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The teaching of traumatic narratives: out-of-the-classroom engagement with non-canonical 'chosen traumas'

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of history education and traumatic narratives, focusing on the impact of out-of-the-classroom learning experiences on the teaching of history during turbulent periods. Through a case study of history teacher training in contemporary Israel, it investigates how exposure to others' troubled histories and past traumas outside the traditional classroom setting influences the personal, disciplinary, pedagogical and professional-educational development of prospective history educators. Drawing on qualitative analysis of reflection sheets and teaching materials generated by students during a course conducted in February 2024, the research focuses on field trips to two non-canonical sites of historical trauma in Israel: the Museum of the Kfar Qassim Massacre and the Gush Katif Museum. In both these locations participants encountered others' narratives of collective suffering, loss and conflict. By examining the material produced amid the students' own recent traumas, the article illuminates the complex interplay between historical consciousness, pedagogical practice and societal upheaval in the training of history teachers.

Keywords troubled past; historical trauma; history teaching; teacher training; conflict transformation; history teachers' professional development; museums

Introduction

Teaching history in Israel has become exceptionally challenging in recent years. The national canon, which has long served as the pillar of history education, has been challenged and fractured. As a result, it has lost its unequivocal status as the backbone of an Israeli identity common to the bulk of society (Naveh, 2017). Israel is a diverse and multicultural society, and different ethnic, national, religious, gender and other groups have begun demanding a place for their histories in the Israeli shared sphere – first and foremost in the state education system. Indeed, the Israeli state education system is divided into separate streams: state-secular (including the Arab education sector); state-religious; and state-Haredi. Each stream has its own inspectorate, curriculum and textbooks (Raichel, 2008). As Naveh (2017), Weintraub (2023), Shaul (2021), Al-Haj (2005) and others have shown, each stream also has its own prevalent histories.

Israel is also an increasingly polarised society, immersed in internal social, political and cultural conflicts (Bialik and Hoffman, 2016). Thus, these histories seldom reside peacefully alongside each other; more often they collide, including in the classroom. Most obvious is the clash between the Palestinian and Zionist narratives (Agbaria, 2014, 2018; Al-Haj, 2005; Goldberg and Ron, 2014), but only slightly below the surface are conflicts between the histories of Jews from African and Middle Eastern countries and those of Jews from Europe (Weintraub and Tal, 2021), between histories of Arab and Jewish citizens (Sorek, 2015), histories of Jews of Ethiopian descent versus 'Sabra' histories (Kaplan, 1993; Tal, 2023), religious versus secular histories (Weintraub and Naveh, 2020) and more. Israeli teachers can no longer adhere to one consensual history, but, rather, they now need to account for the different conflicting histories in and outside the classroom.

Moreover, in times of exceptional turmoil, distrust and violence, the traumatic chapters of these conflicting histories become invested with special significance. In the last couple of years alone, Israeli society has witnessed an unprecedented surge in violence within the Arab community, yet the authorities have allocated only minimal resources to address this issue and provide for their safety; massive protests against the government's attempts to change the balance of power between the branches of the democratic regime; a destructive war against Hamas in Gaza following the massacre of more than 1,200 Israeli citizens on 7 October 2023; and the displacement of tens of thousands of citizens. In this violent and chaotic reality, the Palestinian Nakba, the Holocaust, and past massacres, displacements, wars and losses have become increasingly dominant in the historical narratives of each community (Aderet, 2023).

Thus, today, conflicting histories are not an intellectual exercise in Israel, but rather a social, political, cultural and, indeed, educational reality, in which the Israeli history teacher must navigate between conflicting traumatic narratives while functioning in a world in turmoil.

Although an extreme case, this challenge is not unique to history teachers in present-day Israel. In many countries, changes in the field of historical studies, shifts in the understanding of the role of the nation state in a globalising world, and societal transformations triggered by waves of immigration have challenged traditional historical narratives, giving rise to new conflicting histories. Pierre Nora (2002: n.p.), for example, notes that the 'democratization of history' in France since the 1970s has brought about 'a powerful internal decolonisation movement and the emancipation of group identities … each wanted to reappropriate its own memory and demanded that the nation recognise that history'. These are rarely compatible with the national canon, or, in fact, with one another, which in turn leads to public disputes about the collective past and its meaning. Susanne Popp (2008) further contends that in numerous Western countries, local politics, searches for a new history in emancipated countries, the rise of a politically correct discourse, disciplinary developments and generational gaps have all contributed to growing public controversies revolving around the historical canons. (Regarding the United States, see Nash et al., 1997; Hong Kong, Vickers, 2003; Australia, Clark, 2006; Greece, Nakou and Apostolidou, 2010; Canada, Bennett, 2016 and Sandwell, 2012; Poland, Jaskułowski et al., 2018.)

Moreover, in countries experiencing periods of social and political instability, a particularly central place is given to what Zembylas and Bekerman (2008) term 'dangerous memories', meaning the histories

of marginalised populations who further demand acknowledgement of past wrongs inflicted on them by the social and political hegemony represented, *inter alia*, in and by the historical canon. The motivation for this is clear, given that such dangerous memories – or past traumas and conflicts – are central in constituting collective identities and historical consciousness (Hameiri and Nadler, 2017). A prominent example of this is the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021), which, through the story of slavery in the United States, seeks to wholly revise the history of the country – from colonial times to the present – undermining its liberal and democratic image. As its subtitle suggests, it presents 'A new origin story', through the prism of the African American trauma of enslavement.

This emerging reality has woven itself into the fabric of history teaching. In 2008, for example, the Zinn Education Project was launched, which, based on Howard Zinn's (1980) bestselling work *A People's History of the United States*, 'flips the script' (https://www.zinnedproject.org/why/) and provides sources for teachers to teach non-canonical, often troubled, histories of the country. The 1619 Project, too, has an educational programme (https://1619education.org/).

These social, disciplinary and pedagogic developments pose new challenges for history teachers. As highlighted by Savenije et al. (2019: 1), navigating a conflicted reality, in which master narratives are undermined from a variety of angles, means that 'teachers of history will inevitably encounter issues that elicit disbelief, protest, or feelings of discomfort among pupils'. For history teachers, these issues are primarily manifested in troubled chapters of the past that they need or are expected to teach, such as slavery (Klein, 2017), colonialism (Leone et al., 2022) and occupation (Al-Haj, 2005). In tumultuous periods, when the canonical history is undermined by traumatic narratives, 'any content that challenges the master narrative is bound to provoke resistance and emotional reactions that may impede [students'] fair assessment' (Psaltis et al., 2017: 5). Daniel Bar-Tal (2000) has also shown that dealing with historical conflicts in an educational context can deepen divisions and encourage aggression, while antagonism, anger, frustration and discontent often raise walls between the learner and the historical knowledge.

For history teachers, the challenge is not only pedagogical and disciplinary, but also social and political. Discussing conflicting narratives, difficult histories and dangerous memories entails the risk that the tensions and resistance they evoke in the classroom will find their way into the public sphere, putting the teacher at the heart of a public quarrel (Zimmerman and Robertson, 2017), especially in times of open conflict. For example, when Israeli history teacher Meir Baruchin suggested, in a Facebook group of history teachers, that although it is not written in history textbooks, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers committed crimes during the wars fought throughout Israeli history, he was arrested for disturbing the public peace (Ziv, 2023). Upon his return to school, he was met with scorn and protest by students, parents and politicians. In another example, a history teacher who used a dual Israeli–Palestinian textbook in her classroom found herself, together with the school principal, at the heart of a public dispute and attacked by politicians; 'When I came to teach my class history from a multi-perspective approach', she recalled, 'I never could have imagined the pedagogical-political storm that it would create' (Wasser, 2023: 385).

As the challenge of teaching conflicting traumatic narratives has become an integral aspect of history education in today's turbulent reality, scholars have been paying increasing attention to its effect on teachers' stances, students' learning and classroom dynamics (Alvén, 2024; Berg and Persson, 2023; Goldberg et al., 2019; Larsson and Lindström, 2020). Another major avenue of research has focused on curricula, official examinations, textbooks and other materials that teachers use in the classroom, exploring if and how official material adequately represents different narratives and historical complexities, and whether it promotes or hinders the preparation of students living in a pluralistic and multicultural society (Bentrovato, 2017; Bermudez, 2019; Cole, 2007; Goldberg, 2017; Kello, 2016; Kizel, 2008; Nordgren and Johansson, 2015; Weintraub and Tal, 2021). More generally, as Deborah Britzman (2000: 37) has noted, the 'school curriculum does not have an adequate grasp of conflict in learning, either the conflict within the learner or the conflict within knowledge itself'.

However, a focus on teaching in the classroom and on official curricula, downplays the wider world outside the school. Since the early 2000s, memorial sites dedicated specifically to troubled histories have emerged in great numbers, arguably more so than in any other period in the past (Williams, 2007). Teachers and students engage with different narratives within the public sphere of historical museums, monuments and other 'realms of memory', which serve as significant sites of teaching and learning (Boord, 2016; Cole, 2004; Cooper, 2023; Cowan and Maitles, 2011; De Groot, 2016; Gordon, 2010; Harris and Bilton, 2019; Marcus, 2007; Marcus et al., 2017; Savenije et al., 2019). As Berg and Stolare (2024: 2) demonstrate, 'physical encounters with historical sites can create new opportunities for students'

learning of history and the meaning making that comes from it'. In Israel, too, the Ministry of Education maintains that historical sites outside of the classroom can and should be an integral part of the learning process and of the curriculum (MoE, 2024).

Another important factor to note is the overall tendency of schools to shy away from the issue of conflict more generally. Education scholar Lynn Davies (2004), for example, has concluded that in most instances schools seek to avoid dealing with conflictual questions, thus hindering conflict transformation, or even contributing to its perpetuation and aggravation. Schools, Davies (2004: 203) emphasises, 'tend towards equilibrium rather than radical emergence; hence at best they do not challenge existing social patterns which are generative of conflict. At worst, they act as amplifying mechanisms'. More specifically, Angela Bermudez (2019) has exposed how history textbooks often normalise violence rather than discuss it explicitly, while Julia Rose (2016) has shown that pedagogies developed for teaching troubled history in museums, for example, have proved useful in the classroom and have been adopted by teachers who wanted to engage with conflictual issues in a constructivist way. Museums and memorial sites are able to foster a more comprehensive history education that engages with troubled histories and past traumas in and beyond the classroom.

The present article expands the literature on out-of-the-classroom teaching of conflicting traumatic narratives by focusing on its impact on the teaching and learning of history, particularly during periods of crisis and radical transformations. Using history teacher training in contemporary Israel as a case study, it specifically explores the effect of out-of-the-classroom learning of troubled histories on the personal, disciplinary, pedagogical and professional-educational development of students in a training programme for future history teachers. It scrutinises if and how such history learning affects students' capacity to accept new and uncomfortable historical knowledge, their willingness to experience and practice out-of-the-classroom encounters with the past traumas of others, to develop disciplinary skills, and to lead educational and social change in society.

The article, which is based on an analysis of the above material, begins by describing the course and presenting the troubled historical events that it addressed, particularly the place of these events as 'dangerous memories' in relation to the Israeli master-narrative and to the 'chosen traumas' (Volkan, 2001) that are at the centre of the historical consciousness of different groups within Israeli society. It then presents the research findings and analyses the students' reactions to encountering representations of others' chosen traumas, focusing on the impact of these encounters on their understanding of how history can and should be taught in a conflictual reality. It concludes by considering the implications of these findings for teacher training and history teaching in divided societies during turbulent times.

Background

The Hamas assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, the ensuing months-long war against Hamas in Gaza, and the looming threat of an even bigger war with Hezbollah in the north, has traumatised Israeli society in ways that have yet to be fully comprehended. Furthermore, although at first the horrendous events seemed to unify the country, the social and political tensions that have rocked Israel in recent years soon surfaced in force, intensifying the already widespread sense of alarm. The extensive draft of the military reserves to fight in the war exposed the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jews) community to scrutiny, given their nearly total exemption from military service since the 1950s. Israel's military presence in Gaza reignited heated and polarised discussions of annexation, echoing a religious-Zionist messianic vision prevalent since the Six-Day War of 1967. The loyalty and identity of Palestinian and Arab citizens was also questioned. These are just some of the acute social and political points of contention laid bare during this period.

While the atrocities of 7 October and the ensuing events exposed the conflicts in Israeli society, deepening the sense of trauma, the official education system approached the situation by offering a message of all-encompassing unity. 'The year 2024', declared the Ministry of Education web portal for educators, 'will be etched in collective memory as a painful and simultaneously resilient year. A year in which amidst mourning, sorrow, and bereavement, values of solidarity, volunteerism, giving, love of country, friendship, and belonging stood out, and those are the values we wish to highlight this month' (MoE, 2024: n.p.). This aligns with the perception of Lynn Davies (2004) that in periods of strife and uncertainty, schools – and in this case the education system as a whole – attempt to avoid conflict and to highlight unity.

In February 2024, I taught a course that challenged this approach. Offered to second- and third-year students in the history teaching training programme at the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv, one of Israel's leading teacher training institutions, the course, entitled 'Conflicting Narratives', aimed to introduce students to the challenges of teaching history in the context of current Israeli reality. It also sought to motivate the students to go on to address these challenges, and to develop the professional skills that would enable them to do so outside their classrooms. It did so primarily by exposing students to marginalised historical narratives in Israel, the 'chosen traumas' of others that challenge the canonical narrative from different angles. On a more fundamental level, the course asked students to examine whether and how the focus on troubled past, conflicting narratives and chosen traumas can promote meaningful teaching and learning, and can potentially enhance skills of active citizenship for both teachers and students living in a pluralistic and democratic, yet divided, society.

The course opened with a theoretical unit that defined the concept of historical narratives and explored the history of the Israeli master-narrative from 1948 to the present. The class then went on two field trips to memorial sites that present the chosen traumas of two non-canonical and conflicting Israeli narratives. The visits were guided by people from the commemorating community, often those who were active in the establishment of the site. The course ended with a pedagogical unit in which the students were asked to reflect on their experience in the field as students of history and, in parallel, as future history teachers. They were also tasked with creating a teaching module combining in-class and outdoor history learning for high-school students in Israel.

The two narratives encountered by the students challenge the canon from two opposing directions, and, as such, they are diametrically opposed to one another and not just to the canon. The first site was the Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem, which is dedicated to the preservation of the history and heritage of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, referred to collectively in Hebrew as Gush Katif, which were dismantled and evacuated by Israel in 2005. The museum focuses on the perspective of the mainstream of the Religious Zionist society (22 per cent of the Jewish population as of 2014; Hermann et al., 2014), for whom the evacuation has become ingrained as a traumatic catastrophe (Sheleg, 2015). The second visit was to the Arab city of Kfar Qassim, where the class toured a museum commemorating the massacre of 49 Arab civilians by Israeli military forces in 1956. There they met with key figures who promote the museum and the memory of the event. The students thus engaged directly with the narrative of Arab citizens of Israel (21 per cent of the Israeli population; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023) through one of the defining traumas (Masarwi, 2023; Sorek, 2015).

The Kfar Qassim massacre

Following the 1948 war, the Israeli interim government adopted a strategic approach to exercise military control over Arab populations within the newly established state of Israel. This policy, driven by the perception of Arab citizens as potential threats, persisted from 1949 to 1966. Known as the 'period of martial law', it involved extensive military oversight over various aspects of Arab lives (Sa'di, 2013). In this sense, Kfar Qassim, which was annexed to Israel in 1949, reflected the broader imposition of military control over Arab settlements in the region until 1966. On 29 October 1956, a group of soldiers from the Israel Border Police unit of the Israeli army opened fire on innocent Arab civilians from Kfar Qassim who were returning home from work unaware that the military had pushed the curfew hour back to an earlier time. The result was 49 casualties – men, women and children. In the aftermath of the event, 11 Border Police officers and soldiers were tried for murder for their involvement in the massacre.

However, the trial was revealed to be a political charade (Raz, 2018). Despite eight convictions and prison sentences, none of the perpetrators served their full punishment, and most were released within a few years. The brigade commander received a symbolic fine. Nevertheless, this landmark trial, known as the Kfar Qassim Trial, marked a pivotal moment in Israeli history by addressing the issue of disobeying illegal orders (Orbach, 2013). The assertion of the judges that, in a democracy, certain orders could be so blatantly illegal that disobedience becomes necessary, had a profound impact on the military's code of conduct, and on the relationship between law and security personnel in Israel (Raz, 2018). For the bulk of Israeli Jewish society, the trial marked the end of the affair.

This gradually changed over the following decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, occasional mentions of the Kfar Qassim massacre in newspapers increased in the period leading up to the annual memorial day of the tragic event, increasing in prominence following the abolition of martial law in 1966

(Schnitzer, 2000). The massacre gained further significance in Israeli public discourse in the mid-to-late 1980s due to Palestinian protests against the occupation of the territories in the West Bank and the discrimination faced by Palestinian citizens in Israel (Schnitzer, 2000). The violent clashes between the military and civilian population brought to the surface questions such as those related to the Kfar Qassim massacre. Moreover, the 1980s witnessed a surge in political engagement and organisation among Palestinian citizens, marked by the establishment of new parties and the High Follow-Up Committee. The Kfar Qassim massacre thus played a pivotal role in the promotion of Palestinian narratives and identity during this period (Sorek, 2015). As a result, from the early 1990s on, Israeli society has grappled with the implications of this painful event.

On 1 October 2000, lethal violence erupted once again during an Arab citizen solidarity protest against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its discriminatory policies, resulting in the death of 12 Arab Israeli citizens and one Palestinian civilian (Saba, 2011). These events, traumatic and unprecedented according to Judge Theodor Or, who presided over the official Commission of Inquiry, brought back memories of the Kfar Qassim massacre. Despite the connections drawn between these incidents during the annual commemoration service in Kfar Qassim in 2001, legal proceedings against the security forces involved in the events of 2000 were closed in 2008 (Or, 2006).

As outlined in the following sections, since the early 2000s, the massacre has been included in history and civic curricula, along with other controversial historical events. However, as Naveh (2017: 240) demonstrates, these events 'receive limited representation in history education in Israel, and are mainly mentioned as exceptions and outliers, which are negated by the shining, moral, and inspiring [Zionist] history'. Furthermore, Naveh (2017: 132) contends that 'the massacre is briefly mentioned in all the new textbooks that entered the system in 2009 and passed official approval. However, in the public sphere, the Kfar Qassim incident did not resonate.' Today, a solemn monument in Kfar Qassim stands as a poignant tribute of commemoration to the events of 29 October 1956. It is both a memorial to honour the memory of the victims and a symbol of the community's resilience and commitment to preserving the historical significance of the Kfar Qassim massacre. Additional, smaller monuments and *lieu de mémoire* are scattered around the city public space.

The museum dedicated to the massacre, also situated in the city, serves as the centre of remembrance and commemoration, as well as a space for reflection and learning for both the local population and visitors. The museum houses artefacts, testimonies and historical documents that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the events surrounding the massacre, fostering awareness and education about this pivotal moment in Israeli history. Upon entering the museum, visitors encounter a series of informative texts and historical maps that narrate the site's history from 1948 to the 1950s, with a focus on the massacre. In the second wing, there is a small archive and a memorial wall dedicated to the victims of the massacre, featuring their photographs and biographies. On the far side, a display presents artwork depicting the various stages of the tragedy. Although not housed within the museum, a central feature of a visit is a panoramic exhibition that recounts the story of the massacre.

Kfar Qassim educators, too, take an active part in addressing what is evidently a transgenerational trauma, as Masarwi (2023) has shown. The museum hosts practically every educational framework in Kfar Qassim – from kindergarten to high school – and it serves as the pivotal learning site of the constitutive trauma, as a member of the museum staff explained in an interview with the author on 29 February 2024. Through the commemoration monument and museum, Kfar Qassim ensures that the memory of the tragic incident remains alive in the collective consciousness.

The disengagement from Gaza and the evacuation of the Jewish settlements

In 2005, the Israeli government under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to unilaterally evacuate the 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip. The communities had been founded by the Israeli government from shortly after the occupation of Gaza in the 1967 War. In August 2005, 8,600 Jewish citizens, many of whom were part of the Religious Zionist community, were ordered to leave their homes and relocated in temporary housing within the internationally recognised borders of the state. The evacuation by the IDF and police, and the relocation process, were traumatic experiences. The evacuees were placed in hotels for a prolonged period of time before being moved to what were only temporary residential areas. They

suffered high unemployment rates and struggled to re-find their place in Israeli society. Many suffered severe post-trauma symptoms.

From the inception of the settlement project in Gaza, the settlements were considered to be the vanguard of the state, and they enjoyed the formal support of state institutions. Therefore, for the evacuees, the disengagement abruptly and brutally transformed the state from a nurturer, fostering the realisation of the shared Zionist vision, into what education scholar Galia Plotkin Amrami (2016: 347) calls a 'traumatizing agent'. As Plotkin Amrami (2016) shows, within the Religious Zionist narrative, the disengagement has come to take on the status of a singular 'ideological trauma', by which she means the destruction of an entire world view of an ideological community, not just of the evacuated population (see also Sheleg, 2015). Although socially, politically and theologically, Religious Zionists did not leave the Israeli collective (Riklin Natan, 2017), in their eyes, they turned from heroes in the historical canon, epitomising the realisation of the Zionist dream, to outsiders, exiles in their own home. As one teacher from the Religious Zionist education system explained, 'the evacuees are the "Other" and therefore people like to hate them' (in Gross, 2008: 172). Some extremists in the Religious Zionist community even called for 'disengagement' from the collective historical canon, and to stop celebrating Independence Day (Gross, 2008; Sheleg, 2015).

The Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem was founded in 2008 to tell 'the story of the Jewish settlement in Gaza from the Hasmonean period through to our time', and to serve 'as a memorial to a glorious chapter in Jewish history spanning thirty-five years' (Gush Katif Museum, 2024: n.p.). Like the museum in Kfar Qassim, it is a small private museum, highlighting artefacts related to the history of Jewish settlement in Gaza, including synagogues, a mosaic replica, ancient artefacts and records of the settlers' struggles. Utilising various media, the exhibits include works of art, photographs, and historical and archaeological objects. Upon entering the museum, visitors encounter a timeline of the Jewish presence in Gaza from biblical times to the present. During an organised group visit, such as ours, the experience begins with an oral presentation by a museum guide, which focuses on the Jewish settlement in Gaza from the 1970s to the evacuation in 2005, and which highlights the settlers' livelihoods and pioneering spirit. The museum also features a library and souvenir section, and a memorial room for fallen residents of Gush Katif. Since the beginning of the current war in Gaza, the museum has also become a centre for activities that call for a Jewish return to Gaza. The troubled past of the disengagement has returned to the centre of Israeli public discourse.

Method

The primary question with which this article is concerned is what the effect of out-of-the-classroom learning of troubled histories is on the personal, disciplinary, pedagogical and professional-educational development of students in a training programme for future history teachers.

This question is analysed in the context of a course conducted by the researcher in February 2024 as part of the curriculum of a history teacher training course at the Kibbutzim College of Education. The elective course, entitled 'Conflicting Narratives', included two field trips to sites of commemoration of past traumas that are not part of the canonical Israeli narrative: the Museum of the Kfar Qassim Massacre in Kfar Qassim, and the Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem. The selection of the two sites was made in light of psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan's (2001: 87) concept of 'chosen trauma', which he defined as 'a shared mental representation of a traumatic past event during which the … group suffered loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large group'.

The qualitative study is based on a textual analysis of four different reflection sheets, each containing between six and eight open-ended questions (see Box 1). The reflection sheets were completed by 11 students enrolled on the course. The reflection sheets were administered at four points: before the commencement of the course (R1); following the visit to the Gush Katif Museum (R2); after the visit to the Kfar Qassim museum (R3); and after the completion of the course (R4). In the reflection sheets, the students were asked to reflect on their learning experience throughout the course from two angles: as students of history who encounter new information, acquire knowledge, and engage in learning; and as future history teachers who should consider if and how to teach such histories in their own classrooms.

Additionally, the present study included an analysis of the students' final assignments, which they handed in a few weeks after the termination of the course, and in which they were asked to create their own teaching units integrating in-class and outdoor learning of conflicting traumatic narratives

(see Box 2). These aimed to widen and deepen the view on the impact of the course on the students' motivation to engage with conflicting traumatic narratives in their future classrooms. All but two students, who missed the visit to the Kfar Qassim museum, participated in the entire course, attended all activities, and handed in all the reflection sheets and teaching units.

Box 1. Self-reflection sheets

Self-reflection Sheet 1 (to fill in before the beginning of the course)

1. What are the reasons you chose to participate in the course?
2. Among the tours and meetings included in the course, which do you find particularly challenging and why?
3. Have you visited any of the tour sites in the past? If so, which ones and in what context?
4. Are you familiar with the historical events that the sites deal with?
5. Among the historical chapters discussed in the tours (the massacre in Kfar Qasim, the evacuation of Gush Katif), which do you think is the more important? Why?
6. Among the historical chapters discussed in the tours (the massacre in Kfar Qasim, the evacuation of Gush Katif), which will be the most difficult for you to study? Why?
7. Thoughts.

Self-reflection Sheets 2 and 3 (to fill in after the visit to the Gush Katif museum and after the visit to the Kfar Qassim museum)

1. Share the feelings that arose for you during the tour.
2. How credible do you think the historical story presented on the tour is?
3. Do you have any reservations about the information/narrative presented in the activity? Describe this reservation.
4. Why do you think history is presented in the way it is at the site and by the people?
5. What did you learn on the tour that you didn't know before?
6. Should this historical chapter be integrated into the Israeli education system, and if so, in what context?
7. What should be the educational and learning objectives in discussing the events within the school framework?
8. Thoughts.

Self-reflection Sheet 4 (to fill in after the completion of the course)

1. What are the main things you learned in the course?
2. Among the tours and meetings included in the course, which were the most challenging for you and why?
3. Among the historical chapters discussed in the tours, which do you think is the most important?
4. You need to plan a series of historical-educational tours for a high school that will include at least one site from those we visited. Which sites will be included in the tour and what are the educational and learning objectives of visiting them? Why did you choose to present these chapters and in this way?
5. Among the historical chapters discussed in the tours, which will be the most difficult for you to study? Why?
6. Thoughts.

Box 2. Planning a teaching unit by the students

The final task of the course is to submit a learning unit for high school (of any scope you see fit – a single lesson, a series of lessons, an annual programme, etc.) that weaves a new Israeli narrative (from those we met or any other narrative of your choice) into the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education and includes a suitable tour. The unit should include:

- Rationale describing the overarching goal of the unit and its importance
- Educational objectives
- Disciplinary objectives
- Description of the learning process, with an emphasis on the place of the tour and its purpose.

To a large extent, the curriculum reflects the official view of history, or, in other words, the canon. However, it reflects the canon as it is at the current historical moment (think about our discussion during the course of the curriculum and how it changed over history according to the historical context in which it was designed). The state of the canon allows us to think about new narratives to include in it without completely replacing it. This is with the aim of creating history teaching that fits today's Israeli reality as you understand it. The task invites you to experience this.

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The textual analysis of all the sources (all reflection sheets and all teaching units together) allowed the unearthing and exploring of an array of different reactions and common themes in the engagement of the students as a homogeneous 'we-group' with several 'others' from outside the group.

While the events of 7 October were not part of the curriculum of the course, they made their mark on the atmosphere in the classroom, and they were mentioned throughout the study, as presented below. Moreover, at the beginning of the course I raised the question of what it might require from us, as a class, to explore troubled histories during this period. This initiated a reflective discussion about the context of our education work in college.

Participants

The class consisted of 11 students (7 women and 4 men), all of whom agreed to participate in the research. None of the students was recruited to military service before or during the course. The students were in their second and third year of the training programme, making the class relatively advanced and experienced in history learning and didactics. The participants were all Jewish, secular and held a Zionist world view that, although broad and nuanced, can be considered canonical.

To preserve their privacy, all interviewees are anonymous. All quotations from students are translated by the author.

Data gathering and ethics

The four reflection sheets were developed using Google Forms, and they were digitally distributed among the students. The students submitted their teaching units within a month of the conclusion of the course.

All participants signed an informed consent form, and the research was approved by the college's ethics committee.

Findings and discussion

Troubled past as a source of concern and motivation

While most students were familiar with the historical chapters at the centre of the curriculum, prior to the course, none had ever visited the Gush Katif or Kfar Qassim museums. Moreover, of those students who had heard about the historical events, most had encountered them in informal settings, such as youth movement events, and in stories that they had heard from family and friends, and from the mass media. Feeling ignorant about what they saw as important events and questions, the students were eager to learn about them, and motivated to challenge themselves by engaging with different narratives and troubled histories. As one student noted, she enrolled in the course for the 'opportunity to understand the complexity of things, and more than that, for [the] opportunity to recognise the narrative of certain groups and events in society in a way that would not be possible in any other way' (Anon. A, R1). Another student likewise mentioned that she chose the topic because she was: 'very interested in hearing more about the subject [and] about my world view through listening to different opinions and learning new things that I didn't know' (Anon. B, R1).

At the same time, although motivated to learn and engage with new, troubled history, prior to the course, the students expressed concern. These concerns, however, revolved not around their current status as students, but rather around their future roles as history teachers. After the massacre on 7 October, the Kfar Qassim massacre seemed particularly challenging. Putting herself in her imagined future classroom, one student wrote:

> The event that will be most challenging for me to teach in the classroom is the massacre in Kfar Qassim. It's an important event that has left many implications and conclusions. However, teaching about such a massacre is difficult for me. The understanding that humanity perpetrates such heinous acts raises questions of values, beliefs, many of which, as an educator, I sometimes struggle to answer myself. (Anon. G, R1)

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In addition to personal involvement, the students were concerned about the social and political context within which they will be teaching. 'From my limited experience in recent years with youth in various frameworks', shared one student, 'I feel a polarisation of opinions towards this population [Arab citizens of Israel]. There's a strengthening of nationalism among young people, leading to fear/animosity/avoidance towards a group numbering about 2 million residents in our country. These feelings intensified after the events of October 7th' (Anon. E, R1).

Ultimately, the fact that the students chose to enrol in the course suggests that professional considerations – pedagogic, educational and disciplinary – surpassed doubts and worries. The course was elective, and the syllabus was published well in advance, but after 7 October. From another angle, it seems that, as Israeli citizens, responsible for the growth of their own political and social consciousness, the students felt secure enough to be exposed to troubled histories, and to face them indirectly. However, doing so as teachers seemed riskier.

The gaps that exist between a teacher's sense of meaningful teaching and their worries about being able to do so in practice has proven to be a key source of frustration for many in the field, often leading talented educators to leave the profession. This frustration stems from the fact that teachers play only a peripheral role in shaping educational programmes and influencing educational policy (Bourke et al., 2015). Moreover, in a politically charged atmosphere, a teacher's autonomy is further constrained by increased oversight, regulation and criticism by officials, principals and colleagues, as well as by their students, by their students' parents and by the community. In such a highly charged political atmosphere, teachers often self-censor and suppress their educational goals and world views (Bar-Tal et al., 2017). The students' reflections prior to the course indicate that they were aware of these tensions. In taking the course, their texts show, they hoped that they would both gain new knowledge and develop skills that could enable them to bridge these gaps.

Furthermore, building on Zembylas and Bekerman (2008), the reflections of the students demonstrate that they wished that 'dangerous memories' would not only challenge the master-narrative, but also open the door to empathy and hope. A fractured canonical narrative, in other words, seemed to them to offer an opportunity for a renewed, more just, narrative.

Past traumas as sources of empathy and motivation to acquire new knowledge

In accordance with the students' expectations, the visits to the museums and direct engagement with the two narratives proved challenging – first and foremost, emotionally. 'During the visit to the [Gush Katif] museum, I experienced a range of emotions. The tour was confusing, emotional, and profound', reflected one student (Anon. B, R2). Another wrote, 'I felt anger about the way the story [of Gush Katif] was told, as well as pain about the personal experiences and feelings' (Anon. A, R2). This mixture of emotions, including confusion, was a recurring motif. It was 'a roller-coaster!', wrote a student about the visit to Kfar Qassim, 'Excitement and high expectations turned into sadness, anger, and feelings of guilt' (Anon. E, R3).

Intellectually, the intertwining of new and upsetting knowledge with difficult feelings was disquieting. As one student noted about the visit to Kfar Qassim:

> [T]he feelings were mixed. On one hand, I was glad that I got to learn and hear about a new chapter in history as accurately as possible. On the other hand, it was difficult to hear about the IDF's operation as such and the personal stories of the descendants of the massacre victims. (Anon. C, R3)

In the same vein, another student reported that 'I think the visits to the Gush Katif Museum and the Kfar Qassim Massacre Museum were challenging for me because they presented narratives and perceived reality in a way that challenged my own perception of reality' (Anon. B, R4).

However, the encounter with others' past traumas also lowered the walls between the students and the new experience and information presented to them. 'I have been exposed to personal stories, to the trauma spanning generations of people torn from their homes', noted a student after the tour to the Gush Katif museum. 'Due to my perspective, it's easier for me to ignore them, but when they are given a platform to speak, my thoughts on the subject become more nuanced, considering emotions and not just "logic"' (Anon. F, R2). To some, the difficulties raised in these encounters were in fact fertile soil for connecting with the heretofore remote, almost unreachable, 'other' for the first time. As one student reported:

> The massacre in Kfar Qassim, especially after the October 7th massacre, was particularly poignant. Hearing about a massacre from the 'other side' when we ourselves experienced such a tragedy was surprising. I am surprised at myself for being able to contain and set aside the pain for a moment and empathise with their pain. (Anon. C, R4)

Another student summarised the two visits by noting that:

> like at the Gush Katif Museum, I felt immense compassion and almost complete identification with the massacre in the surrounding settlements. I thought to myself that for the first time, I truly succeed in partially understanding the sadness and anger of the Arab Israeli and even the Palestinian public. (Anon. E, R3)

Furthermore, although the visit to the Kfar Qassim museum was particularly challenging for the students after the events of 7 October, from a broader perspective, and together with the visit to the Gush Katif museum, the visits ultimately allowed a more complex consideration. One student, for example, expressed her frustration after the Gush Katif museum visit, writing, 'I reject the statement that Arabs [in the Gaza Strip, where the Jewish settlements once were] only understand force as a broad and clear generalisation, as well as the statement that there is only one possibility for an absolute victory of one side – that there is no room for compromise' (Anon. D, R2). She thus vehemently opposed the local guide's contention. Following the visits, it appeared that the students could show empathy not only towards Palestinian citizens of Israel, such as the population of Kfar Qassim, but also towards contemporary citizens in Gaza.

Moreover, even in cases when past traumas did not arouse empathy, they motivated the students to hear about the 'other' and acquire new knowledge from and about them. Thus, for example, one student noted about the visit to the Gush Katif museum that: 'I mainly feel distant from [the ideology of the people from Gush Katif]. It's hard for me to understand and empathise with the perspective of the people who lived there, and that's precisely why I'm interested in hearing first-hand testimonies' (Anon. H, R2). Another student likewise mentioned that, although she does not share the world view, she was happy about the visit to the museum because, 'I wasn't exposed to the impressive settlement enterprise that developed in the Gaza Strip. Initially, I imagined settlements in the West Bank' (Anon. E, R2). A third student noted: 'it was fascinating to listen and see things as they used to be. It was difficult to watch videos of the evacuation as a sensitive person' (Anon. C, R2). In general, the encounter with difficult histories proved meaningful and motivating. One student wrote: 'I felt extremely uncomfortable [at the Kfar Qassim museum] and found it very difficult to deal with the situation … There's a conflict that sometimes we prefer to push aside and ignore, and the visit to Kfar Qassim left no choice but to delve into the narrative and confront it', adding, 'It was challenging, meaningful, and I am very grateful for it!' (Anon. B, R3).

Although, as previous studies have shown (Psaltis et al., 2017), encounters with troubled history, others' past traumas and conflicting narratives can potentially raise barriers between learners and the new information with which they are presented, the students' experience in the course shows that such encounters can also bridge seemingly unbridgeable abysses. Difficult feelings proved to be common ground for human contact between the students and the people and histories they met, while the discomfort that the students experienced drove them to ask questions. Importantly, engaging with others' traumas and one's troubled past does not necessarily lead to empathy and a willingness to learn; however, as Zembylas and Bekerman (2008) argue, they hold the potential to do so, particularly in contexts of open conflict and tension. Moreover, the fact that the group was nationally homogeneous, rather than bi-national, provided a safe space for students to openly and honestly reflect on their experiences without the need to defend their previously held narratives and vantage points. Furthermore, in the Israeli context, where the education system is segregated into Jewish and Arab sectors, this more accurately mirrors the students' future classrooms.

Finally, although engaging with a troubled past and dangerous memories can take place inside the classroom, the students' reflections indicate that direct engagement with such histories – by visiting the places of the trauma and meeting people that are closely connected to it – evoke a more encompassing experience. The 'roller-coaster' created an opportunity to learn.

Troubled past, emotional reaction and critical thinking

When exposed to new information in the context of others' past traumas, although showing empathy and acceptance of the other's pain, the students nonetheless regarded the historical information with caution. For some of the students, the direct engagement with the chosen traumas enabled them to separate emotions from opinions, and their personal discomfort from their professional view of the events as meaningful. 'I listened to everything he said and respected his words and opinions', wrote a student about the visit to the Gush Katif museum, 'but I tried to maintain a critical ear and I also gave myself homework to examine different opinions and statements from a different perspective' (Anon. B, R2). Contemplating the nature of the information presented in the museum, he noted that: 'for the most part, I found the story credible. I think the word "credibility" didn't concern me as much as "accuracy" did' (Anon. B, R2). Narratives, he thought, should be listened to with openness, but then carefully examined: 'I believe that there are various versions of the event from different perspectives, and one of the important things is to go and check others' interpretations of the event' (Anon. B, R2). 'It was very interesting to learn about the ancient history of the Jewish settlement in Gaza throughout the generations', wrote another student, but 'it's interesting to check and investigate the information' (Anon. C, R2). While difficult emotions served as entry points of empathy and facilitated openness to listening, they did not prevent, and in fact even set the stage for, a more critical assessment of the historical events.

Moreover, the students even rejected some of the information presented to them by the guides in the museums. However, they did so not because the information was uncomfortable (which indeed it often was), but because it seemed to them, to the best of their judgement, to be inaccurate, biased and unsubstantiated. In Kfar Qassim, the fact that the museum was extremely difficult for many students highlighted the importance, in their eyes, of maintaining a professional stance: 'Throughout the visits, I tried to remain as attentive as possible. I really tried to neutralise my pre-existing knowledge' (Anon. B, R3). Another emphasised that the visit was so unsettling that she felt that it was essential to postpone any judgement: 'My overall feeling is confusion. Honestly, I'm still trying to understand what I think about what we were exposed to and where I stand regarding it' (Anon. H, R3). 'I believe them that the event was difficult to bear and traumatic', wrote a student, '[but the story was] partly credible, a mixture of facts with intentions and desires' (Anon. E, R3).

Thus, the students were able to acquire new information and ask new questions, even in the midst of discomfort: 'It was very clear that there was a great effort to base the feelings and the story on facts. I was particularly puzzled by the statements about Ben-Gurion and Mapai in the context of transfer and the massacre', wrote a student after the visit in Kfar Qassim, 'I never thought about the significant connection between Ben-Gurion and the military government' (Anon. D, R3). 'I learned many new things during the tour', mentioned another with satisfaction (Anon. B, R3), while a third student stated: 'I learned during the tour that the government did not agree for the village residents to hold events related to commemorating the massacre, even after the event was exposed and they were aware of its existence' (Anon. F, R3).

Moreover, the motivation for learning about the past traumas of others, and learning through these traumas, led to a greater openness towards acquiring new knowledge, especially following a direct and personal engagement with different narratives. 'At each visit', reported one student, 'I saw vivid evidence of how trauma affects populations and how they "deal with" that trauma. Additionally, I learned a lot about the events presented during the tours, new details, how people perceive these events, and how they process them' (Anon. F, R4). Another wrote:

> The main thing I learned in the course is the realisation that there is a lot of information I don't know, and I always need to approach learning with curiosity and openness. Although I didn't get answers to all the questions that arose during the visits, I definitely learned a lot of new information. From now on, I will continue to listen and explore with the understanding that there is no limit to learning. (Anon. B, R4)

Following the visits, many felt like the student who was astonished to realise 'how much there is always more to discover, more to learn, more to listen. Pain is a subjective thing that can linger for years upon years. How much recognition of pain can do and influence' (Anon. D, R3).

During and following the personal encounter with others' past chosen trauma, the students were able to situate themselves in a place of both empathy and critical thinking, acceptance and reservations. Establishing a distance from the narratives they encountered enabled them to practice what Sirkka

Ahonen (2021) calls 'reasoned ethical judgment' of the past. In other words, judging acts in historical context, rather than experiencing solely an emotional reaction to injustice (although this is equally important and was experienced by the students as well). Outside the classroom, the students widened the range of possible distances from the past (Savenije et al., 2019) and, in most cases, situated themselves in a position from which they could both empathise with what they encountered and criticise it, enabling them to acknowledge and contextualise the traumas of others, and motivating them to further learning.

Moreover, while the incorporation of empathy (and emotions more generally) into history education has faced criticism, there exists abundant evidence suggesting its potential to enhance historical thinking (Naishtat Bornstein and Naveh, 2017; Stoskopf and Bermudez, 2017). As demonstrated here, along with empathy, anger, discontent, frustration and antagonism can ignite critical thinking and motivate historical research; meaningful learning can occur even when students do not align with witnesses and feel compelled to challenge their narrative of past traumas. The disruption that Simon (2000: 13) has shown as opening 'new ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting' is particularly effective in such cases.

Thus, the students' reflections on their museum experience suggest that the interplay between emotional experiences and historical critical thinking is complex, and that the distinctions between them are not clear-cut. In this case, directly encountering representations and narratives of the troubled past outside the classroom enabled the students to question and reconsider their pre-existing narratives. This, in turn, can later facilitate the development of critical analysis of the events and their learning in the classroom.

From students to teachers: passing forward knowledge, disciplinary skills and empathy

While the students adopted the point of view of learners of troubled history during the course, their future role as history teachers attempting to relay such history played an equal role in their motivation to participate in the course. Reflecting on her desire to develop pedagogical skills, one student shared that 'it seems [to me] that the course will allow me to develop a skill that was lacking in my training' (Anon. D, R4). The chance to hone the skills of out-of-the-classroom learning and pedagogy was a particularly important source of motivation. 'Going into the field is a blessed opportunity (which is very much absent in college)', a student wrote (Anon. E, R1).

Above all, the students felt that both learning and teaching different conflicting narratives is especially important because it touches upon pressing questions current in Israeli society today. One student, for example, wrote that she is 'interested in discussing and hearing opinions regarding different narratives, especially concerning the polarisation and division that has arisen in the country. What is our role and responsibility as educators in the current period?' (Anon. I, R1). The museums and the historical traumas they present seemed particularly important specifically against the background of the war in Gaza. 'The evacuation of Gush Katif is the event that has the most significant impact on our current reality, and therefore it is the most urgent for discussion in our times', noted one (Anon. D, R1); 'the most important thing in the current period we are in is the massacre in Kfar Qassim, especially to confront the clashes it generates today', wrote another (Anon. I, R1). 'I hope that in the future, more attention will be given to these events in the education system', summarised a third (Anon. B, R4).

Contemplating the purpose of teaching these troubled chapters in Israeli history, the students saw the evoking of the emotions of their future students as a central goal. Teaching it in school, stated one student, might 'evoke empathy and compassion towards Arab Israelis and [allow my pupils to] understand that in the early years of the state, the situation was significantly different from today' (Anon. H, R3). These events are immensely important, argued another student, because 'each historical chapter is part of the history of Israel. Each chapter presents us with a different culture or pain that existed in our society. As an educator, I would like students to recognise all the complexities' (Anon. L, R4).

Also important for the students was the potential of teaching troubled history through direct engagement to contribute to the honing of their future students' historical thinking skills. 'In my opinion, there is always room to incorporate such tours into the education system, but only in the upper grades (9th–11th), where students are capable of exercising some critical thinking and scrutiny', argued one student (Anon. B, R4). Accordingly, in the unit that she planned as part of the course assignments, she highlighted that its aim was to 'develop learning skills such as working with historical sources, analysing texts, and engaging in discussion', and noted that 'it is important to emphasise the importance of

critical and open-minded historical learning' (Anon. B). These kinds of lessons, wrote another, are 'about learning about the other and developing a critical perspective on those events' (Anon. J). The main goal of this type of teaching unit, noted a third student, was 'critical thinking about historical events' (Anon. E).

Furthermore, building on their own experience in the course, the students saw in emotional connection and a sense of discomfort an important first step towards acquiring new knowledge and developing disciplinary skills. As one student argued, such history lessons 'may evoke uncomfortable feelings among students and encourage healthy and critical discussion as part of history studies' (Anon. H, R4). 'The … goal should be to … delve into the complexity of the narrative and recognition of the painful past in order to understand the complex and sometimes painful present reality', thought a student about her future classes (Anon. D, R4). 'The objectives can include a critical analysis of the case (based on reports from both the Jewish and Arab sides about the massacre), empathy, understanding, and acceptance of the pain of others' (Anon. F, R4), concluded another student.

Finally, the visits raised an array of questions among the students that they viewed as important to their professional development:

> I came out with many questions for myself, thoughts regarding things I know, understand, and even teach. I wonder [who] I want to be as someone who teaches history to children in middle/high school. What narrative am I presenting, and which narratives do I think is right to present and how? I believe this course gave me a new and important perspective, and I'm glad I took part in it. (Anon. H, R4)

Another student wrote:

> I'm thankful for the opportunity to participate in the course, despite the range of emotions it has stirred in me. I believe these are feelings I need to confront as a citizen of this country, especially considering my aspiration to be an excellent educator … This is a subject that, as educators, we are committed to confront in order to become more open when facing the class. (Anon. L, R4)

'The course was fascinating and highly important for citizens in the country, especially for women in education', wrote another student in their anonymous assessment of the course.

Although highly motivated to teach about these and similar events, the students were also concerned about the personal, professional and political difficulties this might raise in the context of contemporary Israeli reality. 'I think the evacuation of Gush Katif is not currently included in the school curriculum', wrote one student, 'making it difficult to integrate it in a non-political manner or without sparking political debates that might not be pleasant and constructive', adding, 'Additionally, it is the narrative that most contradicts the world view' (Anon. F, R2). Another shared that:

> I think the most challenging aspect would be the massacre in Kfar Qassim. Without belittling it, we know and understand that it is harder for the Jewish society in Israel to accept events where the IDF acted improperly and caused such great injustice. For students, soldiers are heroes who defend our security, which is true of course, but the story of the massacre undermines that admiration. (Anon. B, R4)

A third student opined that 'the most challenging historical chapter to teach would the evacuation of Gush Katif because it touches on very sensitive points for me. I'm afraid that it might affect me too much during the discussion with the children, and it's important not to dismiss any opinion and give proper respect to everyone' (Anon. L, R4).

Ultimately, however, the students nonetheless appeared to be in agreement that the two troubled chapters in their national history should be incorporated into the official curricula. 'The existence of the State of Israel is not in doubt any more, and it is time to present the injustices alongside the victories', stressed one student (Anon. E, R3). Several students went so far as to argue that the Kfar Qassim massacre should even be studied 'as part of the narrative of the establishment of the State of Israel', thus entering the official master-narrative (Anon. J, R3).

Moreover, the teaching units developed by the students demonstrated that they were able to extrapolate and project what they had learned. It seems that the Druze society in particular occupied their minds, especially in the current reality. One student, for example, described the rationale for her unit, stressing that:

> In the current period, during a war unlike any other in nature and scale compared to past events, we are witnessing a significant representation of the Druze community in their contribution to the war effort. The importance of their contribution to the country, within a Zionist context, is not self-evident and underscores the uniqueness of the Druze within Israeli society today. I see great importance in learning about and becoming acquainted with the Druze community, its history, and life in the country. Therefore, I feel that integrating the Druze narrative into high school history studies is essential and will contribute not only to academic knowledge but also to our societal perspective on minorities and their position within society. (Anon. H)

Furthermore, the students were able not only to project what they experienced and learned in terms of subject matter (that is, to think about other historical chapters to tackle), but also in terms of professional skills. For example, in their units, they stressed that visits to memorial sites and meeting people should give their future students the required distance that they themselves had in the course, allowing them to develop 'reasoned ethical judgment' (Ahonen, 2021). 'The study unit', the above student wrote, 'will examine the challenge of the belonging of a national minority group in Israel's multicultural society' (Anon. H). The field-tour she planned reflected that complex view: 'A tour of the Druze Beit Yad Labanim [memorial for fallen Druze IDF soldiers] in Daliyat al-Karmel, visiting a Druze family, and finally conducting research on a significant event or person from the Druze community' (Anon. H). Another student also planned his unit around the Druze community, titled: 'The Story of the Druze Community in Israel: A story of struggle for recognition and identity', based on his view that 'in today's multicultural Israeli society, the canonical historical narrative does not fully reflect the complex reality and the multitude of identities and stories within it' (Anon. J). Accordingly, his teaching unit was 'designed to expose students to the story of the Druze community in Israel and its struggle for recognition of its unique identity. Exposure to this story will broaden students' historical knowledge and encourage them to think critically about the official canon and recognise the existence of different perspectives within society' (Anon. J).

Other students dived into different burning issues and chapters in Israel's troubled past, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Haredi (ultra-Orthodox religious Jews)/secular relations, the Bedouin society in Israel, and the history of ethnic discrimination of Jews from Arab counties. As diverse as the topics were, equally so were the places outside the classroom that the students chose as suitable to achieve their educational and disciplinary goals. The goals, in turn, reflected their understanding, their ability to internalise, and their potential to use troubled past and engagement with chosen traumas to hone their future students' thinking skills. One student asserted in a typical way that her unit aimed to hone learners' capacity to 'analyse historical events from diverse perspectives; understand historical concepts such as "canon", "collective memory" and "historiography"; and develop of learning skills such as working with historical sources, text analysis, and discussion' (Anon. B). Another unit asked likewise to practise a critical understanding of the master-narrative: 'The students will be exposed to a historical narrative that is not expressed in the canonical narrative' (Anon. J).

Since the 1980s, the Israeli educational system has undergone processes of neoliberalism, manifested, among other things, in rising numbers of semi-private schools, increasing emphasis on the individual and their personal welfare, and the entry of private business into the educational environment (Ichilov, 2010; Raichel, 2008). As elsewhere around the world, neoliberal educational policy has resulted in an erosion of the status of teachers as autonomous professional agents in charge of leading education processes in schools (Benziger, 2017; Davies and Bansel, 2007; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). As a counter to this, engaging with troubled pasts during the course bolstered the students' confidence and sense of autonomy, motivating them to confront the personal, pedagogical and political challenges inherent in teaching sensitive historical topics in such an ideological context.

Moreover, although dealing with historical conflicts in an educational context can deepen divisions and encourage aggression (see, for example, Bar-Tal, 2000), when experienced in museums and other sites of memory, representations of difficult histories can in fact be utilised as 'pedagogical strategies' to advocate for social justice, as Rose (2016) has shown. Simon (2014: 175) likewise contends that intimate encounters with difficult histories, as often experienced in museums, 'contain … the possibility of an altered way of living with and learning from images and stories so as to critically engage a person's sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, and identities and distinctions'. In particular, recognising others' historical 'chosen traumas' is an essential step towards fostering understanding and facilitating conflict transformation (Hameiri and Nadler, 2017; Shnabel et al., 2009).

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The students' teaching units – constituting critical revisions to the exiting curriculum – demonstrate that they were inspired to seek to make an impact on contemporary Israeli social and political reality. As Christodoulou (2021: 219) argues, 'although these revisions can never rectify past wrongdoings, they can be seen as a material and symbolic attempt at restoring the human dignity of the victims and their loved ones'. While Christodoulou (2021) focuses on textbooks, the present case study bypasses the confines of the classroom and official teaching material, and suggests that learning outside the school affords a more productive opportunity for harnessing troubled histories for conflict transformation. This, indeed, can be done within the existing curriculum and education policy.

Nonetheless, while the units reflect the broadening of the students' horizons and ability to rethink about the Israeli master-narrative, they also indicate the new limits of these horizons. Most of the units dealt with populations and narrative with little potential to profoundly challenge the existing canon. For example, three units, focused on the Ethiopian community, which for the past four decades has been struggling to become an integral part of Jewish Israeli society, inter alia, by emphasising the links between their history and that of Zionist Israel (Tal, 2023). Two units, as mentioned, were dedicated to the Druze population in Israel, which, although not Jewish, are often seen by the general Jewish population as loyal to the country. At the same time, only one unit asked to address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. 'The narrative I chose', wrote the student (Anon. G), 'deals with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict':

> The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is presented in the high school curriculum within history lessons as an optional subject; teachers can choose to address it, but from a specific viewpoint that does not present both sides of the conflict … The aim of the unit is to deepen and understand the factors contributing to the current fabric of life. It seeks to … bring students to the understanding that there is a multiplicity of opinions and that narratives shape our approach to the conflict.

Acknowledging that Palestinian narratives might undermine the foundation of the Zionist master-narrative, and indeed seeing Palestinian narratives as important for that very reason, she stressed that 'the goal of the unit is to develop citizens who are aware of their neighbours and their historical past'.

Conclusion

Teaching history has become extremely challenging in Israel, particularly in the context of its current complex reality. Yet, Israel's troubled past presents history teachers with a unique opportunity to develop as learners, as pedagogues, as disciplinary specialists and as professional agents-educators. As the present case study demonstrates, engaging pre-service teachers with historical conflicts and others' chosen traumas, especially those relevant to contemporary conflicts and concerns, offers a particularly fertile ground in which they can experience empathy, acquire new knowledge, and adopt innovative pedagogical methods that hone their disciplinary skills, and foster the role of the history teacher as an agent of social and political change.

More broadly, contemporary societal challenges, conflicts and upheavals play a significant role in learning, serving as sources of emotions – triggering empathy as well as constructive discomfort – and motivation to drive change through education in general, and history education in particular. Rather than sweeping conflicts under the rug, schools can benefit from addressing them directly within the educational process. As seen, pedagogical methods that allow for direct engagement with others' chosen traumas can be instrumental in creating this fertile ground for learning. Out-of-the-classroom education, not just in-school study, proves particularly valuable. Exposure to such emotionally charged encounters with their own troubled past and with others' historical traumas enables history teachers and learners to re-evaluate their often-unconscious biases, encouraging them to reconsider previous knowledge and embrace new insights. In other words, it enables them to learn and to educate.

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, shocked by the near-annihilation experience, many history teachers sought to strengthen their students' connection with their heritage by emphasising Jewish and Israeli history and by celebrating Israeli heroism, while downplaying more controversial chapters (Tal and Hofman, 2021). This, they believed, was their educational and moral duty, and this, they hoped, would strengthen their students in their future life as Israeli citizens who will need to fortify their legitimacy in the country. In contrast, the students enrolled in the current course consciously chose

to engage with their country's troubled past despite the challenges posed by a time of war, violence and rising national sentiment. Although it is still too early to determine the outcomes, their participation and reflections suggest that in response to the events of 7 October and the subsequent war, they believe that as future teachers they can foster a better future for their students and for society by leading with empathy and critical engagement with the complex and often uncomfortable past.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Kibbutzim College of Education Ethics Board ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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