

The Radical Project Taking Israel-Palestine Into Schools

By Helen Pidd, Courney Yusuf, *The Guardian*, December 14th, 2024

It has dominated the news agenda for the past 14 months, but inside most British classrooms, it's as if 7 October never happened. Last year, just 2,000 pupils tackled the origins of the Middle East's most contentious war: why Israel was born, what that meant for the Palestinians, and the decades of occupation and violence that followed.

5 It's not that children aren't interested. They hear about it at home, in their communities and of course on social media, where a bitter and bloody 100-year-old schism is boiled down to 15-second clips. But inside school, it's all just too difficult. Too dangerous, even.

All of which made the scene in the hall at Lancaster Royal grammar school (LRGS) this month even more remarkable as pupils explored and debated the Israel-Palestine conflict.
10 About 50 students aged 13 to 18 took part in the session, organised by Parallel Histories, an educational charity working with more than 1,000 schools across the UK.

The Parallel Histories method encourages children lay out competing narratives side by side. They are taught to examine the source evidence and debate alternative interpretations before coming to their own view.

15 On the day we visited, the youngest students, from year 9, were tackling the Balfour declaration, the 1917 memo in which the UK declared its support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The year 10s were doing the 1967 six-day war, or Naksa, which resulted in an Israeli victory over the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria – and the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. And the year 12s were examining
20 who was responsible for the failure of the peace process right up to the present day.

Each group was split into two, with half told they would be arguing the Israeli perspective and half the Palestinian view, with each using primary sources (letters, memos, speeches, etc) to make their case. Key to Parallel Histories is that the groups then swap sides and are forced to counter the arguments they have just been making.

25 It was important for schools to teach Israel-Palestine, said Sol, 16, otherwise "you have these two extreme sides who won't really listen to each other, and therefore you can't achieve peace, because neither side will hear out what's going on".

Al-Yasa, who teaches history at an Islamic boys' school, said: "I think it's really important that we talk about contentious topics, because if we don't, other people do in their own
30 echo chamber. And where best to teach contentious topics than in school, where we can teach the kids to articulate their views in a controlled and safe manner?" Nonetheless, teaching like this comes with risks, which is one reason his school asked to not be named in this piece. But Al-Yasa thinks Parallel Histories is the best way of countering extremism.

Bill Rammell, who took over as Parallel Histories' chief executive this year, said the
35 methodology had never been more important. "Society is more divided than ever before. And I think Parallel Histories and the way we teach, the debates we organise, enables young people to cut through that, to have empathy and understanding for both sides of the arguments, and, in a sense, builds their capacity to reach out across the divides. And I think it genuinely does contribute to social cohesion."