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The unbearable lightness of being implicated in conflict-affected societies: can teachers do anything about it?

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Abstract

Purpose – In this reflective essay, the authors explore how thinking with the notions of implication and complicity may encourage or hinder efforts to engage teachers in problematizing victim-perpetrator binaries in conflict-affected societies.

Design/methodology/approach – This reflective essay draws on lessons learned from the authors' long-time work with teachers in Cyprus and Israel. The authors suggest that the concept of implication provides a productive framework for thinking about teachers' professional responsibilities in more complex and nuanced ways.

Findings – The reflections of the two authors highlight the challenges and possibilities of overcoming essentialist categories of "victims" and "perpetrators" in conflict-affected societies.

Originality/value – This essay shows the (im)possibilities of transforming the prevailing binaries in communities experiencing political conflict.

Keywords The implicated subject, Cyprus, Israel, Teachers, Victims/perpetrators

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Both of us come from what scholars call "conflict-affected societies", that is, societies troubled by long-term, unresolved political, religious, and/or armed conflict. We have worked, researched, and lived in our own respective countries, Cyprus and Israel, for most of our lives. Over the years, we have collaborated by examining our unique contexts, comparing them, and learning from each other's research. Additionally, both individually and as a team, we have worked with colleagues from various countries and regions, including Northern Ireland, South Africa, the Balkans, and Australia. Through these collaborations, we have engaged in theorizing, comparing, and analyzing *both* the constructive *and* destructive role of education in communities experiencing political conflict.

In our research over the years, we have closely worked together with teachers at all levels of education, trying to address their concerns about the role of teachers in such difficult circumstances (e.g. see Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012, 2018, 2023; Zembylas and Bekerman, 2019). We have particularly examined the challenges faced by teachers as they try to balance their understanding of students' needs, their personal and professional commitments, and their responsibilities to the larger society and the nation-state. We have considered the many

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difficulties teachers encounter when addressing controversial issues and contested narratives related to their national contexts. Our primary focus has been on daily classroom practices and events, showing how broader sociocultural and political contexts inevitably have an impact on these practices. We have demonstrated that teachers, burdened by their internal struggles, concerns, and ambivalences, often find it extremely difficult to foster open dialogue among students from conflicting groups. Nonetheless, we argue that there is much to learn from these challenges, because they can help us (scholars, teacher educators, teachers) identify potential openings that might make small but significant changes in the world.

In particular, we have exposed and critiqued the psychologized basis of many educational interventions within the nation-state framework (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2018). We have explored how this framework limits educational visions for resolving conflicts, because it tends to psychologize deeply political issues of power and domination, presenting them as problems that can be resolved with a set of interpersonal competences (e.g. empathy, mutual understanding, respect etc.). Our analysis has focused on how notions of identity, memory, and trauma are intertwined and sustain deep-rooted essentialist ideas about "we" and "they," victims and perpetrators. To put this simply: children learn from a very young age that they are the victims of the Other's aggression; that they are "good" and the Others (enemies) are "evil." Hence, we question whether the schools' sustained emphasis on identity—whether religious, cultural, ethnic, or national—in these essentialist terms offers any real potential for peace and reconciliation in Israel, Cyprus or elsewhere in the world for that matter.

In particular, we have collaborated extensively on research that investigates the role of education in conflict-ridden areas, specifically focusing on how educational practices can either perpetuate or help resolve conflicts while considering aspects of how educational settings can both challenge and reinforce existing social divisions, emphasizing the need for pedagogical approaches that promote understanding and reconciliation (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2023). We have delved into these themes by exploring identity, memory, and reconciliation in peace education and how these can challenge or perpetuate the divisions within conflicted societies (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012). We have carefully examined how educational practices can either ossify or question the social roles and identities imposed by conflicted histories. Our research suggests that schools have the potential to become sites of resistance against divisive ideologies if they embrace an inclusive and reflective approach to teaching history and social studies. Moreover, we have discussed the emotional and ethical dimensions of teaching in conflict zones. We have highlighted the emotional labor required from educators who must handle their own biases and traumas while facilitating a learning environment that encourages critical thinking and empathy among students from different backgrounds. In our work we have emphasized the complexities, both cognitive and emotional, of teaching contested narratives in environments where historical and social tensions prevail. We have advocated for an educational approach that acknowledges the diverse identities and memories of all community members, aiming to foster reconciliation and peace through critical engagement and dialogue in the classroom.

Our reflection in this paper focuses on a particular challenge we have both repeatedly faced (and still do) in our work with teachers in Cyprus and Israel. This challenge emerges from how teachers represent and identify historical victims and perpetrators when teaching about historical trauma and their communities. The teachers' tendency, as we have shown in our long-term research (e.g. see Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012), is to represent one's own community as the victims and the others as the perpetrators. In the numerous workshops we have organized with teachers to discuss this and other related challenges, we have noticed that teachers have a difficult time overcoming these categories. We, as teacher educators, have difficulties how to explore these sensitive and controversial issues with teachers. Clearly, then, we do not blame teachers. They live in communities that use these categories in

everyday social and political life. They have to balance between their professional responsibilities and their obligations to educate younger generations into the nation. And yet, we often wonder: What kind of responsibility do teachers have in the reproduction of essentialized binaries between "we" and "they", victims and perpetrators, the "good" and the "evil"? Is it possible to move beyond these essentialist categories?

To make sense of these questions, we invoke Michael Rothberg's (2019, 2023) concept of *the implicated subject*, which describes that an implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator; implicated subjects "contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination" (2019, p. 1). Rothberg's view of implication is a much broader and more expansive concept than that of complicity; the latter "works best as a term linked to unfolding processes and completed actions (such as the perpetration of a crime), but it works less well for describing the relationship of the past to the present" (2019, p. 14). In this sense, argues Rothberg, we are all implicated in past (and present) injustices, but we cannot be complicit for historical injustices that occurred before our birth. To illustrate how the concept of the implicated subject operates, Rothberg provides case studies of how individuals and groups are implicated in complex ways in different forms of injustice. In these cases, someone may be a victim in one context, while being a perpetrator in another; hence, the categories of victims and perpetrators are not essentialist or monolithic. Rothberg provides a personal example by discussing the intricate dynamics between the diasporic Jewish community and the Israeli occupation of Palestine, where intersecting histories of genocide and oppression converge.

Along similar lines, we argue that the teachers we work with in Israel and Cyprus are implicated in practices and structures that perpetuate essentialist categories of victims and perpetrators. Implicated subjects are not direct agents of harm, but exist in various positions of power and privilege that are shared by legacies of conflict and violence. We suggest, then, that the concept of implication provides a productive framework for thinking about teachers' professional responsibilities in more complex and nuanced ways. We are not suggesting that Rothberg's concept enables us to overcome these categories, but it certainly shows that one is rarely in a position of pure victim or pure perpetrator. Does this really matter? We are not sure that it does always, at least in situations where a political conflict seems to spiral out of control such as the current war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza.

In exploring the nuanced dynamics between "implication" and "complicity" within educational settings, this essay inherently addresses the formation and utilization of professional capital among educators. Professional capital, a concept introduced by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), refers to the collective capabilities that educators build and share to improve student outcomes across schools and systems. This includes human, social, and decisional capital, which, when leveraged, empower educators to navigate complex educational landscapes, especially those marked by sociopolitical conflicts. The focus on implication and complicity offers educators a framework to critically reflect on their roles and responsibilities in potentially divisive or contentious environments. For instance, understanding one's implication in systemic structures provides educators with critical insights into how their actions, or inactions, contribute to perpetuating certain narratives or injustices within the classroom. Critical reflection is a key component of decisional capital, where educators make informed decisions that go beyond technical knowledge to include ethical considerations and the impact of their teaching on diverse student populations. In this sense, the cultivation of social capital is crucial for educators to form supportive professional communities that provide a space for dialogue and shared learning. Such communities encourage educators to discuss difficult topics, share experiences, and develop strategies to address the complexities of teaching in conflict-ridden contexts. By fostering strong professional networks, educators can collectively challenge and refine their understandings of implication and complicity, thus enhancing their capacity to contribute to more equitable and inclusive educational practices.

Furthermore, this essay suggests that by enhancing their professional capital through continuous professional development and collaborative practices, educators can better support each other in navigating the ethical dilemmas that arise when dealing with historical and ongoing conflicts. Building community among educators not only strengthens their professional practice but also models for students how diverse groups can work together toward common goals, thereby embodying the principles of inclusion and mutual respect in the learning environment. By addressing the themes of implication and complicity, then, we directly relate to how educators build and utilize their professional capital to foster communities that are both reflective and action oriented. This should enrich their pedagogical practices and also equip them with the skills necessary to handle the complexities of teaching content that is intimately connected to students' lives and the wider community. Thus, educators will be better prepared to face challenges and create educational environments that are cognizant of historical contexts and proactive in promoting peace and reconciliation.

To illustrate these complexities and the (im)possibilities of creating educational environments in communities experiencing political conflict, we reflect on our personal experiences of working with teachers in Cyprus and Israel.

Michalinos's reflections (Cyprus)

In a secondary school in Nicosia, Cyprus, Mr. Papadopoulos (pseudonym), a seasoned Greek-Cypriot teacher, teaches history. The school's student body includes Greek-Cypriot students (the majority) and students with migrant and refugee background (the minority). There are no Turkish-Cypriots in the classroom; Turkish Cypriots have always been educated in separate schools (now in the north part of Cyprus, which has been occupied by Turkey since 1974). Mr. Papadopoulos, as expected, teaches the hegemonic narrative about the traumatic events of 1974, namely, how Greek-Cypriots have fallen victims of Turkish aggression. He emphasizes that in these events, a Greek-Cypriot coup d'état, supported by the Greek military junta, led to a Turkish military intervention. This resulted in the division of the island and the displacement of thousands of Greek-Cypriots from the north to the south part of Cyprus. Mr. Papadopoulos uses vivid descriptions and personal stories to illustrate the suffering and displacement experienced by the Greek-Cypriot community. His goal is to evoke empathy and understanding among his students, many of whom have family members who lived through these events. By focusing predominantly on the Greek-Cypriot experience of victimization, he creates a binary narrative of "we" (Greek-Cypriot victims) and "they" (Turkish perpetrators).

When Mr. Papadopoulos discusses the Turkish-Cypriot experience, he fails to mention the hardships faced by Turkish-Cypriots during intercommunal violence before 1974. This imbalance reinforces a simplistic victim-perpetrator dichotomy. The Turkish-Cypriot community's suffering and fears are marginalized or underrepresented in the broader narrative of the conflict. This binary framing becomes evident in classroom discussions. Greek-Cypriot students, influenced by Mr. Papadopoulos's emphasis on Greek-Cypriot victimhood, often view "the Turks" (there is rarely a distinction between Turks and Turkish-Cypriots) primarily as the cause of their community's suffering. Students from migrant or refugee background adopt the same narrative to show their Greek-Cypriot classmates that they empathize with their misfortune; at the same time, they feel that their own narrative of suffering (many of them had to flee Syrian war) is overlooked. This dynamic perpetuates a division between "we" (Greek-Cypriots) and "others" (non Greek-Cypriots) and hinders mutual understanding and respect. Mr. Papadopoulos's intention may well be to educate and foster empathy to younger generations of Greek-Cypriots, but his approach risks entrenching further divisions. His Greek-Cypriot students develop a strong sense of

historical grievance and victimhood, but they view Turkish-Cypriots and others (migrants, refugees) through a lens of suspicion and blame.

This is a typical story that I have witnessed in many Greek-Cypriot classrooms over the years, doing research on how teachers present the tragic events of 1974 in Cyprus. As a teacher educator, I often narrate this story in teacher workshops on peace education to show that our pedagogical choices in the classroom matter and have ethical and political consequences. I emphasize that I use this story not to blame the teacher, but rather to problematize how teaching about memory, identity and trauma may create we-they binaries, often without realizing it. When I do this, I get mixed reactions from the teachers' audience. Some teachers admit that they see themselves in Mr. Papadopoulos's actions and feel proud that they teach younger generations who the real victims and perpetrators are in the Cyprus conflict. Other teachers are more ambivalent and express skepticism when they realize that by reinforcing rigid categories of victims and perpetrators, Mr. Papadopoulos risks deepening the ethnic divide rather than bridging it. If students leave the classroom with a one-dimensional view of the conflict that can translate into polarized perspectives, these teachers fear that the culture of political conflict in Cyprus will be simply reproduced.

Teachers in my workshops over the years struggle to appreciate the multifaceted nature of identity and conflict, both in history and in their own lives. To address this challenge, I provide readings and activities that help teachers adopt a more nuanced perspective and understand how they are implicated in the conflict. This involves presenting the histories of both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots with equal empathy and detail, showcasing stories of bi-communal solidarity, resistance, and shared suffering. This does not mean abandoning the categories of victims and perpetrators altogether or suggesting that there is symmetry in the suffering of both communities, but rather demonstrating that reality is rarely straightforward or monolithic. For example, I emphasize that Greek-Cypriots have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by acknowledging the victimhood of Turkish-Cypriots in the period before 1974, when Turkish-Cypriots were forced to live into ethnic enclaves; the same is true for Turkish-Cypriots about recognizing the victimhood of the other community, when Greek-Cypriots were forced to become internally displaced and lose their homes, land, and livelihood. Encouraging critical thinking about the nature of victimhood and perpetration can help teachers understand that these roles can be fluid and context-dependent.

A pedagogical strategy that I often use is to bring examples from other conflicts or historical traumas and how the roles of victims and perpetrators are not as pure as we often think. For example, one source (which is also suggested by Rothberg in his book) that is suggested to show the complexities of being implicated is the autobiography of Primo Levi (1986). Levi writes that in the concentration camps, life could not be reduced to victims and perpetrators, because the camps were set up in such a way that prevented the establishment of these binaries. Rather, there was a "grey zone" as Levi calls it, which refers to the complex moral and ethical landscape within concentration camps. Levi uses the term to describe the ambiguous area where the clear distinctions between victim and perpetrator blur. This zone includes individuals who, under extreme conditions of survival, were forced into morally compromising positions, such as prisoners who collaborated with the Nazis to gain small privileges or to survive. Levi argues that these circumstances complicate the binary view of good and evil, illustrating how extreme oppression can lead to actions that defy simple moral categorization. The "grey zone" challenges the notion of absolute moral clarity by highlighting the severe pressures and impossible choices faced by those in the camps.

Taking these insights into the field of education, and specifically that of teaching about the political conflict in Cyprus, I emphasize that both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are implicated in complex and nuanced ways in histories of both perpetration and victimhood. This does not erase the suffering of each community, which is unique and cannot be compared to that of the other community. What is important though is that embracing a

pedagogical approach that acknowledges this complex implication (Miles, 2024; Zembylas, 2020) makes less possible the binaries of victims/perpetrators, good/evil, and guilty/innocent. What the concept of being an implicated subject offers to education, argues Miles (2024), is that it enables a greater understanding of the "differently situated positions that are often constrained by thinking that emphasizes self-contained or pure identities" (p. 633). The idea is that implication can produce solidarities oriented toward a different understanding of the political conflict in Cyprus (or elsewhere), when a relational ethical approach is used to navigate around the sensitive issues of historical injustices rather than a monolithic identity approach that reifies binaries. Is this approach successful in practice? I am afraid that the evidence is mixed. Does this mean that we should abandon it? I would not rush to do so.

Zvi's reflections (Israel)

In Israel today, almost a year into the renewed conflict in Gaza following the events of October 7, 2023 the atmosphere has become increasingly charged and polarized, making open dialogue particularly challenging. This climate significantly affects teachers' ability to discuss sensitive topics, as the war not only exacerbates existing tensions but also restricts the space for free expression. This situation provides a stark example of how external conflicts influence educational settings and complicate the responsibilities of teachers. The fear of repercussion for voicing dissenting views or simply exploring alternative narratives can stifle the educational process, turning potential discussions into silent monologues where controversial issues are best left unaddressed (Bekerman, 2024).

I harbor a deep apprehension toward context, because it perennially threatens theoretical constructs from all directions and yet no context, no understanding. While theory dwells in abstraction, the ontological reality of context admits only what is perceived as real. True theoretical engagement must therefore renounce the abstract and its concealing, self-indulgent opportunities, plunging us into the dual impossibility of reaching absolute truth and finding a position-free solution.

But I would first like to address Michael Rothberg's (2019) attempts to delineate what Primo Levi characterizes as "gray spaces", his views on implication, distinct from complicity. I find myself questioning who really needs these less defined, unclear spaces. It seems evident that those who wish to distance themselves from pointed accusations prefer not to be categorized within any identity that has been essentialized especially not that of the perpetrator. I, of course, would defend many of these individuals, because I recognize the dangers of essentialization—even when it is used strategically, as its direction can be unpredictable and potentially harmful. This point serves as an example of subjective individual perspective.

However, consider the situation of someone like myself—an Israeli subject—who has lived in Israel for many years and enjoyed a position of privilege without directly supporting the Israeli subjugation of the Palestinian population (at least in the territories conquered during the Six-Day War). I would naturally prefer to be classified as "implicated" rather than "complicit," but can I genuinely expect to be free from guilt? Knowing that apart from expressing my views against the conquest and occasionally supporting peace initiatives through education and demonstrations, I have not actively contributed to helping Palestinians regain their freedom; can I consider myself unburdened by guilt?

This question is inherently difficult. Realistically, how much can be expected of me if I am to remain a law-abiding citizen and a caring father to my daughters? Furthermore, this contemplation leads me to reflect on my feelings towards uninvolved citizens in Nazi Germany—excluding figures like Heidegger (a privileged academic), whose actions are indefensible. Regular citizens who were appalled by the Nazis but found it too perilous to engage in any form of active opposition pose a complex moral question.

Regarding current sentiments in Israel—while these are not uniform across all Israelis—my observation is that many hold the view that there are no uninvolved parties in Gaza and that all should bear the consequences if necessary. Similarly, in Gaza, there are Palestinians who, much like myself here in Israel, wish to be perceived as perhaps implicated but not complicit in the actions of Hamas. Even more so, many desire to be seen as completely free of any guilt. Personally, I am more inclined to view the poor, underprivileged Palestinians living in Gaza as entirely guilt-free compared to any middle–upper class professor in Israel (or Gaza).

This leads to my broader point about the limitations of the "new" categories of implication and complicity in the social sciences. These categories are often complicated by contextual complexities, which I believe are insurmountable due to inherent positional obstacles. We might inevitably become victims of our own subjectivity or that of others, left with no firm ground on which to establish a universally accepted moral stance. In essence, positioning within a context is all we have, and within it, we must make our moral decisions—often alongside those close to us—while recognizing that morality itself is a contested concept.

Can I openly discuss these complex issues with teachers in Israel, or more broadly within Israel? Currently, I believe it is not possible, at least not with the majority. With a select few who are brave or close enough, I might engage in such discussions, though even with them, there are limits to what can be openly debated. Having stated the above I now return to texts from the Jewish tradition that resonate with me today. There are many, but I wish to focus on two examples: one that echoes Rothberg's proposed categories and another that stands independently. What unites them is their potential to be easily silenced.

Consider, for instance, the following description from *Exodus* 34, 5–7:

> The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'

To highlight the complexity of interpreting any sacred text, we can juxtapose this with *Deuteronomy* 24:16, which states, "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

This contrast (which is disputed by the multiple interpreters of these texts) invites us to delve into the myriad interpretative paths these texts might lead us down, though a thorough examination of their historical evolution is beyond the scope of this discussion. Simply by reading these excerpts, one hopefully becomes aware of the multiple directions their interpretation can take. Questions arise such as whether wicked behavior and its accompanying guilt are ingrained in our DNA, passed from generation to generation, or if they are more a product of socialization—the norms set by a society that behaves wickedly towards others and ends up mirroring this violence within its own ranks.

Alternatively, we might ponder whether it is possible to liberate ourselves from these socializing influences as if we could exist as solipsistic individuals moving through society, completely detached from all context. Is there a form of collective responsibility, despite knowing that collectives are merely aggregates of individuals? Or, on the other hand, is responsibility purely individual, given that there are no true "individuals" outside of those shaped by complex social interactions?

Other biblical texts also provoke deep reflection, such as *Exodus* 23:9–10, which commands, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This passage prompts me to question

whether we, as Jews known in the West as progenitors of a universal monotheism, can truly universalize our texts while using them to affirm our identity. Can Israeli Jews see that Palestinians might be the "strangers" referred to in *Exodus*? Moreover, can Israeli Jews perceive that our current leadership might be akin to Pharaoh, as described in *Exodus* 7:13–14: "And he hardened Pharaoh's heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had said. And the Lord said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go"? Could it be that the Divine, praised be He, is the sole entity responsible for hardening all our hearts, and we—both Jews and Palestinians—are merely His victims? Or are we merely implicated, not complicit, especially if we are fortunate enough not to be part of the leadership? The paths of interpretation are manifold and cannot be tamed—except perhaps by tyrants—into a singular narrative; they weave a complex, though sometimes fascinating tapestry of life.

Concluding thoughts

Our reflections point to the hard realization that sometimes neither we (scholars, teacher educators) nor teachers can do much to address our complex implications in the world. As our personal experiences from Cyprus and Israel show, the tools offered by the social sciences, including teacher education, might not be sufficient in addressing these issues; their constructed categories, even those created to expose entrenched ones, are not comprehensive. Not all conceivable human categories fall within the purview of the social sciences. The categories we engage with are often limited and tend to mirror preconceived theoretical or ideological frameworks, aligning with the prevailing, fashionable interests of the day. Amid these limitations, our challenge remains to maintain decency in our interactions and judgments. This may be the most we can hope for in challenging times like the ones we are currently experiencing.

Our reflective work highlights the essential role of professional capital and community in navigating educational challenges in societies suffering from intractable conflicts. We have illustrated how entrenched narratives and societal tensions impact the classroom, pointing to a critical need for educators to possess a deep understanding of both historical context and the current socio-political landscape. The Cyprus context, may help us understand the importance of educators having the professional capital to critically engage with and possibly transcend traditional narratives. This involves the capacity to foster environments where multiple narratives are explored and respected, which can contribute significantly to community building within a divided society. Such professional capital not only enhances teachers' ability to manage sensitive historical content but also empowers them to facilitate student engagement in a manner that promotes healing and reconciliation rather than perpetuating division. Similarly, the reflections on the Israeli context underline the necessity for professional capital that equips educators to handle the pressures of political polarization, enabling them to maintain open and productive classroom dialogues despite external tensions. Building a community of practice among educators, where experiences and strategies are shared, can mitigate the feeling of isolation and support teachers in navigating these complexities. The communal support helps in sustaining the educators' resilience and commitment to uphold educational integrity and empathy amidst conflict.

By drawing on these themes, this essay emphasizes that professional capital—comprised of knowledge, skills, and professional networks—interacts dynamically with community building to form a foundation upon which educators can develop responsive pedagogical approaches. These approaches are crucial not only for addressing immediate educational challenges but also for contributing to the broader process of societal healing and integration. Therefore, investing in the development of professional capital and fostering a strong community of educators are pivotal steps towards transforming schools into arenas of peace and understanding in conflict-affected areas.

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