

The transformative role of research in democratic civic education during times of armed conflict

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Keywords: democratic civic education, armed conflict, educational research, transformative role, public scholarship

- Research highlights how academic inquiry understands and addresses wartime challenges
- Based on student testimonies, conflict hinders civic engagement and democratic education
- Educational research can serve as a transformative tool
- Educational public scholarship and international collaboration are a necessity during crises

Purpose: This research explores the pivotal role of educational research in supporting democratic civic education amid armed conflict. The study uses the recent experiences in Israel to examine how research can maintain democratic values and foster reconciliation during tumultuous times, aiming to illuminate the transformative capabilities of academic inquiry in crisis contexts.

Approach: The research adopts a semi-empirical, exploratory design that evolved from ongoing events. Personal testimonies from a diverse group of seven students were analyzed for overarching theoretical themes.

Findings: The analysis reveals that educational research during conflict may act as a critical, transformative tool, highlighting substantial challenges in maintaining civic engagement and democratic education. It underscores the dual role of research in understanding and actively addressing the complexities of armed conflict.

Practical implications: The findings stress the need for educational public scholarship and international collaboration to support democratic education, highlighting the crucial role of researchers in shaping educational practices during crises.

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Suggested citation:

Cohen, A. (2024). The transformative role of research in democratic civic education during times of armed conflict. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 23(2). <https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-7181>

Declaration of conflicts of interests: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1 INTRODUCTION

The morning of October 7, 2023, was marked by pleasant weather, and I was at the local playground with my two young children, who had awakened way too early on a Saturday morning. Suddenly, air raid sirens began to wail, and I found myself shielding my frightened children with my body. At that moment, I was far from comprehending that this incident was the precursor to a series of terrorist attacks that would unfold in the southern parts of Israel, eventually escalating into armed conflict in the Gaza Strip in the subsequent weeks and months until today.

After overcoming the initial shock imposed by these events, and after several weeks as we began to return to a semi-normal day-to-day routine, I started to question my personal and professional decision to teach and study the field of democratic civic education while residing in my home country of Israel. I was torn between my identity as an Israeli and my professional identity as a critical scholar. Questions arose regarding the feasibility of engaging in discussions about democratic ideals amidst such atrocities. Are efforts to promote democracy through education viable under these circumstances?

To better understand these issues, I contacted the group of students I am privileged to mentor.¹ This diverse group includes Jews and Arab-Palestinians, men and women from various social backgrounds. I invited my students to write personal testimonies addressing the question, “What is the role of educational research in such times?” I encouraged them to be personal rather than academic in their responses. Subsequently, I did what I am used to doing and analyzed the responses received from seven students for general overarching themes. This analysis proved helpful in navigating this professional-existential mid-life crisis I was experiencing.

Through the insights derived from their responses, which will be presented as the main aspect of this semi-empirical research, I gained a renewed belief in the potential of educational research not merely as a tool for understanding education and society descriptively or analytically but also as a transformative force capable of effecting change. As Carl Marx famously stated, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: CIVIC EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

Educating for democratic citizenship is a complex endeavor, even in nations unaffected by the realities of war and armed conflict. The body of research in this domain underscores the necessity of transmitting foundational knowledge, instilling humanistic values, and cultivating participatory behaviors as the principal elements of this field (Gould et al., 2011). Moreover, building upon the foundational concepts introduced by John Dewey (1916), research indicates that the teaching of democracy cannot be disentangled from the social, political, and economic contexts in which the educational process unfolds. For instance, establishing an open democratic environment is essential for enabling students to grasp the authentic significance of living in a democracy (Hahn, 2016). Additionally, social

movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Me Too have propelled more studies addressing racism and social injustices, and their manifestations in educational settings (King & Chandler, 2016).

Implementing these concepts integral to democratic civic education during war and armed conflict poses numerous significant challenges. As identified by various scholars and researchers (Paulson, 2017), these challenges stem from the assumption that educational processes are inseparable from their immediate contextual surroundings. Consequently, these challenges highlight the complex relationship with the unique societal and political landscapes carved out by ongoing conflicts. Additionally, they underscore the inherent difficulties in fostering democratic values and civic engagement under such tumultuous conditions.

Drawing on examples from Israel and the US, Ben-Porath (2009) explored the interplay between democratic civic education and the culture of war, highlighting how fundamental concepts and perceptions of citizenship are transformed during wartime. She notes that while citizenship education in peacetime emphasizes enhancing civic participation, broadening the scope of public discourse, and incorporating the principle of pluralism, wartime education shifts towards a dichotomous “us *versus* them” mentality. This shift narrows the discourse to topics deemed relevant to the prevailing, severe “situation” and restricts pluralism.

Ben-Porath (2009) argues that although educational approaches such as multiculturalism and feminism hold significance, they tend to diminish during conflicts. Consequently, she introduces the concept of “expansive education.” This approach prompts inquiry into the nature of citizenship and democracy post-conflict rather than focusing solely on the immediate context. She posits that expansive education is likely to foster greater inclusivity in participation, extend the range of debate, and diversify the questions posed in educational settings during and after conflicts.

More specifically, additional literature from around the globe highlights the following main challenges to teaching democratic citizenship in times of war and conflict: (1) Regions experiencing conflict, such as those presented in a study from post-conflict Serbia (Petkovska, 2022), are characterized by an unstable political landscape. This instability complicates establishing and maintaining civic education programs that adhere to universal humanistic values and social justice—values deemed essential for fostering a democratic culture among students. Such societies that suffer from what Levinson and Solomon (2021) identified as “hyperpartisanship, mutual mistrust, and the breakdown of democratic norms” (p. 17) present obstacles for educators; (2) Conflict zones, exemplified by the case of Guatemala (Ferris, 2016), are marked by trauma and violence. This reality can obstruct individuals’ ability to participate in civic education and democratic processes; (3) In such societies, as demonstrated about the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Hoggan-Kloubert et al., 2023), social divisions are accentuated, notably limiting the civic participation of marginalized groups. In such periods of heightened tension, national sentiments and feelings of patriotism intensify, thereby further alienating minorities who may not necessarily

embrace the dominant nationalistic perspective (Busey & Walker, 2017); (4) These factors collectively lead to a reality where students and teachers may lose trust in political parties, fear engagement in controversial public issues, and tend to favor authoritarian-style regimes (Quaynor, 2012).

Thus, in conclusion, the main challenges associated with implementing democratic civic education during times of conflict encompass the complexity of the situations arising from conflict, the prevalence of hyperpartisanship and disagreements concerning civic futures, the distinctive needs for post-conflict rebuilding, and the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism. While this presentation has briefly illustrated existing studies on schools, teachers, and students, I aim to shift the focus toward the researchers. Specifically, in the following, I intend to explore how engaging in studies on these issues while simultaneously experiencing the realities at the heart of their research impacts the researchers themselves and the roles they perceive within such studies. My main argument is that research on democratic civic education in contexts of war and armed conflicts must transition from merely descriptive aspects to more theoretical and transformative ones. This approach should aim not only to describe current conditions but also to utilize research as a tool to propose alternative futures. The democratic elements of such studies must emphasize not just the regime's formal institutional aspects but also the normative humanistic values underpinning it.

3 METHODOLOGY

It is important to note that this report presents a semi-empirical study that was not pre-planned but evolved as an ongoing process influenced by unfolding events. Consequently, it should be considered more exploratory, based on partial data collection and analysis, rather than a full comprehensive study. After reaching out to my students with the prompt, "What is the role of educational research in such times?" I received responses from seven students.²

Table 1 - Participants' details

Name ³	Academic Status	Social Background
Dalia	Undergraduate BA student	Muslim Palestinian from East Jerusalem
Fahima	MA student	Muslim Israeli-Arab
Tamar	MA student	Jewish
Salma	MA student	Muslim Palestinian from East Jerusalem
Orli	MA student	Jewish
Rachel	MA student	Jewish
Yoni	PhD student	Jewish

Following Creswell's (2013) model of spiral data analysis, I employed a four-stage process to analyze the data for content and themes, aiming to generate theoretical insights

(Saldana, 2009). In the first stage, I immersed myself in the personal testimonies to grasp the details thoroughly. I developed general questions and comments based on the initially identified themes during the second stage. Utilizing the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), six themes emerged from this analysis. In the third stage, I used Atlas.ti software to establish categories for coding, which were based on the data generated and memos reflecting my personal reflections. This stage involved multiple rounds of coding and recoding to refine the codes and organize them into general categories. I interpreted the data based on the emergent themes in the final analysis stage. The insights derived from this interpretation will be presented in the discussion section.

In the realm of positionality and ethics, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent power dynamics embedded in the relationships I maintain with the students who shared their testimonies and depend on my guidance in their academic endeavors. This dynamic becomes particularly complex given that I am a Jewish Israeli male, and some of the students are Muslim Arab Palestinian females. I ensured transparency throughout the research process to navigate this intricacy, consistently informing students of my intentions and plans. Notably, not all students approached agreed to participate; however, I had clarified beforehand that their decision would not affect our professional relationship. On a personal note, I believe all participants maintain a positive personal and professional rapport with me, which I consider foundational for trust throughout this process.

4 FINDINGS FROM PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

In the following, I will briefly introduce the seven participants and summarize the key points from their testimonies. Subsequently, I will outline the overarching themes I identified across the different cases, including direct quotes from their writings, emphasizing the theoretical insights that can be learned from them.

4.1 Summary of main points

- Dalia, a Muslim Palestinian undergraduate student from East Jerusalem, views education as a career path and a way of life. She posits that the current events compel us to reevaluate our values and the significance of education in this context.
- Fahima, a Muslim Israeli-Arab MA student focusing on identity issues faced by minority students within Israel's academic landscape, delves into the challenges of conducting research with Arab university students amidst the war, highlighting a notable decline in participation. Furthermore, she addresses the perceived constraints on student expression and the uncertain future.
- Tamar, a Jewish MA student, reflects on her research concerning peace education among Jewish and Palestinian youth, emphasizing the significance of these

initiatives for future peace and coexistence despite prevailing challenges and skepticism.

- Salma, a Muslim Palestinian graduate student from East Jerusalem, delves into the complexities of multicultural education and identity in her research. She examines the paradox inherent in discussing multiculturalism and educational diversity in reality. She underscores the importance of amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and emphasizes the critical need for multicultural research in these times.
- Orli, a Jewish graduate student with extensive experience as a high school teacher, discusses the challenges encountered by her thesis's primary population—Jewish Ultra-Orthodox teachers in Israel. She emphasizes the parallels with other minority groups and underscores the necessity for more equitable conditions.
- Rachel, a Jewish graduate student with a research focus on integration within multicultural education, advocates for providing resources to enhance teacher training in multiculturalism and shared living, particularly in the current era.
- Yoni, a Ph.D. student, provides a broad perspective on the impact of the October 7th attack on civic life and education in Israel, highlighting the breakdown of civil discourse and the unique challenges that civic education encounters during such periods of conflict and war.

4.2 Overarching themes

4.2.1 Practical challenges

Several students reported facing significant practical challenges in conducting educational research amidst the conflict. These challenges included difficulties in recruiting and engaging participants for their studies, who often experienced psychological distress and encountered heightened restrictions due to the war and its aftermath. For example, Fahima explained that “the amount of expected and unexpected restrictions that change every time based on the circumstances of war contributes greatly to enhancing fears, confusion, and distraction for the participants.” Consequently, this led to a reality that, in her words, is “ambiguous and incomprehensible to me as a novice researcher in light of these current events.”

Thus, the conflictual reality added a layer of complexity to research efforts, impacting both the feasibility and the ethical considerations of engaging with participants. Furthermore, it raised challenges for the researchers themselves, as expressed, for example, by Tamar, who described how “the war began when I was finalizing the draft and nearing the final submission of my thesis. In the initial days, it was very hard for me personally to sit down and write because it seemed absurd, as if I was reading about a bygone era that no longer exists.” Furthermore, she questioned her positionality as a Jewish Israeli,

confessing that “the more radical and critical quotes suddenly seemed difficult to read and process,” affecting what she saw as her “neutrality and work of a researcher.”

4.2.2 Shifts in participants identity and perceptions

Following the qualitative research tradition, which aims to encapsulate the essence of the participants’ lived experiences, several students observed a transformation in their participants’ identities and worldviews during the research process. Following Fahima’s description above, she detailed how the participants in her study “think a hundred times before speaking to me or answering a question.” This, in turn, highlighted how the conflict precipitated changes in her participants’ perceptions of their cultural identities, which influenced their interactions with her as a researcher. She stated, “when looking at the previous reality of the Arab student before the war, the identity was formed ... in a way that suits different levels and circumstances.”

4.2.3 Impact of war on theoretical discourse and underpinnings

The reality of war impacted the researchers’ self-awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of the topics they studied. Tamar, for example, explained this complexity, stating how “it’s indeed a dilemma and not easy to engage with this topic at this time,” specifically because “essentially, from the start, I chose to investigate a subject that was not natural or familiar to me, both in terms of my political views and the environment I grew up in.”

Yoni underscored the war’s influence on the normative framework of his work on civic education, highlighting the challenges that the current reality presents in maintaining a sense of civic continuity and engaging participants in meaningful discourse. As he reflected on this, “more than any other event, war symbolizes the breakdown of civic life. The state’s monopoly over violence and its ability to keep its citizens safe is necessary for the possibility of civic discourse.” This led him to the conclusion that “our civic vocabulary is eroded; government officials refuse to take responsibility, citizens do not enjoy safety, and disparities in equality are starker than ever.” The conflict disrupted the students’ fundamental assumptions, necessitating a reevaluation of studying civic engagement and education for democracy as conceived during crises.

4.2.4 The imperative for inclusive and diverse educational strategies

Throughout the cases, a consistent plea for implementing more inclusive and diverse educational strategies emerged, aiming to accommodate and confront the intricacies introduced by conflict. For instance, Rachel’s championing of integrated education, alongside the focus on multiculturalism, underscored the necessity for educational frameworks that promote tolerance, comprehension, and communal coexistence. She stated that the need “to create educational frameworks that advocate for shared living in practice.” Salma critiqued the current reality, stating how “it’s very easy for educational institutions to define

themselves as institutions that encourage diversity and multiculturalism, but in my opinion, there is a very big gap in the understanding of multiculturalism.” Therefore, she elevated the role of research on these topics, explaining that “to truly encourage multiculturalism, it’s necessary to promote multicultural research, encourage weak voices to speak, and encourage people to share so we can truly experience a diverse academy.” She summarized by stating that “it’s impossible to live in the grey middle area that I write about if you don’t hear all voices.”

4.2.5 The mitigating role of education in times of crisis

Throughout the gathered testimonies, a unanimous agreement emerged regarding the pivotal role of education in the context of war and conflict. For instance, Dalia’s viewpoint highlighted education as a countermeasure to today’s dominant, non-humanistic values. As she explained, “everything in this world is education, by desire, choice, or otherwise. Is education something we choose, yet most of the time, it chooses what, how, and when to educate us?” Thus, she stressed the need “to highlight humanistic values that seem to us to be irrelevant in this era and contradict other values that have been strengthened as a result of the situation.”

Salma highlighted the importance of multiculturalism and diversity, demonstrating how education can alleviate the severe conditions and bridge the gaps caused by conflict. She highlighted the role of research on these topics as a mitigating force, explaining how “the contradiction in dealing with what might be called middle-ground areas, which are topics that cause both societies to connect to the human experience at a midpoint.” Tamar voiced similar views, stating how “engaging with these topics is also important for the future, the future we want here in the country, which is a future of peace and security with our neighbors.”

4.2.6 Future uncertainties and the path forward

The participants expressed concerns regarding their future, individually and as professional community members. Their testimonies reveal a shared anxiety over the sustainability of educational pursuits, including research, amidst persistent conflict. As summarized by Salma, who stated that “the only way to reach this dream is to challenge the obvious, raise awareness, and never stop writing,” and by Rachel, who explained that “Educators today play a significant role in building and shaping Israeli society; what generation will emerge from the crisis? It definitely depends on the growth direction chosen”. Such concerns were also raised regarding how they viewed themselves as public educational figures. Rachel, for example, shared her fears regarding her plans “to establish an integrated school... hoping for a willingness to engage... I wonder if amid the conflict and the significant, important preoccupations with evacuees and urgent daily matters, will anyone be wise enough to look beyond the here and now.”

These findings illuminate the profound and multifaceted impacts that the reality of war and armed conflict have on educational research. The practical challenges identified reveal the logistical and emotional hurdles that researchers faced, including recruitment difficulties and participants' psychological distress, which often led to ambiguous and unpredictable research environments. The shifts in participants' identity and perceptions theme underscores the transformative effect of conflict on personal and cultural identities, influencing the participants' responses and interactions with the research students. This is intricately linked to the impact on the theoretical discourses and underpinnings, where the students noted profound challenges to the theoretical frameworks guiding their studies, prompting a reevaluation of the connections between civic engagement and educational theories in such times.

Moreover, the imperative for inclusive and diverse educational strategies theme emerged as a critical response to the conflict, highlighting the necessity for educational systems to foster environments of tolerance and mutual understanding. This theme connects deeply with how the students viewed the role of education in times of crisis, suggesting that educational research not only persists but also plays a crucial role in bridging divides and healing communities during such tumultuous times. Lastly, the theme of future uncertainties and the path forward captures the students' concerns about research's specific sustainability and general educational endeavors.

As detailed in Figure 1, these themes collectively illustrate the significant challenges and responsibilities that educational researchers and practitioners face during war and armed conflict. The discussion transitions from methodological aspects to theoretical realms and finally to an emphasis on the transformative role of research. It highlights the critical importance of adaptive strategies in educational research. Furthermore, it stresses the need to focus on inclusive, democratic, and peace-oriented educational practices. These insights will be expanded upon in the following discussion section, further highlighting educational research's pivotal role in such challenging times.

Figure 1 - Identified themes



5. DISCUSSION

These testimonies and the emerging themes collectively highlight a vision of educational research as a transformative tool. This vision underscores its capacity to understand, confront, and potentially alleviate the complexities presented by war and armed conflicts, moving beyond what has already been displayed in the literature in this regard (Paulson, 2017). Building on this foundation, several key insights emerge that enhance our comprehension of educational research's role in democratic civic education during times of conflict, underscoring its transformative potential:

1. Research serves as a medium to enhance our understanding of social complexities (Cohen & Gilead, 2022), including the shifting nature of identity issues (Conrad, 2020; Goldberg, 2013). By employing research, we gain insights into how conflict impacts individual and collective identities within educational settings. Viewing such understandings as the initial step towards addressing this reality is crucial.
2. Research can be viewed as a platform for advocating peace and coexistence (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). Educational research, in particular, has the potential to illuminate pathways toward peace and coexistence, showcasing its ability to discover and emphasize positive narratives that challenge the dominant conflict-driven perspectives.
3. Adopting a critical research approach (Segall, 2013) may be more suited to the realities of a society in conflict, thereby contributing to a more responsive and relevant educational experience.
4. By adopting a multicultural perspective (Banks, 2015; Chu, 2022), research may promote a deeper and more genuine engagement with these educational concepts.
5. Educational research in conflict areas has the potential to foster dialogue and reconciliation (Brock-Utne, 2009). Such research provides not only descriptions and explanations of conflict but also can facilitate understanding and dialogue among conflicting groups.

These insights into the role of educational research in democratic civic education during times of conflict emphasize its significant transformative potential. The role of educational research in conflict zones becomes evident by connecting these theoretical insights with the transformative elements evident in the students' personal testimonies. Such research has the potential to promote dialogue and reconciliation, facilitate a deeper understanding among diverse groups, and contribute to the overarching objectives of democratic civic education.

A key question from this discussion is how education for democratic citizenship in conflict settings differs from that in non-conflict settings. Specifically, what aspects are unique to conflict environments, and which elements might apply to other contexts?

Foremost, in conflict settings, education for democratic citizenship often necessitates a more explicit and intentional articulation and understanding of the democratic principles

and ideals. This is crucial as these contexts frequently pose direct challenges to democratic norms through political instability, violence, and disruptions in social order. Educators are tasked with defining what constitutes democracy, including topics such as humanistic ideals, the rule of law, individual rights, and the importance of civic participation.

Second, in non-conflict settings, the principles of democracy may often be taken for granted or assumed as understood and accepted. However, in conflict zones, there is a heightened need to understand how to make these concepts evident and frame them as non-negotiable elements of society's foundational structure. This involves not only research on teaching content about democracy but also understanding how educators can demonstrate democratic principles through the educational environment itself.

Finally, in conflict settings, there's a critical need to affirm and solidify democratic values as societies face the risk of fragmentation. Education systems play a pivotal role in this process by creating spaces where democratic values are not only taught but also vigorously defended. Thus, research on discussions about current events, for example, may highlight the importance of maintaining democratic norms against the backdrop of conflict. Educators and educational researchers must address the specific challenges to democracy in conflict settings, such as ethnic tensions or political repression, providing students with the tools and knowledge to support democratic integrity.

To summarize and in response to the initial challenge presented by the reality I personally encountered, this exercise has renewed my faith in research within democratic civic education. This research serves not only to navigate the harsh realities of armed conflict but also to actively address the challenges such realities present. Educational research occupies a unique position, capable of illuminating complex understandings, bridging divides, fostering resilience, and even contributing to the peace-building process. As I have learned from my students, educational researchers play a dual role as both scholars and practitioners. Through their work, they engage in a form of genuine public scholarship with the potential to significantly impact society through their work.

6. MOVING FORWARD

In light of these insights, I find it essential for educational researchers to navigate and actively address the harsh realities of armed conflicts. As they straddle the dual roles of scholars and practitioners, researchers engage in what can be described as public scholarship (Oakes, 2017). This entails a commitment to transcending traditional academic boundaries to directly impact the societal conditions within conflict zones. As individuals engaged in their respective research projects, we, as educational researchers, can collectively contribute significantly to the practical applications of our findings and insights. It is hoped that this will directly influence educational practices and policies.

Furthermore, I stress the pressing need for the international academic community to rally in support of research that enhances our understanding and advancement of democratic civic education, as presented in this special issue. This support should extend beyond the confines of conflict zones to encompass a global perspective that recognizes the

universal challenges and opportunities within democratic civic education. Such collaborative efforts can lead to a more profound and widespread understanding of the complexities of teaching democratic principles in diverse contexts.

Thus, moving forward, the role of educational research in conflict settings should be viewed as an integral component of broader efforts to promote democratic civic education worldwide. I call for a broader engagement with issues of conflict, citizenship, democracy, and education. I emphasize the importance of continued inquiry, innovation, and collaboration to effectively educate for democracy amidst conflict. I urge the international academic community to support research that contributes to our understanding and advancement of democratic civic education, both in contexts of armed conflict and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the following, the term “students” will refer to the individuals I mentor and whose testimonies form the foundation of this research. The term “participants” will denote those who engaged in the studies conducted by these students.

² See Table 1 - Participants details.

³ All names are pseudonyms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on an invited talk presented at the Democratic Citizenship in Education SIG of the AERA annual conference in Philadelphia, USA 2024.

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