

# Why are teachers in Ontario afraid to talk about Palestinian rights and freedoms?

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*Abstract: Now that Canada has taken steps to recognize Palestinian statehood (Carney, 2025), it remains concerning that teachers in Ontario are afraid to talk about the issues affecting Israel-Palestine. This paper outlines why and how Palestinian identity and advocacy for Palestinian human rights and sovereignty have been repeatedly diminished in Ontario schools and why teachers therefore feel afraid to teach about Palestinian rights and freedoms. Ontario curriculum requirements do not mandate that students learn about Israel-Palestine in school. Furthermore, from my communications with teachers across the province, teachers often feel uncomfortable talking about the issues affecting Israel-Palestine out of fear of being labelled anti-Semitic. Language that is critical of Zionist ideology that promotes the establishment and expansion of the state of Israel is often misunderstood as anti-Semitic. Therefore, in this paper, I explain the importance of understanding the differences between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. I will examine how a conflation of the two definitions through the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's definition of anti-Semitism makes advocacy for Palestinian sovereignty and Palestinian identity much more difficult as well as Jewish people less safe through the false conflation of ideology with religious identity. I will also develop an understanding of how Canadian governments and schools privilege white comfort over racialized people's safety. Furthermore, I will outline how educators feel surveilled in the classroom especially surrounding their advocacy for Palestinian human rights through experiences shared by teachers across Ontario. This impacts teachers' feeling of safety and autonomy in teaching about or advocating for Palestine. Finally, we will examine the impact of anti-Palestinian racism on educators and consider next steps to make educators, students, and Palestinian families feel safer in schools.*

*Keywords: Palestine, anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, Ontario, Canada, Education, Teacher*

## Introduction

As a high school teacher who identifies as a queer woman of colour, and as an immigrant-settler to Canada where a genocide has already taken place against Indigenous peoples of this land (Hirsch & Moisan, 2024), I teach with the hopes that the students of today will build a better, more inclusive and more just world than the one we currently live in. I teach English and French while ensuring I include texts representing lived experiences of people of a variety of identities. During my career, however, I have often been cautioned by colleagues to avoid talking about Palestinian human rights and freedoms. Over the years, I have taught students from both Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories (Gaza and the West Bank) who have recently moved to Ontario. I have also taught Palestinian students whose families have been displaced from the region in decades prior. Furthermore, I have taught many students who ally themselves with the Palestinian cause and who have asked me personally why they are not learning about current events in Israel-Palestine when it is a significant world issue. This question lingered with me when I took a break from teaching to complete a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics, where I had the privilege of being able to study theory in linguistic anthropology that would help me understand the ways that language, semiotics, identity markers, and power intersect in the ways we communicate with one another. During this time, I developed an understanding of how language, politics, and policies are being used in our school systems to suppress teachers' capacity on teaching the question of Palestine. I intentionally use 'we' throughout this paper because we need to develop a shared understanding of the root causes of why teachers feel afraid to teach about Palestinian rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the fight for recognition of Palestinian identity, sovereignty and human rights is a collective effort both inside and outside of our school systems.

In this paper, we will primarily focus our attention on Ontario and the Toronto District School Board as Ontario's largest board, and one where students and the public have been very vocal about advocating for pro-Palestinian rights (Oatley, 2025d; Oatley, 2025e). We will examine how pro-Palestinian advocacy and criticism of Zionist ideology have been conflated with antisemitism at the federal, provincial and school board levels (Government of Canada, 2025; Oatley, 2025a; Oatley 2025b). We will further examine how professional

development in our school boards through partnerships with organizations with Zionist leanings (News Release Ontario, 2024) further cement a definition that wrongly conflates anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. Furthermore, we will develop an understanding of how Canadian federal and provincial governments and Canadian school boards function as “white public spaces” (Hill, 1998), which privilege some people’s comfort and belonging over others. We will examine the effects of this predicament on our educational landscape which ultimately leads to the ways teachers, educators and administrators feel surveilled in public school boards (TDSB Administrators, 2021). I will share some personal communications from colleagues across Ontario who have agreed on the disclosure of our communication in order to (i) underscore how anti-Palestinian racism is present in school boards and in the surrounding Greater Toronto Area, (ii) disclose how pro-Palestinian advocacy is conflated with anti-Semitism, and (iii) uncover how teachers are surveilled which makes them feel unsafe teaching about human rights for Palestinians. I have anonymized these teachers for their own safety, especially after learning how some educators have been harassed by Zionist organizations or not supported by the administration at their schools and school boards. Finally, we will consider next steps into how we can move forward to ensure better protections for Palestinian students, educators, and families in school boards as well as teacher and student safety in teaching and advocating for Palestinian human rights.

## **The Curriculum**

It is important to understand that students are only required to take the following mandatory credits covering geography, history, and politics in Ontario: CGC1W Grade 9 Exploring Canadian Geography, CHC2D/P Grade 10 Canadian History Since World War I, and CHV2O Grade 10 Civics and Citizenship (Politics) (Government of Ontario, 2025). The grade 10 history course covers Canada’s involvement in WWII, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism, but does not touch on Zionism or the creation of Israel, or the question of Palestinian sovereignty and rights (Government of Ontario, 2018).

Some optional senior level courses in history and politics (Government of Ontario, 2015) do mention the region of Israel-Palestine, such as CHT3O Grade 11: World History since 1900 Global and Regional Interactions (pp. 354, 364), CHY4U Grade 12 World History since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century (p. 406), CHM4E Grade 12 Adventures in World History (p. 440), and CPW4U Grade 12 Canadian and International Politics (p. 534, 536). The curriculum expectations in all these courses do not include teaching students about the issues in Israel-Palestine. Rather, the curriculum suggests that the region can be used as one of several examples to develop an understanding of skills and concepts that students must acquire through the curriculum, such as ‘historical thinking’ (p. 354), ‘impacts of nationalism’ (p. 364), ‘change in national boundaries and development of identity’ (p. 406), ‘changes brought about by colonial, nationalist, and anti-colonial forces’ (p. 440), ‘identities influence politics’ (p. 534), and ‘diplomatic recognition of states’ (p. 536). The unique codes prior to each course name identify the course on the Ministry of Ontario curriculum website as well as whether the course is coded U for University preparation, M for University or College Preparation, E for Workplace preparation, or O for Open to all students. Senior level courses are run based on supply and demand of students at the school and on the availability of teachers with the subject-area credentials, as well as administrators’ discretion to run elective courses. Because Israel-Palestine is only mentioned in senior level courses’ curriculum, which may or may not run at a specific school, many students are likely to complete all their compulsory credits and even their high school career without ever learning curriculum that touches on the topic of Israel-Palestine in class.

However, the Ontario Curriculum for all subjects does include “Considerations for Program Planning” that highlight human rights, equity and inclusive education which explicitly states that “in an inclusive education system, students must see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, so that they can feel engaged in and empowered by their learning experiences” (Government of Ontario, 2024). The curriculum also specifically outlines that students’ identities include “ancestry, culture, ethnicity, sex, disability,

race, colour, religion, age, marital or family status, creed, gender identity/expression, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other factors” (Government of Ontario, 2024). This curriculum front matter asks teachers to connect to students’ identities so that they are reflected in the learning environment. Therefore, although the question of Palestine is not explicitly raised, it has potential to be as it connects to students’ identities, ancestry, and culture. Furthermore, in English, French, English as a Second Language and French as a Second Language courses, the teacher can choose a variety of texts for students to study to practice literacy skills. Therefore, there is a lot of space to include texts by Palestinians, as well as people of any identity group, into our teaching practice.

However, from my discussions with colleagues, it is clear that these teachers felt that the inclusion of Palestinian voices or the issues affecting Israel-Palestine were being diminished in Ontario schools through school board and Ministry of Education communications as discussed later in this paper. Indeed, former Minister of Education of Ontario, Stephen Lecce, verbally warned teachers not to bring “politics” into the classroom or to discuss the “ Hamas-Israel war,” alluding to reprimands of teachers and administrators who had engaged in pro-Palestinian activism (Rushowy, 2023). However, no actual policy prohibits discussion of these topics in the classroom. In fact, the curriculum posits the opposite with the section “Considerations for Program Planning” across all curricula subject areas, as well as senior level subjects in Canadian and World Studies courses. Furthermore, in contrast to Minister Lecce’s stated mandate of separating politics from education, the Ministry of Education tied a significant funding increase for Holocaust and anti-Semitism education to the events of October 7, 2023, in their news release (News Release Ontario, 2024), thereby directly tying educational funding to politics. One of these partnerships is with the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), which is a pro-Israel lobby group. The Jewish Faculty Network released *THE CIJA REPORT: A Pattern of Anti-Palestinian Racism and Genocide Denial at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs* which demonstrates how CIJA has regularly exhibited anti-Palestinian racism and genocide denial, engaging in lobbying efforts to “silence voices calling for the liberation of the Palestinian people, and engineering a longstanding ‘exception’ rendering Palestine, Palestinian lives, and Palestinian human rights as unworthy of consideration” (Haiven et al., 2025).

In contrast, at the time of writing, there has been no funding from the Ministry of Education towards understanding anti-Palestinian racism, or the conditions of displacement, apartheid, and now genocide that Palestinians face today (Lynk, 2022; Albanese, 2024). This gap in funding is significant, especially as research conducted by Saleh & Awwad (2024) show that Palestinian students and families experience severe racism and discrimination in Canadian school systems.

## **Language as the Crux of the Issue**

As seen through the curriculum requirements for high school as well as the Ministry of Education’s directives to teachers, students in Ontario are unlikely to learn how to navigate this the crisis in Israel-Palestine in school or learn about how the Israeli government and military are (i) maintaining an apartheid state through its indefinite occupation of Palestinian territories (Lynk, 2022; Humane Rights Watch, 2024), and (ii) enacting war crimes and committing a genocide in Israel-Palestine (Albanese, 2024). Nevertheless, young people are aware of the atrocities happening, and high school students across Ontario from Peel region, Durham region, and the greater Toronto area are organizing pro-Palestinian protests as well as protests to underscore the pro-Palestinian censorship in schools (Oatley, 2025e). At the student protests I’ve attended, I’ve heard high school students chant “Free! Free! Palestine!” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!”, while wearing keffiyehs and raising the Palestinian flag.

Often, however, what students learn is that public schools often do not sanction many semiotic signs for pro-Palestinian advocacy, as seen by students who are censored for their advocacy. Some examples include: (i) a picture of Toronto District School Board students wearing Keffiyeh in the 2025 Ursula Franklin Academy’s yearbook covered by a sticker before distribution to hide the photograph (Oatley, 2025c) and (ii) students at Pickering High School being told they could not wear a hoodie that displayed “M.S.A. Pine Ridge” and the outline

of Israel-Palestine (Global News, 2025). Furthermore, students often risk being falsely accused of hate speech (The CJPME Foundation, 2023) and of experiencing anti-Palestinian racism from their peers, teachers and administrators (Saleh & Awwad, 2024). Saleh & Awwad (2024) denounce the racism that Palestinian students and families in Canada face and finally bring some of these issues in our education systems to light. This paper, however, will focus on Ontario teachers' ability and agency to teach on the topic of Palestinian rights and freedom.

Concepts from linguistic anthropology can help us better understand how much of the language advocating for a "Free Palestine!" is enregistered (Agha, 2005; Agha, 2025) as "social justice language." Furthermore, this social justice register is heard differently by different people, creating an indexical field (Eckert, 2008) of alternative meanings. On the one hand, people hear this language and see these signs as advocacy for Palestinian peoples, and as the right to a Palestinian state where Palestinians can live freely. On the other hand, some other people perceive signs related to Palestinian advocacy, such as the keffiyeh and Palestinian flag, as violent. Moreover, some people assume the language "from the river to the sea" is anti-Semitic rhetoric, believing that if the state of Israel which currently stands as an apartheid state was to cease to exist, Israelis would no longer be free or safe to live on the land. Indeed, the use of this "social justice language" is enregistered as associated with a specific type of persona. People alternatively see this persona as an advocate for Palestinian rights, or as someone who is anti-Semitic and purportedly supporting violence against Israelis and Jewish peoples. This second perception is promoted by pro-Israel lobby groups like the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA). "[T]he current discourse about antisemitism in Canada serves to manufacture consent for Israel's genocide in Gaza" (Haiven et al., 2025). Breaking the false discourse of pro-Palestinian advocacy as being anti-Semitic is important to enable advocacy for Palestinian human rights. Breaking this discourse requires education on anti-Palestinian racism.

To begin with, we must recognize that this second perception of users of social justice language and signs for Palestine as inherently anti-Semitic requires a rather racist underlying assumption that a Palestinian state would create a violent state where Palestinians do not allow Israelis to live freely or in safety. It is important to recognize and call out this assumption as a racist dehumanizing assumption of Palestinians being inherently violent, as well as willing, or able, to cause harm on a wide scale to Israelis. This is especially grievous considering the majority of the Palestinian population in Occupied Palestinian Territories are unarmed civilians, most of whom are children, struggling to live their daily lives while facing severe ongoing violence from the Israeli state, military and police. As the Jewish Faculty Network explain, "racism against Palestinians builds upon an architecture of discrimination that attributes a foundational antisemitism to Muslims and Arabs" (Haiven et al., 2025). Further, this racist belief is extended to allies of the Palestinian cause who are then branded in several negative ways including "anti-Semite" and "terrorist sympathisers," among others.

This racist assumption that Palestinians are inherently violent underpins much of the indexing of cultural and political signs and slogans for Palestine as anti-Semitic. And, in the Western world, (consisting of western Europe, United States, Canada, and Australia), these racist assumptions are created through Orientalism (Said, 1979) whereby the "occident" imagines and creates the "orient" as separate and other. It does this by "dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979, p. 3). As educators in Canada, it is incredibly important that we break orientalist discourse on Palestine by privileging Palestinian voices and teaching for Palestinian rights and freedoms. Otherwise, we remain in the situation we are in now—where Palestinians are actively imagined as violent, their humanity and their very lives are deemed less worthy than other peoples, and the deaths of individual people no longer cause outrage because the number of "casualties" is so high. If we do not break orientalist discourse, it remains socially acceptable in Canadian media and schools to police and suppress language and signs used to advocate for the lives, health, well-being and human dignity of Palestinians as well as their human right for freedom. If we, as educators, choose not to educate on Palestinian rights and freedoms, we continue to develop a society that assumes some people's lives as less valuable

than others. This is something that must change in our school systems to authentically align ourselves with our responsibility to protect human rights.

Unfortunately, Canadian governance at the federal and provincial levels have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism which suggests that much of the social justice language used in Canada in support of the Palestinian cause *should* be indexed as anti-Semitic; it achieves this through its conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism (Government of Canada, 2025; News Release Ontario, 2024). Some school boards are also using the IHRA definition on anti-Semitism either through professional development that partners with Zionist organizations, or through the school board formally adopting the IHRA definition, such as the Toronto District School Board (Salmon et al., 2025). The IHRA definition makes it extremely difficult for teachers to advocate for, or even discuss, Palestinian rights and freedoms without potentially being slandered with false accusations of anti-Semitism, which is also the most common sub-type of anti-Palestinian racism in Canada (Walia, 2025). The conflation of pro-Palestinian activism with anti-Semitism has made many teachers wary of bringing these discussions into the classroom.

The IHRA definition also adds teeth to directions from the Ministry of Education (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017; Rushowy, 2023) that already monitor teachers' advocacy for Palestine. It is important to recognize that this creates anxiety for teachers who advocate for a Free Palestine, or Palestinian rights and freedoms, because Canadian schools function as "white public spaces" (Hill, 1998) where dominant white discourses are the norm. Furthermore, white comfort is privileged at the expense of acknowledgement of Palestinian identity as well as at the expense of advocacy for Palestinian human rights. Any deviant discourse from white dominant discourse on this issue is surveilled, as explained later in this paper. Berman (2024) uses the theoretical construct of an "ear of power" to help analyze how people change their behaviour due to concerns about surveillance. This pervasive feeling of surveillance is in effect across Ontario school boards, creating an atmosphere of fear that makes Palestinians, and their allies, feel unsafe in schools. This fear of surveillance often disables people involved at all levels of education, from "teachers to trustees" (ON THE LINE MEDIA, 2025), from advocating for Palestine. Understanding that pro-Palestinian language has become enregistered as 'social justice language' that is heard differently by different groups helps us better understand the concerns people have speaking out in support for Palestine. My hope is that in understanding how language is being used, perceived, and distorted, we are better able to confront the issues with clear vision, moral integrity and authority.

### **How the IHRA definition conflates criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism**

The Federal Government of Canada has published the *Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Anti-Semitism* (from now on referred to as *Canadian Handbook*) which formally adopts the IHRA definition and has been updated into 2025. Although the handbook explains many grievous forms of anti-Semitism, other aspects of the definition try to limit criticism of Israel. Example 7 of the definition tries to index some social justice language as anti-Semitic. Example 8 of the definition tries to limit criticism for Israel by suggesting that critics are applying "double standards" to Israel.

Much of the social justice language for the Palestinian cause critiques Zionist ideologies. The *Canadian Handbook* describes that "the belief that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland (the land of Israel) is known as **Zionism**" (Canada, 2025, p. 30, emphasis in original). In this context, the *Canadian Handbook* indexes social justice language critiquing Zionism as anti-Semitic, as seen in the case study in Figure 1. The *Canadian Handbook* suggests that this example demonstrates anti-Semitic language because it falls under Example 7 of the definition "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" (p. 29). If we unpack this language, however, we realize how the definition is problematic and actively indexes discourse against Zionism as anti-Semitic to suppress criticism of Israel.

Canada (December, 2023): A post made on Instagram claimed that “you can’t be antiracist and Zionist” and that “Zionism is a racist & violent settler-colonial project...”

A post made on Instagram about Zionism



Figure 1: (Canada, 2025, p. 30)

First, the wording provided for Example 7 as well as their definition of Zionism must be critiqued. The phrase “the Jewish people” is in itself ideological and was used both by the Nazis and Zionists to amalgamate diverse Jewish communities into one imagined group. Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor in literature and philology who survived the Holocaust in Germany, described the essentialization of Jewish communities into one imagined group as stripping away of peoples’ identities and facilitating anti-Semitic attacks against them (Klemperer, 1957/2000). Klemperer also lived through the rise of Zionism in Germany and Austria and witnessed firsthand how Nazism promoted Zionism as well as how Zionism also promoted anti-Semitism when Jewish people and Zionist beliefs were conflated (Klemperer, 1957/2000, p. 193). This amalgamation of diverse Jewish communities into one imagined group helped facilitate the genocide during the Holocaust, and this framing continues to make Jewish communities more vulnerable to anti-Semitism today.

Secondly, although Israel is an apartheid state that discriminates based on race and religion (Lynk, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2024)—and an apartheid state is indeed a racist endeavour—this definition tries to sidestep the racist colonial underpinning of the state of Israel. Instead, it focuses on arguments of whether the state of Israel *should* exist by suggesting that “claiming that the existence of *a* State of Israel as a racist endeavour” [emphasis added] is anti-Semitic; therefore, criticism of Zionism, which advocates for a State of Israel, is also anti-Semitic. The IHRA definition suggests that it provides space for critique of actions by *the* state of Israel, as long as people do not deny the “right” for *a* state of Israel to exist or declare that “right” a racist endeavour. In reality, however, this very particular wording of the definition is used to then index any language criticizing Zionism or Zionist ideologies, and criticism against the state of Israel as it exists today as anti-Semitic. The *Canadian Handbook* also adds that the “delegitimization of the State of Israel is a distinct and prevalent issue, involving questioning Israel’s right to exist or calling for its destruction” (p. 31). This language in the *Canadian Handbook* allows people to then enregister “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” as ‘social justice language’ that is inherently anti-Semitic. Never mind that Palestinians living under colonial, apartheid rule, should be allowed to live freely on the land that is their home.

As seen from the example in the *Canadian Handbook* above, the wording of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, and the choice of the case study in the illustrative example, makes it extremely difficult to express criticism of Zionism without being labelled anti-Semitic in Canada. The *Canadian Handbook* also suggests that “the application of classical anti-Semitism to Zionists is generally achieved simply through replacing the word ‘Jew’ with ‘Zionist’ and ‘Judaism’ with ‘Zionism’” (p. 33). However, this is a conflation of criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism. Zionism is an ideology that promotes the creation of a Jewish ethnonationalist nation which is currently

situated in Israel. What makes Zionism deeply problematic as an ideology is that Zionism further allows for the forced transfer or ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in order to make room for a Jewish state in Israel-Palestine and maintain a Jewish majority. Zionists are not an identifiable “people” or religious or cultural group. Indeed, people of a variety of religious, ethnic, and cultural groups support Zionism. In my view, people who have conflated Zionism with their own cultural or spiritual identity are adopting an ideology as an identity marker. Furthermore, of the Jewish people who support Zionism, many imbibe this ideology at a young age through “Birthright” trips to Israel, and they may or may not be aware of the violent harm these ideologies cause to Palestinians (Israelism, 2023).

Woolard (1998) explains that “Ideology is seen as ideas, discourse, or signifying practices in the service of the struggle to acquire or maintain power” (p. 7). Recognizing that Zionism is an ideology used to acquire and maintain power helps us understand that to reject an ideology is not the same as being racist towards people who hold that ideology. It helps frame rejection of Zionism as different from, and not a manifestation of, anti-Semitism. Anti-Zionism does not equal hatred of Jewish peoples or anti-Jewish sentiment. Instead, anti-Zionism rejects the notion that Israel has the “right” to “transfer” or ethnically cleanse Palestinians to establish and maintain a Jewish ethnonationalist state. In effect, being against Zionist ideology, and describing oneself as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist, is not anti-Semitic. Indeed, many Jewish people are anti-Zionist themselves and do not support school boards like the Toronto District School Board adopting the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism that conflates anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism (ON THE LINE MEDIA, 2025).

A 2024 report called *Combatting Anti-Palestinian Racism and Anti-Semitism: An Intersectional Approach to Canada’s Anti-Racist Strategy*, written as a collaboration between the Arab Canadian Lawyers Association (ACLA), Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), Canadian Muslim Public Affairs Council (CMPAC) and Independent Jewish Voices Canada (IJV) can help further explain why the IHRA definition is so problematic. It suggests that:

[C]onflating legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and actions with anti-Semitism makes it more difficult for the public to identify genuine anti-Semitism, thereby advertently putting Jews in danger. Further, insisting that Judaism/Jewishness means uncritical support for the policies and actions of a state that is widely and justifiably condemned for serious human rights violations is itself anti-Semitic, erases non-Zionist Jewish identities and histories, and also puts Jews at risk (Arab Canadian Lawyers Association (ACLA) et al., 2024, p. 3).

Recognizing how problematic the IHRA definition is for both Palestinian and Jewish communities is vital to battle anti-Palestinian racism and anti-Semitism concurrently. Various religious and political organizations in Canada, including over 40 faculty unions, as well as 200 Jewish faculty, and 650 Canadian academics have expressed opposition to the IHRA definition in Canada (Walia, 2024). Indeed, the IHRA definition threatens freedom of expression, and academic freedom. Walia (2025) argues that “the primary goal of IHRA definition is not to fight anti-Semitism or protect Jewish communities from attack, predominantly carried out by white supremacists; it is a mechanism to suppress advocacy for Palestinian rights” (p. 33). Despite all the pushback against the IHRA definition, the *Canadian Handbook on the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism* has received endorsement from the federal government in 2019, from all the provinces (except Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia) by 2023, with Ontario adopting it in 2020. Use of this definition has severe consequences for our political landscape and for our educational systems.

The *Canadian Handbook* also includes Example 8 of the IHRA definition: “Applying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation” (p. 31). This portion of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism has nothing to do with racism towards Jewish peoples and instead attempts to suppress criticism of the state of Israel. Although the *Canadian Handbook* states, somewhat superficially, that the definition does not restrict discourse for legitimate criticism of Israel, it follows this statement by suggesting that

focused attention on Israel is anti-Semitic, labelling it as “disproportionate, sometimes obsessive, focus on criticizing Israel relative to other countries” (p. 31). This definition suggests that focusing attention on Israel might be considered “a double standard” if that same focus is not concurrently applied elsewhere. Therefore, Example 8 of the IHRA definition attempts to draw peoples’ attention away from Israel, lest they be labelled anti-Semitic. In my personal experience working in public schools, this cry of “double-standards” has made it into the discourse of teachers in our system who actively support the Israeli government’s actions, as well as for those who do not know much about the issues related to Israel-Palestine but support the state of Israel, nevertheless. This cry of “double-standards” is especially egregious when the state of Israel commits international law and human rights violations with impunity and has developed and expanded an apartheid regime in our lifetime. This is evidenced by the United Nations special rapporteur’s report to the Human Rights Council:

The occupation by Israel has been conducted in profound defiance of international law and hundreds of United Nations resolutions, with scant pushback from the international community. [...] It insists that the laws of occupation and human rights do not apply to its regime, and its proliferating facts on the ground have virtually extinguished what lingering prospects remain for a genuine Palestinian State. A legal oxymoron has emerged: an occupation in perpetuity. (Lynk, 2022, p. 3)

Advocates for Palestine focusing on this unique situation are not engaging in a double standard; rather this attention is applied specifically because powerful nation-states in the international community, especially Canada, The United States of America, and the United Kingdom, have rarely held Israel responsible or accountable for its human rights violations against Palestinians. Rather, they continued to send weapons and transferred aid to Israel despite clear evidence of the genocide Israel is enacting in Gaza (Albanese, 2024). Even the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan invests in arms manufacturers for Israel (Chaudhary, 2024), and protests to end this investment continue. It is necessary to pay attention to the Israeli government’s actions because the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism actively attempts to silence discourse on human rights violations. In most other contexts of genocide or war crimes, there is at least some recognition, condemnation, or reprisal applied to nation states who commit human rights violations from other powerful nation-states, and from educators in our school systems. However, Canada has long supported Israel’s actions almost unequivocally with both Harper and Trudeau governments strengthening relationships with Israel (Dyer, 2025). Only recently has Canada decided to recognize a Palestinian state (Carney, 2025; Stevens, 2025b). The long-standing lack of institutional backing in critiquing Israel’s actions towards Palestinians, and the lack of discourse on Palestinian rights and freedoms, has had a severe effect on Canada’s political and educational landscape for Palestinians and their allies.

## **Canadian Governments and Canadian Educational Systems as White Public Spaces**

The discussions around Israel-Palestine draw so much attention from Canadians because of the polarizing discourses around the issue. Mass protests of diverse groups of people are making many white people in Canada uneasy, especially as Canada, its governments, communities, and schools function as “white public spaces” (Hill, 1998). Whiteness and white public discourses become marked as an “invisible and unmarked ‘norm’” (Hill, 1998, p. 684). Although not all Israelis are white, dominant white discourses in Canada continue to protect Israelis and new settlers to Israel from criticism about the land dispossession of Palestinians. These white norms in Canada’s government, media and educational institutions also support the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, therefore people in all these spaces may hesitate to engage in discourse criticizing Israel as an apartheid colonial state engaging in genocide.

Furthermore, language that protects whiteness, including the actions or inactions of the Israeli and Canadian governments becomes the norm. Syntax in legacy media diminishes war crimes that the Israeli military commits against Palestinian victims by using passive phrases to distance the perpetrators from their crimes. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has attempted to avoid acknowledging Palestinian rights to the land by



avoiding the term “Palestine,” and 66 organizations in Canada have written an open letter to the CBC demanding a change (CBCPalestine, n.d.). Moreover, the harm caused to Palestinians is regularly diminished through the lexical choices made in news articles. This diminishes the humanity of Palestinians while privileging the comfort and feelings of white people.

Finally, right wing media and politicians have defamed and slandered pro-Palestinian protests as inherently anti-Semitic, which Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (2023) has labelled a form of anti-Palestinian racism. People who support the Palestinian cause are aware that the way language is used has serious consequences to the way people view and construct the humanity and identities of Palestinians of all backgrounds, and due to racist logics, by extension, Muslims, Arabs, and other racialized people from nearby regions as the “other” (Said, 1979). Ultimately, the white dominant discourse in Canadian media regularly dehumanizes Palestinians and their allies.

Raciolinguistics is a field of study examining the intersections of race and language. It helps us understand how white linguistic normalcy in North America allows white people to engage in “orderly disorder” (Hill, 1998) and use language in racist ways which are not usually indexed as racist in white public spaces. This concept can be extended to explaining how white people can say or do racist things that are simply accepted as “not racist” by most of the public. This has serious consequences. For example, Conservative party leader Pierre Poilievre describes pro-Palestinian marches as anti-Semitic “hate marches” and stated that, if elected, he would deport foreigners on visas to Canada “who carry out law-breaking” without specifying what laws those would be (Steven, 2025). Labelling rallies as “hate marches” and slandering its participants as engaging in hate speech is a form of anti-Palestinian racism that sitting Conservative party leader Poilievre can engage in without repercussions. Furthermore, at the time of writing, Liberal party leader Mark Carney will not use the word ‘genocide’ to refer to the carnage in Gaza and instead states that he is aware of the “situation” (Steven, 2025). Even in recognizing Palestinian statehood, Carney has not used the word ‘genocide’ once when describing the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Carney, 2025). White dominant discourse in legacy media allows social space in Canadian politics and education systems to justify Israel’s continued violence against Palestinians, and especially its escalation of violence on Palestinians after Hamas’ attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023. This cultural framework of white dominant discourse allows many Canadians, including teachers, to somehow justify the extraordinary violence Israel is inflicting upon Palestinians, and Palestinian children, as a right to self-defence.

Another example of “orderly disorder” is how former Ontario Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, ordered all school boards to remove *Nakba Day* from their Days of Significance calendar (Mousa & Pegios, 2024). This is a calendar that marks religious holidays, days of mourning, days of commemoration, and days of pride which can be honoured in a school board setting. The *Nakba* translates to the “catastrophe” and refers to the mass displacement of Palestinians by Zionist militia groups in 1947 and the continued displacement of Palestinians today by the State of Israel. *Nakba* denial, much like Holocaust denial, is a form of bigotry and racism, and is indexed as a form of anti-Palestinian racism (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2023). While Lecce did not outright deny the events of the *Nakba*, as the Minister of Education, he denied school boards with the opportunity to teach about it and “made his expectations clear that there is no room for politics or the influence of personal opinions in Ontario classrooms” (Mousa & Pegios, 2024).

Indeed, the labelling of the *Nakba* as a political issue, when it is a historical fact, is a form of erasure of the *Nakba* in our education system. We would never deny teachers the opportunity to teach about the Holocaust or other genocides. This is a form of anti-Palestinian racism that is systematically prevalent in our entire education system. Furthermore, Minister Lecce’s comments about keeping politics outside the classroom feels especially egregious when he explicitly celebrates and links Israel’s celebration of Independence Day with Holocaust education for students in Ontario schools. Minister Lecce’s comments which link Ontario’s education objectives with posts

celebrating Israel's Independence Day make it clear the Ministry of Education is taking a pro-Israel stance in politics as well as in educational outcomes.



Figure 2: (Lecce, 2023)

## Effects on the Educational Landscape in Canada

White dominant discourses in the Ontario Ministry of Education and in school boards dictate whose feelings and humanity are privileged in the classroom and what education on history and social studies students receive. For me and based on my colleague's experiences, when school boards mention the ongoing violence in Israel-Palestine through communications, it is only to discuss how teachers should deal with student reactions, not to educate on the topic. One teacher, who is Palestinian and a mother of school age children, shared that:

The board had put out a guide to dealing with the traumatic and on-going "conflict" between Israel and Palestine. The first FAQ was something along the lines of 'what if my child does not feel safe to come to school'. That told me everything I needed to know about the board's stance, because I know which child's feelings they were concerned about. I knew that they were more concerned about feelings (white fragility) than an actual genocide. (Teacher 1, Personal Communication, March 13, 2025).

Even if the majority of students and families may be racialized at a specific school, the vast majority of teachers and administrators are white (Abawi, 2021), and the feelings of white staff, students and families are privileged. The school continues to act as a "white public space" (Hill, 1998). This becomes evident with discussions around Israel-Palestine because of the way predominantly white people's feelings on the topic are centered. Conversely, Palestinian students, families and educators, as well as racialized people who identify with the struggles of region and who experience trauma are not centered in the conversation at the school board level. These white norms are acutely felt by racialized teachers. Another teacher who is also a mother of school age children, a visibly Black Muslim woman who wears a hijab shared that:

In my experience, there is a subtle yet pervasive form of surveillance and silence that comes both from within the school and from outside organizations. This often manifests through the dominant cultural norms

established by the school's administration and staff, which tend to avoid controversial or politically charged discussions. (Teacher 2, Personal Communication, March 22, 2025)

This white discourse deeply affects the way teachers move through the school system. Certain teachers' comfort is privileged while others are actively intimidated. Further, this discourse affects racialized teachers who are also parents and who realize that their children will be subjected to dominant white discourse that may not affirm their children's identities.

Another teacher who is a man of colour shared that he posted a "Ceasefire Now" poster on his classroom door. By lunchtime, four other teachers had complained to the principal that the sign was anti-Semitic, and the teacher was ordered to take the sign down. A few weeks later, the teacher received an envelope addressed to him in his staffroom mailbox with no further information. When he opened the envelope, he found a "Save the Hostages" poster by the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Because there was no further information, he felt the poster was sent to him as an intimidation tactic (Teacher 3, Personal Communications, March 16, 2025). Advocates for Palestine, especially Black, Indigenous and racialized advocates, have faced intimidation from their colleagues for speaking up about the question of Palestine.

Palestinian students and families, as well as many educators, have experienced silencing and racial discrimination against them when they want to discuss Palestinian rights and freedoms in the classroom across Canadian schools (Paradkar, 2021; Saleh & Awwad, 2024, Shaker et al., 2024). This has been an issue for several years. In 2021, a group of 30 Toronto District School Board administrators (Principals, Vice Principals, etc.) put out a letter to "Director Falconer and the TDSB Human Rights Department" citing concerns of "policing, criticism, and silencing that some of us are experiencing when we name and create spaces to discuss human rights violations," especially in order to discuss the "islamophobia and anti-Palestinianism that is being enacted daily on our TDSB community" (TDSB Administrators, 2021, p. 1). The group signed the letter: "TDSB Administrators, (anonymous for fear of reprisal)" (TDSB Administrators, 2021, p. 2). Teachers or administrators who care about Palestinians and advocacy for Palestinian human rights have had to take the impetus upon themselves to actively name and support Palestinians without support from the Ministry of Education Ontario, schools or school boards. Furthermore, they do so with fear of surveillance and intimidation from within and outside of their schools. The TDSB makes an interesting case study because it is the largest school board in Canada in the most diverse region of the country; its actions may serve as precedence for other school boards in Ontario and in Canada.

### **TDSB grapples with supporting both Jewish and Palestinian students**

The TDSB has slowly started making some headway to put educational policy in place to combat anti-Palestinian racism on the agenda for the 2025-2026 school year (Oatley, 2025d). This is after much grassroots advocacy from educators and families in the TDSB community with groups such as Jews Say No to Genocide, Toronto Jewish Families and Toronto Palestinian Families pushing back against TDSB implementing the controversial IHRA definition of anti-Semitism into schools (Oatley, 2025b). However, the TDSB still chose to use the controversial IHRA definition that conflates anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism into school board policies and professional development (Oatley, 2025b; Salmon et al., 2025). The TDSB's updated anti-hate and anti-racism strategy is using a 2-year working plan with Phase 1 (started in 2023-2024 school year) to focus on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, Phase 2 (started in the 2024-2025 school year) to focus on anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, homophobia and transphobia, and Phase 3 (slated to start in the 2025-2026 school year) for ableism and anti-Palestinian racism (Salmon et al., 2025).

Although school boards and Ontario curriculum already require students to study anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, this renewed focus on anti-Semitism comes with funding from the Ministry of Education Ontario, which Minister of Education, Jill Dunlop, explicitly tied to the events of the October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel (News

Release Ontario, 2024). Despite Palestinians being disproportionately affected by the events in Israel-Palestine, the focus on anti-Palestinian racism in the TDSB was pushed to the 2025-2026 school year. Further, although, there seems to be an interest in developing a strategy to combat anti-Palestinian racism at the TDSB, there still is no professional development from the Ministry of Education Ontario to support this. In 2024, the Government of Ontario chose not to follow the recommendations made by Patrick Case, the Ministry of Education's appointed reviewer of the Toronto District School Board's excursions policy and procedure, which included developing two professional development series on anti-Semitism and on anti-Palestinian racism that would each take place over three sessions (Case, 2024; Oatley, 2025d). This professional development is necessary for legitimate movement forward on safety for Palestinian and Jewish students alike:

There is a culture of fear throughout the TDSB related to this erasure of Palestinian existence. Senior leaders told me that principals and teachers are afraid to say or do the wrong thing for fear of repercussion. Students and parents told me that there has been a notable silence in classrooms with respect to the war in the Middle East. Although this war is far from the classrooms in Toronto, it affects many of TDSB's students, Jewish and Palestinian alike. (Case, 2024)

At the time of writing, no Ministry of Education backed professional development on Palestine is happening in Ontario. Instead, school boards would have to choose to develop or fund this professional development on their own. Professional development on anti-Semitism that is funded through Government of Ontario funds (News Release Ontario, 2024) is through organizations that conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism on their websites, making Palestinians and their allies continue to feel unsafe to advocate for Palestinian human rights, freedoms and sovereignty in schools.

### **Ministry of Education Ontario and the Toronto District School Board implement the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism**

In April 2018, the TDSB updated its P037 Equity policy to include the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism (Salmon et al., 2025, p. 22). In February 2025, TDSB trustees voted to receive and accept the implementation of its report: "Update: Affirming Jewish Identities and Addressing Anti-Semitism and the Combatting Hate and Racism Strategy" (Salmon et al., 2025). This strategy specifically recommends that the TDSB must "provide professional learning for staff to deepen understanding of anti-Semitism, including modern manifestations such as anti-Zionism, intersectionality, and Jewish identity diversity" (p. 16). In this way, not only is the IHRA definition being used by the TDSB, but it is also being used to inform professional development on anti-Semitism. Several Jewish parents in the TDSB have spoken out against the TDSB trustees receiving this report that conflates anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism (ON THE LINE MEDIA, 2025). Nevertheless, the Toronto District School Board's 22 trustees still voted to receive the report that would keep an anti-Semitism strategy that conflates anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism (ON THE LINE MEDIA, 2025) and therefore support the IHRA definition. Thirteen trustees voted for receiving the report while five voted against it (ON THE LINE MEDIA, 2025).

The professional development and anti-Semitism strategy of the TDSB incorporates "modern manifestations such as anti-Zionism" into its definition of anti-Semitism which is highly problematic. The Jewish Faculty Network notes that:

For a number of decades, the state of Israel has promoted the idea that critiques of Zionism and critique of Israeli state policies, laws, and practices constitute a "new" antisemitism, since Israel is a Jewish nation-state. Many pro-Israel Jewish lobby groups have adopted this framework and have been key players in silencing Palestinian political calls for liberation by naming this movement as antisemitic. This discourse around antisemitism has become particularly salient in the context of Israel's ongoing genocidal campaign

in Gaza as we are witnessing a heightened level of racism directed at expressions of Palestinian solidarity and Palestinian political and human rights in Canada. (Haiven et al., 2025)

Including professional development on anti-Semitism from Zionist organizations allow for an increase in racism towards people advocating for Palestinian rights. The Ministry of Education Ontario is funding Zionist Jewish organizations like the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) to partner with school boards and develop professional development resources as well as educational resources for children to learn about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Teachers in Ontario have been partaking in Profession Development (PD) sessions where:

The PD session taught that criticism of Israel was anti-Semitic and that this can be the most ‘insidious form of anti-Semitism’ as it appears to be done by social justice advocating human rights. I don’t believe they ever said Palestine, but there were pictures of protests and of signs that were criticizing Israel’s apartheid state. The main message of the PD was to ‘teach our classes about this insidious form of anti-Semitism.’ (Teacher 4, Personal Communication, March 22, 2025)

As confirmed by this teacher’s testimony, professional development in Ontario school boards is already underway to enregister criticism of Israel as “social justice language” which is further indexed as anti-Semitic. Some teachers in Ontario are being directed to teach about this “insidious form of anti-Semitism” to students in their professional development. Furthermore, teachers are being asked to actively engage in indexing language enregistered as social justice language for the Palestinian cause as anti-Semitic. It is important to recognize that labeling pro-Palestinian protests and language as anti-Semitic is a form of anti-Palestinian racism (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2023), which is precisely what this professional development directs teachers to do.

The delay in developing a strategy to deal with anti-Palestinian racism at school boards allows the province of Ontario and Zionist organizations hired by school boards to engage in professional development for teachers that fully implement the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. It turns this into the norm, effectively suppressing much needed discourse on Palestinian rights and freedoms in our education systems. If the IHRA definition is implemented in a classroom setting, it does not leave much room for discussion on Palestinian rights, freedoms, or sovereignty, and only surface level discussions on Palestinian culture would be possible in this context. Unless the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is removed, any policies combatting anti-Palestinian racism are limited in scope. Seeing the next steps the TDSB takes to combat anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism are important because, as the largest school board in Ontario, it sets an example, and perhaps precedence, for what other school boards do in the region. At my school board, teachers are looking at the TDSB’s position and policies to see what we can do next in terms of combatting anti-Palestinian racism. The promotion of the IHRA definition in Ontario school boards by Zionist organizations has created an atmosphere of fear.

## **Surveillance of Educators**

Shortly after the October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, attacks, the Minister of Education Stephen Lecce said: “Educators need to take caution when it comes to commenting on the Israel-Hamas conflict because there is ‘zero tolerance’ for hate and they will be held accountable” (Rushowy, 2023). Furthermore, as Rushowy (2023) noted in *The Star*, in 2017, educators received a professional advisory that reminded teachers that the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that “off-duty conduct, even when not directly related to students, is relevant to their suitability to teach” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). Rushowy (2023) also noted that “a handful of teachers and principals across the province have been put on home leave because of their social media posts regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict.” Thus, teachers, principals and other educators in the school system are aware that they are being closely monitored for their advocacy for Palestine, even off school property or outside of school time. Any accusation of hate speech, whether it is justified or not, can cause a teacher to be put on leave without notice until the incident is investigated

(Paradkar, 2021a). This, of course, is terrifying for teachers (Paradkar, 2021a) and can act as a significant deterrent to advocating for Palestine or teaching about Palestinian human rights in schools.

In 2021, the Toronto Star published that Javier Dávila, a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) educator, was put on leave for sharing an opt-in email list of curated resources on Israel and Palestine (Dávila, 2021a; Paradkar, 2021a), although he was later reinstated without discipline after an investigation cleared him of any wrongdoing (Dávila, 2021b; Paradkar, 2021b). A petition calling for Dávila's reinstatement also amassed 5000 signatures. The fear caused by the defamation attacks on Dávila, as well as the fact the TDSB put a teacher on leave without cause, concerned many educators across Ontario. After he was reinstated from the earlier suspension, Dávila was suspended again and placed under investigation in November 2023 after:

publicly criticizing pro-Israel group the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) on social media for spreading misinformation about students from Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute. CIJA had falsely accused the students of making antisemitic remarks during a rally, alleging that one student shouted “Judah, Judah, you can’t hide,” which they portrayed as a highly antisemitic term directed at Jews. Javier Dávila defended the students by challenging the accuracy of CIJA’s accusations, pointing out that the students were actually chanting “Trudeau, Trudeau, you can’t hide,” addressing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and criticizing his response to Israel’s actions in Gaza, and not making any remarks directed at Jewish individuals or expressing antisemitic sentiments.” (The CJPME Foundation, 2023)

The TDSB accused Dávila of “serious misconduct” for addressing these false accusations of anti-Semitism against TDSB students. Although Dávila was defending TDSB students from a Zionist organization that was slandering the students by distorting what they had said, Dávila was still put on suspension. When teachers are put on suspension, they are not allowed to discuss the proceedings with colleagues at their board, and therefore other people will not know why the person has been put on suspension, which can destroy educators’ reputations and affect their mental health and well-being.

### **Ear with Power**

Why would a school board like the TDSB, which touts human rights strategies as part of its agenda (Salmon et al., 2025), continue to disparage the work and advocacy of exceptional educators like Javier Dávila, who not only worked as a teacher but was promoted into a Student Equity Advisor role? Theories from linguistic anthropology can help us understand why communities might choose to use or choose to avoid certain language in specific situations. By using Berman’s (2024) framework of an “ear with power,” we can better understand why school boards are taking a position on Israel-Palestine that puts some of their teachers and students at risk. Berman (2024) explains that “an ear with power works through listeners who can, by listening, alter people’s speech and other actions. It does so in ways that suit the institutions on whose behalf the listener acts” (p. 332). Not only are teachers at risk of losing their jobs if they are accused of hate speech, so are administrators, and educators in upper levels of educational management if they do not appropriately manage people that may be *accused* of hate speech, regardless of whether they are *engaging* in hate speech. Thus, administrators and management act in ways that suit the school board and Ministry of Education, which is to maintain dominant white discourses while privileging white comfort in educational institutions as white public spaces (Hill, 1998). This can alter the ways educators and administrators in educational management speak on issues surrounding Israel-Palestine, regardless of their politics on the issues.

One very widely broadcast example of “an ear with power” in effect at the TDSB was in November 2021, when Desmond Cole, best-selling Canadian author and journalist, was invited to an online TDSB conference as the keynote speaker to discuss anti-Black racism. During his speech he decided to address the “elephant in the room” and brought up how Palestinians in the TDSB were being discriminated against for advocating for a Free Palestine. Desmond Cole was immediately interrupted by TDSB staff who were moderating the Zoom conference and acting

as listeners to his dialogue. The moderators “demanded he explain how Free Palestine doesn’t entail the ‘destruction of Israel’” (Ayyash, 2021). However, these listeners, Shirley Chan and Lorraine Linton, seemed to be reading off scripted talking points to effectively interrupt Desmond Cole. It was obvious from the call that the “listeners” were being “listened to.” Cole responded to the comment by saying:

If people interpret Free Palestine as being violent, it is because they are benefitting from Palestinians being unfree. Period. In the same way that if you answer Black Lives Matter with All Lives Matter, you must have some investment in Black lives being more ... undervalued ... Otherwise, you wouldn’t quarrel with the statement. (Ayyash, 2021)

On X (twitter), where educators and community members in Ontario regularly interact after online conferences, reactions to Desmond Cole’s language were alternatively viewed as advocacy for the Palestinian cause or as anti-Semitic. Although Chan and Linton’s interruptions of Cole’s talk were jarring, in a tweet after the fact, Cole recognized that they were probably asked to interrupt him by their superiors (Cole, 2021). Thus an “ear with power” (Berman, 2024) was likely in effect. He was aware that his listeners, the moderators of the call, were also being monitored for their reactions to his statement. Furthermore, after the call, the TDSB’s Director of Education, Colleen Russell-Rawlins, put out a statement apologizing for “harm caused” from Desmond Cole’s words advocating for a Free Palestine. Russell-Rawlins explained that “It is incumbent upon [TDSB staff] to interrupt and question when content is potentially problematic or inappropriate” (Ayyash, 2021). Chan, Linton, and Russell-Rawlins all made statements suggesting “Free Palestine” was inappropriate rhetoric, supporting dominant white discourse which suppresses advocacy for Palestine in the TDSB.

All of the people in this interaction were Black or racialized. Nevertheless, an “ear with power” still works to maintain the dominant white discourse regardless of who the “listeners” are in a discussion, because the dominant discourse community is monitoring the participants’ reactions. It was especially interesting that all the moderators on the call were racialized when the majority of the administrators and senior level staff are white (Abawi, 2021). Previously, I have theorized that the TDSB intentionally chose racialized senior staff to moderate the call with Desmond Cole in case he was to make a point advocating for Palestine (Farooq, 2021). Further, they were provided scripted responses in order to listen and react “appropriately” on behalf of the TDSB. I called this intentional choosing of Black people and People of Colour to act as listeners in this moment as a “BIPOC shield” (Farooq, 2021). If a white person were to have interrupted Desmond Cole in the same way, that person would have likely been “called out” by racialized communities in Toronto. Because the TDSB instead chose to put a Black woman and a racialized woman on the call, teachers and community members were hesitant to critique Linton and Chan’s scripted talking points in the same way, perhaps for fear of being labelled racist. Linton and Chan therefore functioned as a BIPOC shield for the TDSB in order to mitigate racialized communities’ reactions, and further to protect white senior staff’s reputations. Meanwhile, Linton and Chan were forced to potentially sacrifice their own reputations in the eyes of pro-Palestinian advocates, teachers, colleagues and community members in the process.

The “ear with power” also works at the school level where principals must act cautiously with how they respond to teachers’ and students’ discussions on Palestine. An “ear with power” requires principals to consider “[...] the ramifications of acts of listening that precede the speech that they are imagined to follow, the process whereby listeners come to hear themselves through the ear of another, and the ways that policing listening can alienate listening from listeners.” (Berman, 2024, p. 332). This was evident in one white teacher’s communications with me on how her normally outspoken principal, who regularly backs human rights discussions, cautioned her while speaking on Palestine because of the way it might be perceived:

Shortly after October 7th, 2024, I had a casual conversation with my principal in the hall [...] I told him that I planned on addressing Palestine with my classes that day. He agreed that discussing Palestine, Apartheid and colonization connected well with my course content. What worried me is he did say to ‘be

careful' and 'stick to information that specifically connects with the course.' (Teacher 4, Personal Communication, March 22, 2025)

We can use Berman's (2024) "ear with power" framework to analyze the principal's reaction. The principal may be aware that his response to the teacher's plan could be critiqued by his superiors or the school community. The principal may believe that in listening to the teacher's plan, others may also react to the way he responds, and thus he cautions the teacher about speaking on Palestine even when the teacher and principal agree on the importance of human rights. Berman (2024) explains that an ear with power works through distributed listening and examines "how absent listeners affect social relations" (p. 332). Any one of the students in a teacher's class may listen to her words and then discuss the content of the class discussion with others in the community. Those listeners in the community are then effectively listening in to the discussion in the classroom. If the student or outside community members take issue with the class discussion, not only could the teacher face repercussions, but also the principal who did not stop the teacher from starting the discussion in the classroom. Berman (2024) explains that "listening becomes the medium through which each of the people involved is bound to each other and to their selves as social actors; that is, as enacting roles, subject positions, characters, and types" (p. 341) When the principal cautions the teacher about the discussion the teacher is planning to have on Palestine, he enacts his role as the principal in which he attempts to protect the teacher and himself from the "ear of power." However, he does not outright ban the discussion because he is probably aware that the way he listens and reacts to the teacher's proposal also speaks to his integrity—as a principal who allows discussions on Israel-Palestine and Palestinian human rights to happen at his school.

Finally, this "ear with power" (Berman, 2024) is given teeth with the adoption of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and with professional development that instruct teachers in the province not to criticize Israel as it constitutes an "insidious form of anti-Semitism." Furthermore, the TDSB strategy titled "Update: Affirming Jewish Identities and Addressing Anti-Semitism and the Combatting Hate and Racism Strategy" (Salmon et al., 2025) also recommends that the TDSB monitor and report all incidents of anti-Semitism in its Racism, Bias and Hate Portal to ensure transparency, accountability, and follow-up (Salmon et al., 2025, p. 16). However, TDSB's definition of "insidious anti-Semitism" suggests that anti-Zionism is a "modern manifestation of anti-Semitism." While on the surface, keeping track of incidents is important to understand data and trends, this reporting can also have serious adverse consequences on students and teachers who are accused of anti-Semitism when advocating for a Free Palestine. This is concerning as there will be a lasting record of that accusation against their names in the school system through reporting portals. This concern is especially relevant if there is no policy on combatting anti-Palestinian racism.

## **The Impact of anti-Palestinian Racism on Educators**

The impact of anti-Palestinian racism is extremely harmful to the wellbeing of Palestinians and their allies. Going back to Teacher 3's experience of being 'pro Palestine' in an Ontario school can help us understand just how badly this racism can play out in a school context:

In the spring of 2023, at my current school ([Redacted] SS), a colleague broached me with concerns about how I was teaching the Holocaust in my Canadian history class. Her concern was ostensibly in relation to comments she overheard. I assured her that I take the teaching of the Holocaust very seriously and do not diminish in any way its horrors. She continued to push me (visiting my classroom uninvited for several days) until the conversation shifted to Israel/Palestine—at her prompting. I insisted that these two topics should not be linked and that an acknowledgement of the horrors of the Holocaust does not require me to defend the actions of the state of Israel (in fact, that the lessons of the Holocaust should lead me to criticize Israel's treatment of the Palestinians). She couldn't accept this, and the conversation got a little heated. It ended without resolution and tensions between us heightened. A few days later, we encountered each other



in the hallway after school. As she passed me, and within earshot of students and some staff, she said, “Oh, look, there’s the antisemite.” (Teacher 3, Personal Communication, March 16, 2025)

This testimony of a racialized teacher’s experience in schools should shock us all. Unfortunately, it doesn’t. Ultimately, this paper addresses why teachers in Canada are afraid to talk about Palestinian rights and freedoms, and what needs to change for Palestinians and their allies to feel safer in schools. The experiences that teachers have shared with me indicate that anti-Palestinian racism affects both Palestinians and their allies in our educational systems.

Teachers have come to feel unsafe in their workplace. Teachers have come to fear their colleagues simply for advocating for the human rights of Palestinians—something that should not be controversial. Sometimes teachers even fear their students, and how their words may be misconstrued by listeners outside of the classroom who come to know what happens in the classroom through students’ reports. Finally, teachers have found that they are unable to count on the leaders in their schools and school boards to protect them from false charges of hate speech. Instead, teachers may be unsupported by their school leaders and administrators should they be falsely accused of any rhetoric or semiotics that is deemed anti-Semitic. One teacher who is a woman of colour shared that although she had taught about Palestinian rights previously, she is afraid to continue: “I’m worried siding with Palestine is not aligned with the board’s view. I’ve been feeling uneasy about bringing the topic up. I find it easier to avoid and not have to fear the consequence” (Teacher 5, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025). Teachers must recognize that policies that collude with the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, surveillance of teachers, white public discourse that is upheld and often dehumanizes Palestinians and racialized peoples, and an “ear with power” (Berman 2024) are all at play, thus making advocacy for Palestine a career minefield.

## Next Steps

When it comes to discussing Israel-Palestine, language is often at the crux of all disagreements. I have sought to outline how language is distorted to silence advocacy, solidarity and education on Palestinian human rights and Palestinian sovereignty. When we can clearly articulate the differences between anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism and the false conflation of the two, we become less liable to defamation attacks. Furthermore, we can move forward in teaching to the issues in Israel-Palestine with integrity and authority.

We must follow the suggestions made by Patrick Case (2025) in his review of the TDSB and create opportunities for educators to engage in professional development on combatting anti-Palestinian racism. This can either be through the creation of Ministry of Education professional development as suggested by Case (2025) or through existing resources for combatting anti-Palestinian racism. One example of professional development for teachers that could easily be incorporated is the lesson series on *unlearn* called “Affirming the Palestinian Identity in Education” created by Heba Mousa and Shirel Pegios (Mousa & Pegios, 2024).

We must continue to advocate for getting rid of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in school boards. We should listen to the diverse Jewish families, organizations and the Jewish Faculty Network who have spoken out against this definition and how it does not actually make schools safer from anti-Semitic attacks. Indeed, it makes Jewish students more vulnerable to anti-Semitism if their religious identity is conflated with Zionist ideology that has led to a genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Furthermore, we should continue professional development on anti-Semitism, however, we should disengage with Zionist organizations like CIJA that have patterns of anti-Palestinian racism as outlined by the Jewish Faculty Network in *THE CIJA REPORT: A Pattern of Anti-Palestinian Racism and Genocide Denial at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs* (Haiven et al., 2025).

Next steps for implementation of policy to combat anti-Palestinian racism are on the agenda for the Toronto District School Board. As the TDSB establishes policy, other school boards should be encouraged to

establish their own policies on combating anti-Palestinian racism. Once we as educators have a policy recognizing the need to protect Palestinian students in our school boards, it will become harder for the school boards to shut down teachers' efforts to educate students about Palestinians, Palestinian human rights and freedoms, and the quest for Palestinian sovereignty and statehood. Hopefully, teachers will be able to teach to these topics without fear, especially if we have the language to approach these topics with integrity.

Teachers, like students, should feel safe at school. Teachers should not feel like they will be harmed or unsupported should they wish to advocate for human rights. Our students of diverse identities will feel safer in our schools when they are confident that their teachers feel safe to respect, acknowledge and teach to their diverse identities. This includes students of all backgrounds and identities, including Palestinian students. As part of our regular curriculum, teachers should teach about current events, media literacy, critical thinking skills and advocacy for human rights. Therefore, including Palestinian voices and identities within our curricular texts as well as acknowledgment of advocacy for Palestinian human rights should be a part of our commitment to anti-oppression, equity, diversity and inclusion. We are living through a pivotal moment in history, where we are watching a genocide of Palestinians be livestreamed, while also seeing Canada recognize Palestinian sovereignty (Carney, 2025). Future generations of students and teachers will look back and ask us 'what did you do?'. Hopefully, we will be able to share that as teachers we took the responsibility to not only teach about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, but to also teach how the Holocaust led to an increase in Zionism, the creation of Israel, and the *Nakba* or mass displacement and eventual genocide of Palestinians. I hope we will be able to tell the next generation that we taught to the question of Palestine while respecting the lived experiences of both Palestinian and Israeli students migrating to Canada, while teaching with integrity and moral authority that upholds the value of human life and advocates for human rights. As educators, I hope we call in our colleagues to actively recognize Palestinian identities, rights and freedoms, and call for a Free Palestine in our lifetime.

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