50% for the Palestinians.... Also, their government should be half Palestinians and Jewish, they should each get control over their side of the land.

Within this comment, Carmela referenced what she saw as the inequitable U.N. Partition Plan of 1947 that proposed a 55/45 land split as well as the current Palestinian concern about lack of control over their own land. Ivan suggested a similarly nuanced solution, stating:

Since Israel and Palestine cannot decide the owner of Jerusalem, a partition could be made. Palestinians get their homeland back, and Israelis get the majority of Jerusalem. That way, Palestinian refugees can come back home again, and Jews can share their holiest cities with others.

This idea reflected the concerns of Palestinian refugees and land dispossession as well as the religious claims of the Jews to Jerusalem. Hannah offered the most comprehensive and justice-oriented two-state solution:

The Israelis would no longer be in control of the vast majority of Israel, and would instead share control of Israel with the Palestinians. Furthermore, the Jews would allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and the Palestinians in turn would allow the Jews to stay in their homes. This way, both the Palestinians and Jews can be in Israel and have a home and basic necessities to survive, which are the basic human rights of all people. By doing this, not only will government decisions no longer be biased or unfair to one particular group, both the Palestinians and Jews would get a say and the Jews and Palestinians would be able to have a home for themselves without any persecution or fear of being forced out of their homes.

Hannah's solution addressed several key points including the rights of refugees to return to their homes, the need for all people to live free from fear of eviction, and the importance

of living under a government that does not unfairly discriminate against a certain group of people.

Others believed that one country in which the land is shared would be the ideal approach. For instance, Aditya asserted, "A one-state solution could definitely work out. Everyone has all the land and everybody has equal rights." Simar agreed with the one-state approach, stating:

This has been used in America, where many religions are welcome, so why can't both the Israelis and Palestinians be able to live in the same place. If you can't have two religions in one place, how can you have 4-5 religions in one place?

Importantly, each of these ideas reflect a vision of a more peaceful world.

Most suggested either a split of the land, a sharing of the land, and/or ideas that addressed specific inequities. However, there were a few who did not embrace a multiperspective lens and proposed ideas that would perpetuate Israeli control and supremacy. For instance, Jessica argued for maintaining the status quo, stating:

I think that Israel should get the land because it was promised to them by Abraham and they have a religious connection to it. There are less Palestinians than Israelis. So Israel should get it because most of the population is already Jewish.

While this comment accurately captured the religious claims of Israel, it ignored the perspective of the Palestinians and their historical connection to the land. Similarly, in two different classes a few students suggested that the best solution would be for Palestinians to leave altogether. For example, Tristan stated in one class, "If we're trying to stop the conflict then send the Palestinians somewhere else" and Scott in another class posed the question: "Why don't the Palestinians just move?" While this certainly would strengthen Israel, this would not consider the human rights concerns of all the people involved.

Ultimately, most students proposed ideas that reflected a consideration of multiple perspectives and a focus on addressing injustices. In these discussions students shared and listened to competing viewpoints and honed their own ideas about how this intractable problem can be solved. Through these discussions, students also realized the challenges of finding a solution that would require such a large structural shift. Some like Vick felt that continued fighting was inevitable. Others, like Amanda, were skeptical of the proposed plans due to a fundamental lack of trust between both sides. Ariana captured this struggle poignantly, “This conflict can’t really be solved without one group wanting something the other one has and/or war. Nonetheless, ideas are always a way to start.” This was such a powerful point because, despite the challenges, we need to be able to imagine a better world to work toward creating one.

Student Reflections and Critical Shifts in Thinking

After the discussion, students reflected on their learning over the course of the project. First, I asked students to return to our essential questions and choose one to explain how it relates to understanding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict:

- When does the story begin?
- Who has a right to land?
- Why does perspective matter?

Nate focused on the first question writing:

The question “When does the story begin” relates to the conflict because you can have a different view on the situation depending on what year you started learning about it. For example, if you start learning about it when the Palestinians have control of Israel you would have a different view than someone who started learning about it when the Israelis had control.

Brielle offered a response to the second question: “The question, ‘who has a right to land’ has a major part in understanding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. You need to know the claims from both sides to know more about the origins of the land to each group.” In each of these responses, students clearly and thoughtfully applied the dual-perspective lens to their understanding of the conflict. Most students chose the last question. Gillian’s response was a particularly good example of a student connecting the idea of perspective to their own view of the issue:

Perspective matters to the way we understand the Israeli/Palestinian conflict because I originally thought that Jews had the better claim to land because the Britains [*sic*] granted them the land and they won the war fair and square. However, when I took a deeper look at the Palestinians claim I realized that they were living there longer and that they never agreed to the UN partition plan. In the end because I saw both perspectives I ended up siding with the Palestinians and that they should have the land.

Gillian reflected on her thinking and shifted her position after closely analyzing this topic from multiple perspectives.

Students also responded to the two additional reflection questions:

- How did your view of this conflict change or deepen as a result of the class lessons, research and discussion?
- How does understanding this conflict help you better understand the world (even if we are not able to solve the conflict)?

I ask a version of these two questions at the end of every project to help students think about their own thinking and explicitly connect their specific learning with a broader understanding of the world. These questions were the primary focus of my analysis to determine the extent to which students gained an understanding of the topic and made a critical shift in their disposition. However, I also referred to their

responses to the first reflection question as well as their discussion preparation responses as a supplemental tool to evaluate their understanding and perspective. Using the critical consciousness progression scale described above, I plotted each student based on their reflection responses.

Of the 89 total students I taught in four classes, 75 participated in the discussion and completed the reflection. Of the 75, 10 students gained a clear understanding of the topic but embraced the dominant narrative and/or supported the continuation of the status quo (Level 1); 46 students developed a deeper understanding of the topic and adopted a perspective outside the dominant narrative and supportive of change (Level 2); and 19 students developed a clear and nuanced understanding of the topic and embraced a perspective rooted in equity and justice (Level 3).

Sixty-five of the 75 students reached where I had hoped; they developed an understanding grounded in a perspective that questions the dominant narrative and embraces a solution for peace. However, 10 students did not. I explored these 10 students further and found two common trends. First, of the 10 students whose self-reported position was reflective of the dominant narrative, three did not complete all the research and discussion preparation. I believe this limited the depth of their understanding and led them to defaulting to the most conventional perspective on the topic. The other interesting trend was that six of the 10 students adopted the perspective of the dominant narrative in their reflection but proposed a peace-oriented solution in their discussion preparation response. Perhaps the focus on generating a solution explains this paradox. When framing this conflict as a problem in need of a solution the students cited the need to end the fighting and create lasting peace. This revealed a slight willingness to embrace a perspective other than the continuation of the current conditions. However, when reflecting on their learning they still reverted to the dominant narrative. It would be possible that with further exposure and study focused on justice-

oriented solutions that these students would continue thinking about this conflict through a critical perspective.

One student of the 10 completed all parts of the project and was consistent in her position from the research to the discussion preparation, to the discussion, and to the reflection. Jessica, whose discussion comments I cited, insisted that Israel should maintain control of the land based on their religious claims. Additionally, in her research notes and reflection, she downplayed the Palestinian concerns and misrepresented Palestinian contributions, writing:

I think that the Israelis have a right to the land because God promised them the land and it's their holy land. Another reason is because when the Palestinians had the land they did nothing but fight over it and when the Jews had the land, they turned it beautiful.

I think part of her position could be attributed to Jessica's self-reported religious identity as a Jewish person. She made several references to information learned in her Hebrew school and believed that those religious arguments trumped other claims and concerns. This revealed the unique challenge of teaching difficult history that contradicts a student's own religious views. It is my hope that exposure to an alternative perspective is one step toward a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Additionally, it is worth noting that several other students who identified as Jewish embraced perspectives that questioned the current conditions and power structure in Israel.

Overall, the largest number of students reached a deeper understanding of the topic and a perspective shift that included information outside the dominant narrative and in support of change (Level 2 on the critical consciousness progression scale). Some of the most common words and phrases that appeared in these students' reflections included: changed, deepened, multiple perspectives instead of one, both points of view, not caring to caring, more complicated.

Johnny reported a heightened awareness of the issue:

I think it changed my view a lot. I used to think that this wasn't that big of a conflict, and it was long ago. But then I realized that this conflict still goes on today, and it is a problem.

While Gia cited a change from looking at multiple perspectives:

This really changes the way I looked at the situation because it is very different for each side and you can't just get info from one side or the other because you need each POV for the info. This really helps with the situation because you can really see what the problem is and maybe even fix it.

The critical shift in students' thinking was not limited to this topic. For instance, Valerie shared:

I think that understanding it lets me think of different ideas on how to solve conflicts and it lets me think about people's different perspectives, and it helps me to understand how important it is to listen to the different perspectives of things.

Additionally, Lilly wrote:

Understanding the conflict helps me realize that you need to view a disagreement from both perspectives so it is easier to solve. It should help others too knowing that you viewed both perspectives so you know a bit of how the other person felt.

For Valerie and Lilly, their deeper understanding of the world was embedded in their thinking about perspective. Thinking through this lens helped them consider solutions and the feelings of others involved, both of which are applicable to other issues in history and today.

Some students went even further in their self-reflection, embracing positions grounded in equity and justice (Level 3 on the critical consciousness progression scale). For example, David wrote:

My view of this conflict changed when I studied both sides, not just the Israeli side. I learned that the Palestinians were actually their [*sic*] first and the Jewish (*sic*) pretty much invaded their land. I also learned that they were being unfair and not splitting the land equally.

David's comment revealed the potential for perspective analysis to lead students to a justice-oriented conclusion. Eric made a similar shift:

I saw the conflict in a new light. Before I really was very one sided and thought that the Palestinians had no right to be in the promised land of the Israelis, but now after discussing the conflict I can relate to the Palestinians point of view and think they have a right to the land just as much as the Israelis.

Finally, Julia wrote:

It helps me understand what I am hearing on the news. I wake up in the morning and hear about Israel and the Gaza Strip fighting. I never understood their reason for fighting. We humans likely take sides when there are places fighting and now I would proudly stand up for the Palestinians.

Julia's reflection indicated how a better and more comprehensive understanding of the topic can lead to a position of solidarity with a marginalized group. In the end, nearly all students embraced a broader perspective and a deeper understanding of this difficult topic. This self-reporting revealed the possibilities when students are encouraged to learn about a conflict through multiple perspectives, and not just the dominant perspective in the media and government.

CONCLUSION

Critical teaching is as important now as ever. Young people are trying to make sense of a world marred by a pandemic, economic inequality, ongoing wars, humanitarian crises,

and political dysfunction. They need exposure to these problems and the related injustices in a way that is accessible and empowering. We have a responsibility as teachers to help students understand the world in which they live and enable them to envision and work toward a better society in the future and do so in a way that is equitable and inclusive (Harrison et al., 2019). This is complicated and challenging work, especially in communities where parents are aggressively questioning this type of teaching. However, as hooks (1994) wrote, “The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (p. 207).

Inquiry-based projects offer a pathway for this kind of teaching and learning at the middle school level. The banking model of instruction is an ineffective approach and does not help develop a critical understanding of the world (Friere, 1997). Students must be able to take ownership over their learning and their voices must be elevated in the classroom (hooks, 1994). As middle school students are beginning to explore the world it is important that these projects attend to issues of power and equity, particularly as it relates to marginalized groups (Harrison et al., 2019). The role of the teacher is to develop learning activities that invite students to critically analyze the world through multiple perspectives and provide them with the resources and support to be successful. This is not only good teaching but also helps protect teachers who are broaching difficult topics from accusations of indoctrination by parents and administrators (Swalwell, 2013).

Teaching about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in a way that challenges the dominant narrative and centers the perspective of Palestinians is not popular and poses risks for teachers. However, this project reveals the extent to which it is possible to confront that narrative and leave students with a deeper and more complete understanding of the conflict and a perspective grounded in peace and justice. This project demonstrates the potential to help middle school students critically analyze compli-

cated and controversial topics as they begin to think about the world and their role in it.

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