



Palestine in the classroom

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The topic of Palestine in the classroom is one that exemplifies the words of the late radical education scholar, bell hooks (2014), who stated that ‘the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy’ (p. 12). Yet, the classrooms within Palestine look very different to others around the globe. Since October 2023, Israel has intensified its efforts to annihilate the Palestinian people that reside in the Gaza Strip, and Israeli military officers have produced several self-made-videos where soldiers are mocking destroyed schools or using schools as places to execute Palestinian civilians (The New Arab, 2024). These actions epitomise what Palestinian Professor Karma Nabulsi defined as ‘scholasticide’ (Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009), which describes the patterns of Israeli colonial attacks upon students, scholars and educational institutions. Ten months into the genocide, it was estimated that 8572 school students and 497 teachers/school staff have been murdered whilst 65 educational institutions were bombed and vandalised by Israeli soldiers (Middle East Eye, 2024).

While the world watched Israel’s horrific, live-streamed killing spree of Palestinians, the country of South Africa boldly filed a case in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2023, alleging that Israel continues to commit genocidal acts against Palestinians. In the ICJ, Blinne Ni Ghraígh, an Irish legal advisor to South Africa, stated:

...despite the horror of the genocide against the Palestinian people being live-streamed from Gaza to our mobile phones, computers and television screens, the first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in real time in the desperate so far vain hope that the world might do something (Reuters, 2024).

As young social media users continue to be eye-witnesses to the unfolding atrocities that are occurring in the Gaza Strip (Abdel-Fattah, 2023; Abdel Jawad, 2023; Mohsen, 2024), educators are faced with the question of how to incorporate content about Palestine. As a diaspora Palestinian who currently works as a lecturer in education on unceded Wiradjuri Country, I contextualise the predicament of teachers and students within (so-called) Australia in relation to the events in the Gaza Strip, and point out that a radical pedagogy is paramount if educators are to incorporate content about Palestine within classrooms.

Students and Palestine

‘We have a major, major, major generational problem... this is not a left or right gap, folks. It is young and old!’ These were the words of a US-based pro-Israel lobbyist, Jonathon Greenblatt, as he panicked over the reluctance of the younger generation in Western societies to condone anti-Palestinian genocide (Frank, 2024). These generational shifts are apparent in Australia, where many school students have taken an active interest in the Gaza Strip. The impact of youth accessing social media and witnessing the horrors unfold is one that cannot be understated. Many school students have noted the overwhelmingly pro-Israel narratives within mainstream political rhetoric and news media, and contrasted these with the horrors they have witnessed on their social media feeds (Roscoe, 2023). One recent survey found that young people get most of their news from social media (Notley et al., 2023). A leading researcher involved in this survey stated that they were not surprised to see young people dominating pro-Palestinian rallies across Australia (Hermant & Kent, 2023). The younger generational shifts have not only reminded educators of the power of the digital world in transforming and shaping how young people share and receive information; they have also shown other generations how young people are increasingly global citizens that take an interest in events around the world. As a result, many young people are very angry at the injustices

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and human rights abuses occurring in Palestine and have organised student strikes in solidarity with the people across the Gaza Strip.

In Australia, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019)* encourages students to be ‘active and informed members’ of society (p. 6). Whilst this Declaration itself strives to mould students as critical thinkers, the Australian news media and politicians from far right/major parties have been united in their consistent attacks upon school students who apply such critical thinking skills in relation to the genocide. In response, school students have defended their motivations to strike for Palestine. Young people in Australia have noticed that while they go to school, students in Gaza cannot. If Australian teens are old enough to watch the news about the genocide in Palestine, it would mean that they are also old enough to discuss Palestine respectfully within classroom settings. As one student protestor stated, ‘If the children of Gaza are old enough to be bombed, old enough to be displaced, old enough to be orphans, we are old enough to understand the genocide taking place’ (Kallarakal, 2023). On Channel Ten’s *The Project*, a student was asked to respond to the Opposition Leader’s comments that students should be in school ‘learning’ rather than protesting. In her reply, she explained that, through the course of her recent activism for Palestine, she had learnt more about history than her two year-experience of studying the Stage 6 (Grades 11 and 12) Modern History curriculum (*The Project*, 2023).

Teachers and Palestine

Teachers across Australia have similarly been attacked for daring to speak against the genocide and have formed coalitions such as the NSW Teachers and School Staff for Palestine and the Victorian Teachers and School Staff for Palestine (Honan, 2024; NSW Teachers Federation, 2023; teachers4palestine_vic, 2024). Australian political leaders, the mainstream media and conservative pundits have attempted to police these teachers. The NSW Premier criticised teacher initiatives for Palestine as ‘political speech’ that was allegedly ‘not allowed’ (Sky News, 2023). The Victorian Government characterised teacher support for Palestine as ‘inflammatory’ (SBS News, 2023). In some cases, education departments have tried to ‘reprimand’ teachers for displaying any pro-Palestinian attire such as badges and keffiyehs (SBS News, 2023). One letter, signed by hundreds of Australian teachers, critiqued how the ‘Department of Education is trying to silence the widespread critical discussion and debate in schools and classrooms of Israel’s deliberate bombing of schools and hospitals and the killing of thousands of children in Gaza’ (Andrewartha, 2024).

These common accounts of harassment against students and teachers who have dared to show solidarity with Palestinians prompted the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) (2024) to set up an ‘Anti-Palestine Racism in Schools Register’, where educators, school support staff, parents and guardians reported their experiences of being ‘silenced and discriminated against for showing solidarity with Palestine since 7 October 2023’. Evidently, school staff and students continue to be targeted by mainstream politicians and the media. On 8 December 2023, the Teachers Victorian Branch Council passed a resolution in response to the attacks on educators who show support for Palestine. This resolution stated:

Educating for peace must be able to be done without AEU (Australian Education Union) members being confined by kneejerk political reactions or limitations on their professional rights. Instead, effective peace education relies on teachers having the professional agency to develop and provide teaching and learning experiences which call out the violence and injustice which is at the heart of war and conflict (AEU, 2023).

Radical pedagogy and teaching about Palestine in the curriculum

Educators are often told that they should consider their students’ interests in planning their classroom activities. The *Mparntwe Declaration (2019)* states that the ‘curriculum supports students to become responsible local and global members of the community’ (p. 15) and ‘engage in the global community’ (p. 8). It is contradictory for curriculum writers to encourage students to be involved as global citizens on the one hand, whilst political leaders, conservative educational proponents and media shock jocks attack both students and teachers for simply taking a position against the atrocities occurring right now in the Gaza Strip. Within the Australian Curriculum, ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ is a cross curriculum priority that lists ‘the Palestinian territories’ as located in West Asia (Australian Curriculum Review, 2021), thus there is justifiable room for discussion about the experiences of Palestinians currently surviving the genocide. Further, when simply entering ‘Human Rights’ into the Australian Curriculum (Version 9) search engine, several results appear within the General Capabilities (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). The Australian Curriculum (n.d.) defines General Capabilities as key dimensions that include critical and creative thinking, intercultural understanding, ethical understanding, and personal and social capability. Whether it be human rights abuses

locally or overseas, students – as local and global citizens – have curricular opportunities to discuss Human Rights matters that fall under these particular General Capabilities. This curriculum validation of Human Rights fundamentally contradicts the arguments made by political leaders and conservatives against the discussions on Palestine within schools.

Whilst classroom discussions of Palestine fit within the objectives of the Australian Curriculum, I argue that a radical pedagogy (Silwadi & Mayo, 2014) here is essential. Freire (1970) argued that teaching itself is an inherently political act as it has the potential to empower students with critical thinking skills. Further, Freire (1970) argued against the idea that education could be ‘neutral’, rather what Freire identified as ‘neutral’ were mainstream oppressive structures designed to limit students. Teaching work has the potential ‘for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom’ (hooks, 2014, p. 11). In their unified attacks on students and teachers; mainstream politicians, media and educational bureaucrats have claimed that discussing Palestine is about bringing ‘politics’ into a supposedly neutral classroom. This is indeed familiar territory, as educators have also been attacked for merely teaching that Australia was founded upon colonization/genocide, for incorporating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum (Al-Natour, 2024), and have been even targeted for daring to discuss racism with Australian students (Baak & Chapman, 2024). The dismissive view that Palestine is ‘too political’ for the classroom parallels these common racist reactions against such curriculum initiatives, that ostensibly trigger white comfort zones within settler colonial education systems (Rudolph, 2013). Evidently, the incorporation of Palestine into the everyday classroom is one that requires a strong radical pedagogy in contexts that continue to be hostile against the people of Palestine.

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