

Choosing your materials on Israel-Palestine – balance, human rights and opportunities for teachers and students.

There are currently fewer courses in schools on Israel-Palestine and there are fewer textbooks too. (The strength of feeling on both sides caused Pearson to review a textbook and then to withdraw it) There is still a lot of material available on Israel-Palestine, so if you want pictures or videos or information on something in particular, you should be able to find it, but not all tells the truth, or all of the truth, and there is much strong bias and much of it hidden. Our review of the material (see table) looks at the material both from the point of view of its design, and at its view (as far as we can see) of what is important, the angle that it seems to be pushing.

Maps, map-labels, country names, choices of voices that are given space are always an issue and never more so than in talking about Israel-Palestine. This area of study can be a wonderful opportunity for critical thinking, for considering what lies behind claims and how things are represented.

We have contrasted what we call **'balance-first'** materials with materials that take **human rights** as their starting point. However, there can be good visual material, videos and information in packs of material that take either of these perspectives.

We have found material for students studying the conflict for exams, but other material for students learning about the conflict for general knowledge, because of the force and importance of the issue. 14+ seems to be the preferred age for dealing with this in schools.

Balance-first materials.

We are keen to find material that tells the truth, has a calm, positive, inclusive perspective and helps us understand what is going on. This means looking all around a situation and having an open mind: an approach that can be described as 'balanced.'

A common approach is to look on two sides in parallel. It sounds as if listening to both sides must be even and fair, but not every two-sided account is balanced. Sometimes an account from two sides can hide the truth or project a picture that is false. This can easily be the case when talking about Israel-Palestine: 'The situation is in itself unbalanced: there is much more power on one side than on the other. If the weight of the different sides is not considered, or if we do not look at the agendas being pushed, then we may in fact be teaching students a false equivalence and hiding the real dynamics of a situation.

Here are some of the issues that can be hidden by a 'balance-first' approach:

- If the 'two sides' chosen are 'Muslim' and 'Jewish', this suggests a unitary view among Muslims and a different unitary view among Jews which isn't the case. Anti-Zionist Jews are at pains to point out that not all Jews think the same way, and that suggesting that they do have one view serves the Zionist narrative: it suggests that all Jews are pro-Israel and asks us to ignore the Jewish voices that call for human rights / Palestinian rights.

- The justification for what is happening is not the same (on the ground) to what is really happening, so if we teach children that as a first step they should look at the claims to the land of Israel and Palestine, we may find that we are not teaching them the truth of the misery that is happening to Palestinians in pursuit of those claims.
- Choices of information may echo the agenda of one side. An example is suggesting that the Palestinians' 'claim to the land' goes back only till Arabs arrived from the Arabian peninsula (we found this in *Parallel Histories* and '*The Israelis and Palestinians*'), while Palestinians themselves trace their heritage back before the Arabs to the people who have dwelt on that shoreline for millenia.
- Not mentioning colonialism or power is a significant choice, missing an important opportunity for students to understand the world and compare to other parts of it – but it also screens the occupiers. We think that if people are promoting the view of a balance in such a way as to suggest equality when there is none, they are (often unknowingly) covering up the truth.

Some of the most influential current material, *Parallel Histories* and *Solutions not Sides*, is also the best-produced, with videos, slides, personable presenters for talks in schools. We completely see the attraction of their presentations. We understand why schools will use it: it is specifically promoted by the government, professionally produced seems to offer a calm perspective. But having been to one of the SnS presentations and seeing the projection of equality despite the inequality of power and communicative ability of its happy Israeli and defeated-looking Palestinian speakers, we have been worried. Having looked at the 'whole history' given in PH and finding the 'Palestinian' perspective not the one that Palestinians would put, we have worried.

We wonder if the balance perspective is actually serving as propaganda? Neither of these banks of materials (PH the online materials, SnS the talks) talk about inequalities of human rights. We wonder if we can see the influence of funders who want to see a particular non-critical angle taken into schools? Or the sign of a conflict in an editing team that includes people who are worried or in some way fearful? Whatever the origin, students are arguably 'being diverted from the realities of the situation to a fantasy equality at a time when reputed human rights organisations (as well as all Palestinians) are pointing out that there is no mild inequality but a severe situation of apartheid firmly in place.

How are teachers to know all this or make a judgement? There are many useful books, but in addition we suggest that a good question to ask is whether the people talking to you (through their materials or in person) respect the human rights of everyone equally.

Human rights approach

We contrast this balance-first material to a second bank of work that takes human rights as its starting point. This asserts that human beings are equal and that human rights are important and apply to everyone. In this this situation of conflict we look for recognition of human rights as one of the criteria of good material on Israel- Palestine. This approach also gives us the chance for a balanced perspective as it is about real equality and fairness.

The Quaker material sits on the fence – perhaps the result of an impassioned debate? *'Razor Wire and Olive Branches'* is full of imaginative activities and its authors know of the situation, but its 'principled impartiality in the classroom' leads it to an equal number of case studies from Israelis and from Palestinians and to some strange choices – we were astonished that of all the people it could speak about in Palestinian civil society, the authors chose to include a suicide bomber? However, the Quaker material also insists on the importance of human rights, and we do recommend some of its work and activities for schools.

Beyond that there is work that acknowledges the importance of human rights in general (Amnesty) and in relation to Palestine in particular. The Tower Hamlets work (Global Learning London) starts by examining ways of approaching controversial issues (citing also Oxfam's work) and then goes straight on to look at inequality and colonialism. It uses the work of other people to offer an interesting way into the Israel-Palestine conflict.

CADFA's work in general - and *'For Hammam'* as an example - focuses directly on human rights and on the stories of Palestinian lives – young Palestinians in the case of *'For Hammam'*. Both of these (Tower Hamlets and CADFA), having looked at what is going on in Palestine, look at the issues of anti-semitism and what young people can do themselves to promote change.

Some of the interesting work we found that introduces the Palestine-Israel issue and uses a human rights perspective is by Jewish anti-Zionist groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace (based in US) which has made – for example – a short film, very useful in the classroom, looks at the displacement of and cruelty to Palestinians by the growth of Israel. They have also made a series of lessons on *Facing the Nakba* that are aimed at Jews in the US (and for others if they like), looking at the pressures to leave that faced Palestinians in 1948 and continue.

With the internet, and specially as we are talking about an international matter, we are not restricted to materials made in the UK. In the US, the Middle Eastern Children's Alliance has put together a large resource called *'Teach Palestine.'* This is clear in its effort to promote Palestinian rights but suggested schemes of work include a focus on multiple perspectives.

Many types of available material

There are huge amounts of material available and here we suggest only some of it. CADFA has its own books of stories by Palestinian young people, women and by others. Many people by now have recorded what is happening in Palestine through print, photos, videos. There are children's books, adult novels, films. There are the heavy reports by human rights organisations. The situation in Palestine is (if you look) well in the public domain.

Speakers, visits, places to visit – link here

There are speakers available to schools from many organisations now. There are visits to Palestine available both for general interest groups and for teachers in particular so that they can learn about the situation at first hand. There are particular places of interest available across the country that can provide Palestinian food and crafts, exhibitions and

relevant workshops – Café Palestina in London, the Palestinian Museum in Bristol, and many organisations that hold events on an occasional basis.

Zoom links with Palestine and youth visits from Palestine – link here

An interesting opportunity for schools and is to link to Palestinian schools just once or more regularly by Zoom (Sonunu project) , and even increasing opportunities to have a visit – perhaps for a session – from a group of Palestinian youth (Building Hope project and others).

Children’s books on Israel-Palestine – link here

Current material on Israel-Palestine made for schools (2022) –link here

Where to find more info on Israel-Palestine – link here

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