

‘The danger of a single story’: Students’ negotiations following the October 7 attacks

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Abstract

This study explores how students negotiate complex and sensitive issues in schools, focussing on the October 7, 2023, attacks and their consequences. Drawing on discourse analysis informed by Foucault and discursive psychology, we analyse students’ talk in focus group discussions as situated social action, examining how they make sense of events, construct accounts and position themselves and others. The analysis provides empirical insights into how students navigate a contested topic and contributes to pedagogical approaches that support democratic dialogue and critical engagement. The results show that students negotiate meaning through a knowledge positioning discourse, which shapes students’ willingness to engage amid epistemic ambiguity; a moral positioning discourse, which introduces pressures to take a stance and challenges deliberative ideals; and an anti-antisemitism discourse, which exposes tensions between critique of Zionism and antisemitism. Findings reveal that reliance on media-informed narratives, moral framings and contested identity categories can both enable and constrain dialogue, sometimes reinforcing polarisation and feelings of alienation. The study argues for pedagogical strategies that foster epistemic security, promote perspective-taking and critically engage with the politics of language to dismantle stereotypes and prevent dichotomous narratives.

Keywords

Controversial issues, Israel–Palestine conflict, antisemitism and antizionism, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, focus groups, upper secondary education

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Introduction

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in her TED Talk: ‘The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story’ (Adichie, 2009: 13:11). Adichie reminds us of the danger of reducing complex human experiences to one-dimensional descriptions, highlighting the necessity of multiple perspectives to avoid generating distorted or deficient knowledge shaped by stereotypes. This principle is a recurring challenge in many historical and contemporary conflicts, where limited perspectives foster simplified and polarised understandings. In education, this challenge becomes particularly relevant when addressing controversial issues; topics that often involve strong emotions, moral dilemmas and political, religious or historical tensions (Kerr and Huddleston, 2016). Students bring diverse worldviews and lived experiences into the classroom, fostering discussions that can produce tensions, expose conflicting perspectives and themselves become sources of controversy (Alvén, 2024; Årman, 2024). When such complexity is reduced to one-dimensional narratives or one-sided perspectives, classrooms risk not only reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice but also marginalising certain voices and limiting opportunities for critical engagement (Årman, 2024).

The concept of ‘controversial issues’ is contested and context-dependent, with no agreed-upon definition in the research literature, either conceptually or in terms of practical application (Flensner, 2020; Larsson and Lindström, 2020). However, most definitions include emotional, cognitive and evaluative elements, referring to issues that tend to provoke disagreement, strong reactions, conflicting explanations and divergent value-based solutions (Larsson and Lindström, 2020: 2). European policy frameworks, including the Council of Europe’s guidelines for teachers, position engagement with controversial issues as central to schools’ democratic mission (Kerr and Huddleston, 2016). These frameworks advocate for creating safe spaces for dialogue and adopting deliberative pedagogies that promote pluralism and respectful exchange.

In Sweden, democracy and human rights are foundational values in both the Education Act (Skollag, 2010: 800) and the national curricula (Skolverket, 2022). Teaching controversial issues is considered central to this democratic mission (Skolinspektionen, 2022), preparing students for citizenship in contexts marked by disagreement and complexity. However, research and national inspections indicate that such issues are often avoided in practice, partly due to teachers’ concerns about strong reactions and emotions, conflict and a lack of didactic tools (Blennow, 2019; Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Flensner, 2020; Skolinspektionen, 2022). This avoidance risks narrowing students’ exposure to diverse perspectives and limiting their democratic competence.

The Israel–Palestine conflict exemplifies the complexity and sensitivity of these challenges. It encompasses historical, political, religious and identity-related dimensions, as well as human rights, and is characterised by competing narratives and polarised interpretations in both public debate and scholarship (Caplan, 2020). Following the October 7 attacks in 2023 and the subsequent Israel–Gaza war, these discursive struggles have intensified. This also has consequences in schools, as the conflict’s geopolitical complexity and emotional charge enter educational settings, requiring teachers to navigate sensitive discussions. When events in the Middle East reverberate globally, schools can become spaces where tensions are negotiated and competing perspectives and identity positions emerge. Discussions about the conflict may also intertwine with perceptions of Jews and Judaism, sometimes leading to problematic attitudes among students (Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023; Thomas, 2016). Classroom discourse reflects these tensions, as the topic often provokes reactions and connects to students’ personal experiences (Baak et al., 2024; Beutel, 2022). Swedish studies confirm that school professionals report difficulties in creating safe spaces for dialogue under such conditions, highlighting challenges related to

emotional intensity, conflict, problematic attitudes and the need for pedagogical strategies (Flensner, 2019, 2020; Karlsson and Sivenbring, 2026; Larsson and Larsson, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this study explores how students negotiate complex and sensitive issues in schools. Using the Israel–Palestine conflict – specifically the October 7 attacks and their consequences – as a case study, we draw on discourse analysis informed by Foucault (1972, 1984) and discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998) to analyse students' talk as situated social action oriented towards what participants treat as relevant or sensitive in interaction (Goodman, 2017). This enables us to examine how, in focus group discussions, students make sense of these events, construct accounts and position themselves and others.

Aim and research question

The study aims to contribute to research on teaching controversial issues by offering empirical insights into how students construct meaning around contested, complex and sensitive topics and by informing pedagogical approaches that support democratic dialogue and critical engagement. Our analysis is guided by the following research question: What discourses and subject positions do students draw on in negotiating the October 7 attacks and their consequences?

Although previous research shows that teachers often avoid controversial issues, global events such as the Israel–Gaza war have amplified these challenges, producing ripple effects across Europe that affect educational institutions and sometimes blur the line between Jewish identity and the actions of the Israeli state. Against this backdrop, the present study offers a rarely considered perspective: how students experience and interpret the conflict as a controversial classroom issue.

Controversial issues in schools

Although research on addressing and teaching controversial issues in schools has expanded considerably in recent decades (Larsson and Lindström, 2020), it has largely focussed on teachers' roles and pedagogical approaches. A substantial body of theoretical and empirical work explores how educators can establish safe spaces for dialogue, manage classroom tensions and promote democratic competencies through discussions of controversial topics (e.g. Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2004, 2009; Larsson and Ledman, 2025; McAvoy and Hess, 2013; Stradling, 1984). These studies recognise teaching controversial issues as fundamental to democratic education. Whether defined as politically sensitive topics, moral dilemmas or issues that provoke disagreement, their inclusion aims to foster critical thinking, tolerance and civic engagement by exposing students to multiple perspectives and encouraging deliberative dialogue (Kerr and Huddleston, 2016).

Research shows that engaging with controversial issues fosters students' ability to analyse complex societal problems, evaluate competing narratives and make informed decisions (Beutel, 2022; Moore, 2012). However, teaching such issues entails significant pedagogical, epistemic and ethical challenges. Controversy can arise spontaneously in classroom interactions – even around topics not formally classified as controversial – underscoring its fluid and relational nature (Blennow, 2019; Flensner, 2020). Scholars also highlight the dual challenge of epistemic ambiguity and emotional intensity (Blennow, 2019; Flensner, 2019, 2020). As Franck (2023) argues, ethics and values education in social studies requires pedagogical approaches that integrate emotional and intellectual dimensions while ensuring epistemic grounding rather than reducing learning to personal opinion or mere emotional engagement. When approached effectively, such teaching becomes both a cognitive exercise and an opportunity for ethical reflection, critical competence and democratic formation.

The Israel-Palestine conflict as a case

Avoiding controversial issues in the classroom can have unintended consequences. Escalations in the Israel–Palestine conflict are associated with increased hate crimes against Jews and antisemitism. In examining Swedish teachers' approaches to controversial issues, such as conflicts in the Middle East, Flensner (2020) found that, despite efforts to present diverse perspectives or challenge their students, teachers often avoid or deny topics that might provoke strong reactions or emotions, potentially leading to a loss of control. Her study further reveals that controversial issues were perceived as content involving both factual knowledge and values, where drawing a clear distinction between the two was often difficult. This epistemic ambiguity, combined with the emotional intensity such topics evoke among teachers and students, makes them particularly challenging in classroom practice. Blennow (2019) similarly demonstrates that some of the most pressing issues in contemporary society – such as crises related to migration, international law, terrorism and the welfare state – are integral to social studies. This means that social studies teaching is inherently charged with intensity and emotion. However, both students and teachers tend to suppress emotions during class, due to what is perceived as professionalism and boundary work within and between emotional communities. This avoidance risks leaving students without guidance on how to navigate complex global issues, narrowing their exposure to diverse perspectives and undermining the democratic mission of schooling.

The October 7 attacks and antisemitism

On the morning of 7 October 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, reigniting the conflict and resulting in over 1300 Israeli deaths on the first day. Within hours, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared war on Hamas, and Israeli forces retaliated, causing more than 1800 deaths in Gaza within the first week (McKernan et al., 2023). The escalation produced humanitarian crises, widespread suffering and the deaths of thousands of people across the Middle East, as well as political fallout throughout the region.

In Europe, these events reverberated beyond the conflict zone, with ideological polarisation shaping responses in media and political discourse (Freedman and Hirsh, 2024). Pro-Palestinian demonstrations in several Swedish cities drew criticism from both the Swedish Government and the media regarding rising antisemitism and concerns over the safety of Jewish individuals. A survey by Katzin and Rudberg (2024) revealed heightened anxiety among Jews in Sweden, with respondents expressing a frequent necessity to conceal their Jewish identity, feelings of societal abandonment and disappointment in democratic institutions, particularly the media, which they felt perpetuated antisemitic discourse.

Prejudice, stereotyping and a steady increase in antisemitic sentiment are documented across the European Union (FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024), and in national contexts such as Sweden (Bachner and Bevelander, 2021; Österberg, 2023), Finland (Czibalmos and Pataricza, 2024) and Norway (Moe, 2022, 2024). A Norwegian survey (Moe, 2022) revealed that antisemitism is most prevalent among respondents with anti-Israel attitudes. The most cited explanation for negative attitudes towards Jews was their perceived association with Israel and what is denoted as the Israel–Palestine conflict. In Denmark, Jewish community representatives have stated that the number of antisemitic incidents has surged after October 2023 (Olsen, 2024). The connexion between the Israel–Palestine conflict and contemporary antisemitism is also apparent in Sweden. A report by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå, Brottsförebyggande rådet [Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention], 2025) shows that the number of reported hate crimes with antisemitic motives increased almost fivefold during autumn

2023 compared to the same period the previous year, while the number of reported hate crimes with Islamophobic motives remained relatively unchanged (Lundgren, 2024). Research also indicates that antisemitism in Sweden often manifests in relation to developments in the Israel–Palestine conflict (Österberg, 2023; Persson, 2022).

Understanding contemporary antisemitism

Depending on historical, cultural and social contexts, antisemitism ‘has meant different things to different people at different times’ (Judaken, 2024: 3). Early distinctions between religious anti-Judaism and racial and political hostility, particularly evident during the Holocaust, have been reshaped by global events and are increasingly amplified through social media (Weiser, 2021). Although still intertwined with the Holocaust and its complex memory, scholars argue for ‘rethinking’ antisemitism, focussing on both its continuities and discontinuities (Judaken, 2024; Seymour, 2019). Contemporary antisemitism manifests in various forms, such as Holocaust denial and distortion (IHRA, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, n.d; Lipstadt, 2019), anti-Jewish conspiracy theories that posit a Jewish plot to undermine society (Byford, 2021) and tropes that conflate Jews collectively with Israel and Zionism (Hirsch, 2013, 2024; Loeffler, 2021).

This raises the need to distinguish between antizionism as a legitimate critique of Israeli government policies (Judaken, 2024; Loeffler, 2021) and ‘antisemitic antizionism’, which seeks to delegitimise the Jewish state or demonise Jews (Seymour, 2019). As Hirsch (2013: 1407) notes: ‘Not all criticism of Israel is antisemitic; neither is all criticism of Israel free from antisemitism’. Nevertheless, antizionism can overlap with antisemitic sentiments and be regarded as a reconfiguration of antisemitism and ‘the Jewish question’ (Fine and Spencer, 2017; Seymour, 2019). Understanding these nuances is essential for respectful dialogue and for preventing the conflation of political critique with racial or religious prejudice.

Educational implications

The Israel–Palestine conflict has long shaped global views of Jewish identity and antisemitism. In schools, discussions about the conflict often intertwine with perceptions of Jews and Judaism, sometimes leading to problematic attitudes among students (Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023; Thomas, 2016). Similar to other countries, the Swedish Government has taken initiatives to enhance awareness of antisemitism, placing schools at the forefront of efforts to prevent it (Swedish Government, 2022, 2023, 2024), and research in Western Europe has highlighted the interplay between antisemitic attitudes, conflicts and educational interventions.

Thomas (2016) found that many Norwegian upper secondary students linked antisemitism to the Israel–Palestine conflict, equating Jews with the state of Israel and framing them as ‘murderers’ or ‘objects of hate’ in response to perceived Palestinian oppression, whereas Palestinians were portrayed as ‘innocent’ victims and Jews as possessing a ‘superior’ self-perception (193). Similarly, Hübscher and Pfaff (2023) observed that young non-Jewish Germans often conflated Jewish identity with Israeli state policies, influenced by discourses surrounding the conflict. Despite opposing antisemitism and receiving extensive Holocaust education, they struggled to critically deconstruct stereotypes. The study identified narratives of ‘strangeness’, ‘victimhood’, ‘guilt’ and ‘criticism of antisemitism’, revealing fragmented understandings and practices of ‘othering’ rooted in post-Nazi socialisation, described as ‘antisemitism-informed knowledge’ (p. 17). They also identified ‘fragmented antisemitism’, where students constructed Jews as ‘the Other’, often positioning them as ‘enemies’ (p. 17). Lacking personal experience with Jews and Judaism, participants relied on

education and media, which emphasised the Holocaust and violence, with the Israel–Palestine conflict commonly referenced.

Adwan et al. (2021) found that Swedish students of Palestinian, Muslim, or Christian backgrounds expressed interest in Holocaust education but felt it overshadowed the Israel–Palestine conflict. Whereas Thomas (2016) linked negative attitudes to religious affiliation, Adwan et al. (2021) identified cultural factors as most influential.

These findings underscore the need for nuanced education that distinguishes antisemitism from criticism of Israeli policies, dismantles stereotypes and addresses both historical and contemporary dimensions of prejudice. Scholars advocate for antisemitism-critical education that extends beyond historical facts, incorporating critical analysis of socialisation, stereotypes and the discursive entanglement of antisemitism and antizionism (Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023; Thomas, 2016).

Materials and methods

The study was conducted in two upper secondary schools in a Swedish city and involved six focus group interviews with 33 students aged 17–21 years. Each group comprised five to six participants, and the interviews were conducted between October and November 2023. Both schools, anonymised as Glimten and Beachbrook, are inner-city schools. Glimten offers vocational programmes and has a diverse student body, whereas Beachbrook School has a multicultural student population and primarily offers preparatory programmes for higher education. The city was selected due to documented antisemitism issues and the implementation of preventive measures by the local government in cooperation with the Jewish community. Schools were chosen based on recommendations from the city's board of education, highlighting their engagement with antisemitism-related issues and the role of educators in addressing them.

The study forms part of a broader research project examining how student health teams, teachers and students experience and respond to antisemitism, including preventive educational strategies. Within this framework, schools with a documented history of antisemitism offered a relevant context for exploring how students negotiate the Israel–Palestine conflict and the discourses surrounding it. While the interviews took place in these settings, the study's focus extends beyond antisemitic discourses to encompass the broader range of meaning-making practices through which students construct, negotiate and contest understandings of the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Focus group interviews capture group interactions and are useful for discussing sensitive issues, representing multiple perspectives and fostering openness among participants (Barbour, 2018). The rationale for choosing focus groups was that the October 7 attacks and subsequent war, being value-laden issues, might be more comfortably discussed among peers than individually. While still acknowledging individual experiences, focus groups prioritise collective perspectives, enabling diverse discussions and viewpoint contestation (Barbour, 2018). However, dominant voices and group dynamics can obscure controversial views in favour of prevailing normative discourse (Smithson, 2000). Although such effects may stem from group dynamics and personal connections beyond our control, we sought to mitigate them by probing for different perspectives and at times challenging hegemonic opinions.

As Barbour (2018) notes, stimulus material can provide immediate access to current topics and promote discussion. A locally sourced news image of demonstrations following the October 7 attacks was chosen for its contextual relevance and familiarity, offering a concrete entry point into negotiating the events and their aftermath. The image encouraged reflection on both local and global dimensions and supported engagement across varying levels of prior knowledge. Although it effectively sparked dialogue and supported situated responses to a complex geopolitical issue

(Potter and Wetherell, 1987), it also risked narrowing the scope of discussion. Alternatives, such as written articles, were considered, but the image's immediacy and relevance to participants' everyday lives were ultimately deemed more conducive to naturally occurring dialogue (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary, with written informed consent obtained from all participants. Students were informed of the study's aims and ethical considerations at the outset of each interview. Pseudonyms replaced all names and locations to preserve confidentiality (All European Academies (ALLEA), 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Review number 2024-02685-02).

Analysis followed an inductive approach. Both authors reread transcripts to identify recurring accounts relevant to the research question, compared interpretations and collaboratively identified dominant accounts. Transcripts were then coded by isolating sections where participants engaged in these accounts. Focussing on their negotiations, articulation and intended outcomes (Goodman, 2017), key accounts were identified for discussion in the Results section. All quoted statements were translated from Swedish and lightly edited to enhance readability.

Theoretical framework

This study on discourses and subject positions emerging from students' negotiations on the Israel-Hamas conflict is guided by a discourse-analytical framework informed by Foucault and discursive psychology. Drawing on Foucault (1972), the notion of discourse implies a practice that produces and governs the possibilities for individuals' actions and utterances. We use this understanding to frame the broader discursive conditions that shape what can be said about the conflict. These conditions form situated discursive formations, which constitute a temporal whole when they are referred to as specific objects; in this case, the conflict or the October 7 attacks (Foucault, 1978). Thus, we focus on the statements and arguments through which students attribute meaning and make particular versions of the conflict possible. This stance, derived from discursive psychology, implies that we orient towards speakers' utterances as more than mere reports of cognition; they achieve something in performing social actions (Goodman, 2017). We therefore analyse the interviewees' utterances as interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), which can be described as 'common sense' for participants, or as 'recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations' (Goodman, 2017: 148), from which actions such as questioning, (un)justifying, accusing and validating versions of events are launched. These repertoires are not always coherent; rather, they often contain internal contradictions, that generate ideological dilemmas (Goodman, 2017; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003), requiring participants to navigate conflicting moral, political or social expectations. Furthermore, interpretative repertoires serve as discursive resources for negotiating positionings (Wetherell, 1998). Through talk in interaction, individuals are positioned – and position themselves – as particular kinds of people within specific social contexts. These positions are fluid and dynamically shape how individuals produce identities, influencing their actions and interpretations (Goodman, 2017). Using discursive psychology, our analysis examines how students negotiate roles and identities – positioning themselves and others, both individually and collectively.

Results

This section examines the discourses and subject positions that students draw on in negotiating the October 7 attacks and their consequences. While broader discursive formations (Foucault, 1978) shape what becomes sayable about the conflict, our analysis focuses on how these resources are

drawn upon, negotiated and reworked in students' situated interaction (Wetherell, 1998). In presenting the results, we use the term discourses in a discursive psychology sense, referring to clusters of interpretative repertoires and positioning practices (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). When negotiating the conflict, students use a range of repertoires to construct versions of events, manage accountability and position themselves and others within the conversational space. Through their utterances, they perform social actions while simultaneously negotiating their own and others' positions. We present three discourses that emerge from these discussions, encompassing dominant interpretative repertoires and positioning patterns: the knowledge positioning discourse, the moral positioning discourse and the anti-antisemitism discourse. These discourses illuminate how students navigate complex and sensitive geopolitical issues through language, shaping not only what they feel able to say, but also how they position themselves and others in relation to controversial topics such as the Israel–Palestine conflict. In some cases, extensive excerpts are provided to illustrate these discourses, enhance transparency and demonstrate how students negotiate meaning within the interview situation.

The knowledge positioning discourse

Within the knowledge-positioning discourse, students may either adopt a stance on the topic or not—a position that governs whether one engages in discussion, and, by extension, whether one is deemed 'a decent person'.

Throughout the interviews, the October 7 attacks evoke strong emotions and cause divisions as students negotiate their meanings. Sometimes students express reluctance to share their opinions, citing limited knowledge or fear of causing hurt or conflict. Knowledge – or its absence – regarding current developments, along with historical and political context, is constantly used to negotiate how students make sense of the issue.

Discussing differing opinions in the classroom, students refer to the pro-Palestinian demonstration in the city. They note that the demonstration, alongside conflict and attacks, have not been addressed in classroom dialogue. This reluctance to address the conflict is illustrated in the following exchange.

Elias: I'm unsure if the teachers dare to bring it up, or I could be wrong, but I think it's quite a sensitive topic. . .every class has some students with strong opinions, either on both sides, and then it's. . .I don't know. . .I think it's just sensitive to bring it up, just like that. Some students might think it's wrong, and then. . .I think there's a reason why they haven't brought it up yet, because they don't want to risk anything going. . .

Interviewer: But, as a student, would you want teachers to bring it up so you can better understand what's happening?

Elias: I mean, I can. . .I don't know much about it, but at the same time, not in a bad way, I don't feel like I must. It would be interesting to know why it all started, but if I really want to know, I can find out elsewhere. I don't have to rely on the teachers to inform me about it.

Interviewer: Ok, but what would you do to find out in other ways?

Elias: I would search for it, watch the news. . .I'm sure there's plenty to read by now; it's been going on for a while, so surely there is a lot that you can find on the internet.

Elias frames the demonstration and conflict as too sensitive to address openly, justifying teachers' silence as understandable, presumably as a means of maintaining classroom control (cf. Flensner, 2020). Simultaneously, he presents himself as a responsible, self-sufficient student who can access information independently, though he admits limited understanding of the issue. He positions himself as capable of navigating complex political issues without institutional guidance. However, this also highlights a missed pedagogical opportunity: the classroom could function as a space for critically engaging with how online information is shaped by competing narratives and ideological framings.

In the same interview, Elias states that the issue becomes particularly sensitive among students on opposing sides due to their personal ties to Palestine. Prompted by the interviewer's questions, he continues:

Interviewer: Okay, so you have classmates with divided opinions, some on one side, and some on the other?

Elias: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: How is it working for them in the classroom?

Elias: Well, they don't bring it up. But it's also, now I am presuming that I know what side. . .because their countries. . .like they are closer to Palestine or something like that. . .so I presume that if they have an opinion, it's on that side. But I dare not ask. I don't know much about it, so I don't want to say anything wrong and cause a hassle.

In negotiating the conflict's sensitivity, Elias constructs a cautiously distant position. He avoids asking questions or engaging in discussion, citing limited knowledge and the risk of making offensive remarks that could lead to tension among peers. The issue is framed not only as controversial but also as socially risky, constructing a climate of uncertainty in which students are unsure of each other's views and hesitant to speak. This pattern is reinforced in the following exchange, where Elias and Anton elaborate on their reluctance to engage.

Interviewer: Ok, and what might happen if you say something wrong? What could be so wrong that it could cause a hassle?

Elias: Wrong in their opinion. And then they think that I think this. . .and that I will say something that sounds like something else. . .and that it sounds wrong. . .and they will get upset or hurt. . .or something. It can turn into whatever.

Interviewer: But you are not afraid to voice your opinion?

Elias: No, but I feel. . .Because I don't know enough, it feels unnecessary. To be completely honest, I don't have a strong opinion about the whole situation. So, it does not feel worth it to even try and like, you know. . .risk that it turns out wrong.

Interviewer: What do the rest of you think?

Anton: I can agree with him. I don't; we don't really talk about it as a group. So, I don't know what other people think. I don't really want to talk about it either. . .because I don't feel like I know enough. Also, I don't want people thinking that I believe something when, in fact, I don't know enough information about it.

Both Elias and Anton draw on a repertoire of cautious disengagement, using limited knowledge to justify silence. Elias positions himself as unafraid to speak, yet lacking strong opinions, choosing not to engage, while Anton reinforces that insufficient knowledge makes silence safer. In doing so, they navigate the ideological dilemma of appearing respectful and informed while avoiding the

social risks associated with taking a stance. This avoidance strategy is employed by students and teachers alike. Notably, Elias and Anton are not personally involved in the conflict and frame it as distant yet emotionally charged. Personal connections and perceived affiliations shape the boundaries of who can say what and when.

In summary, knowledge emerges as a central positioning resource. Students reference limited knowledge to negotiate hesitant subject positions, shaped by the risk of being wrong before peers seen as more informed or emotionally involved. This fosters a climate of caution, where silence becomes a strategy for managing social risk. Students also note teachers' reluctance to address controversial topics, often attributing this to a lack of confidence or knowledge, further limiting opportunities for critical engagement. This pattern reflects previous research, suggesting that teachers avoid controversial topics due to uncertainty or insufficient knowledge (cf. Flensner, 2020; Kello, 2016). Students adopt similar avoidance strategies, drawing on a repertoire of self-protection and epistemic modesty. Importantly, their conception of knowledge extends beyond factual understanding. It encompasses the ability to navigate historical and political contexts and engage with sensitive issues without exacerbating division. As the analysis demonstrates, possessing such knowledge may also carry the expectation to take a stand – thus positioning speakers within a polarised discursive field, a challenging demand for students negotiating emotionally loaded events.

The moral positioning discourse

The framing of the October 7 attacks and the ensuing war has produced a discourse where students are expected to take a stand. Within this space, informed positioning emerges as a moral imperative, with students negotiating their views through appeals to justice, rationality, and decency.

During focus group discussions, students' negotiations are shaped by personal connections to Middle Eastern events, influencing how they position themselves and others in relation to the conflict. Although comparative analysis between groups is not the primary focus, notable differences emerge as empirically significant. Discussions reveal that taking a stand involves expressing one's opinion and understanding and responding to others' views. The concept of justice – often framed through media narratives and perceived imbalances – recurs as a central interpretative resource. In the following excerpt, Janna draws on this moral positioning discourse to justify her stance.

Janna: Well, I haven't encountered people with other opinions, but I've taken the initiative to explore how others see it. And I've seen other perspectives, but I still don't find them reasonable. Their arguments have been like: "Yes, but Hamas started it, they killed innocent people at a common musical festival. It was sad, and people had such fun", and bla, bla. . . Yes, they did, okay, but since then, 11,000 people have died in Gaza alone, if you don't count the West Bank, and almost half of them were children, small children. And 3,000 still have not been found underground. It is like. . .how can you even compare. . . what happened at the music festival and what is going on in Palestine? You can't. If it were. . .that equal numbers die, or that equal numbers of innocent people get hit, I would understand why people are so worried about Israel and want to support them. Support any country you like, but it has to be reasonable. I mean, you must be realistic.

Interviewer: So, I can have my opinion, you can have yours, and there is no need to discuss it in school?

Janna: No—but if it is brought up, I think that you have to stand up for what you believe and think.

Janna positions herself using a logic of proportionality and moral reasoning. By keeping score and employing causal explanations, she legitimises her support for Palestine and challenges what she perceives as an unjust equivalence in dominant narratives. Her account illustrates how taking a stand can reinforce binary structures, pressuring individuals to align with one side. This dichotomisation contributes to ‘othering’ through stereotyping, whereby attributions are assigned to different subjects, and opposing views are not only contested but also morally evaluated.

Discussions in several groups further demonstrate that students with personal ties to the Middle East often position themselves as members of a victimised collective. In these accounts, victimhood is constructed relationally – victims emerge through identifying perpetrators. The following exchange illustrates how students articulate a sense of injustice rooted in global power asymmetries, using discursive strategies such as taking sides, identifying the perpetrator and invoking justice to negotiate boundaries between ‘the West and the rest’ (Fanon, 2001).

- Malik:** The Israelis. . .they can kill Palestinians and such, but when Hamas retaliated to reclaim land and like that. . .they were bombed, then everybody turned against the Palestinians, not against the Israelis.
- Emir:** All countries turned against Hamas.
- Malik:** It’s like. . .when Israel bombs Gaza, nobody says anything, but when this happened, everyone was against. . .Palestine.
- Dabir:** No, but now. . .I think that this is Europe or these countries like. . .yes, you can say Europe, Britain, America, and others, they can only see Israel’s side, they don’t see the Palestinian side.
- Emir:** They don’t see our side.
- Dabir:** But us Arabs, for instance. . .almost all Arabic countries, they see Palestine’s side. For example, you’ve surely heard about Israelis that have died, but not about the Palestinian children or about the hospital that was bombed, with 500 people, right, because here they only show the Israeli perspective, not Palestine’s.

Students draw on a postcolonial repertoire that frames the conflict as part of a broader geopolitical divide, helping them make sense of the injustices they associate with the Western world’s alignment with Israel. Emir’s statement, ‘they don’t see our side’, expresses identification with Palestine and positions him as part of a marginalised group rendered invisible within dominant Western discourse. Through this utterance, he constructs a subject position of exclusion, implicitly contrasting it with a hegemonic narrative perceived as indifferent or biased. Dabir reinforces this framing, invoking a collective ‘we’ excluded from recognition and legitimacy. This asymmetry is further developed when Emir, Kadira and Malik continue to discuss how social media platforms restrict or flag pro-Palestinian content.

- Emir:** Like on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook. . .all of those. . .if you post something on. . .
- Kadira:** Your story. . .
- Emir:** . . .on your story, that someone. . .that something has happened to Palestinians, before you can even access it, it says that this entry might not be true. They add it [a caption] to the story or something like that, it is common or you. . .What is it called? You get banned from Instagram and so on.
- Malik:** He [Emir] means that the media is hiding what’s happening to Palestinians and only reporting what’s happening with Israelis.

The students draw on a shared repertoire of media bias to describe how Western media obscure Palestinian suffering while foregrounding Israeli victimhood. This reflects a broader repertoire of media scepticism, positioning themselves as critical consumers of information. By citing statistics and examples, they challenge the dominant offender-victim narrative and construct an alternative moral order in which Palestinians are portrayed as victims of both violence and misrepresentation. This positioning is not only epistemic but also ethical, as students express a desire to correct perceived injustices in representation, reflecting both moral conviction and emotional frustration. The ensuing discussion further elaborates this sense of injustice by explicitly linking Swedish media and society to a broader Western alignment with Israel.

- Keila:** We mean that the media is on their side [the Israelis].
Malik: For instance, Aftonbladet [tabloid press] only shows what Hamas has done against the Israelis. They don't show what's happening in Gaza.
Keila: And they think that it's terroristic [sic]
Emir: We can say. . .let's take Sweden as an example. If someone took your land, ok, you'd fight to get it back, right? But when we fight back and want our country back, they call us ISIS affiliates.
Malik: Terrorists.
Emir: Terrorists. . .

The students construct a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', portraying 'we' (Arabs, Muslims, Palestinians) as misrepresented and delegitimised. Keila and her peers articulate a sense of alienation in response to perceived dominant societal stances in Sweden. Through oppositional language – referring to 'we', 'us Arabs', 'their side' and similar expressions – they construct a collective identity, while simultaneously challenging dominant Western narratives, highlighting how the sensitivity of these identifications shape their positioning. However, their stance on Hamas as a terrorist organisation remains ambiguous. Emir's analogy, reframing Palestinian resistance as a liberation struggle, justifies Hamas's defence of Palestine, echoing the familiar trope from *Harry's Game* (Seymour, 1975) that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. The students' identification with Palestinians compels them to position themselves as either victims or freedom fighters.

Moreover, they describe how their understanding of the conflict is shaped by alternative sources – Arabic-language media and family networks – framed as more accurate than Swedish or Western media, which are portrayed as biased and ideologically driven. This reliance on alternative sources signals mistrust in institutional knowledge and reinforces their sense of exclusion. The following excerpt illustrates how this is further explored.

- Interviewer:** But if we turn it around. . .If we had students in this group who had relatives in Israel, could there be a chance that they were sitting here, saying the same things that you say, that 'we want our country back'? How can peace then be achieved?
Emir: I think that the media are trying to brainwash people and only showing what Palestinians are doing wrong, and not what Israelis are doing to Palestine. So, I think that they're brainwashing them so that they have to believe it.
Interviewer: Who is brainwashing?
Malik: The media.
Emir: For example, the media, the news.
Interviewer: Ok, the media. . .

Keila: Teachers at school, too. Since they are. . .since they were small children, they are taught that Muslims and Arabs are the enemies, and that nothing is free. . . But in our religion, we value peace and things like that; it's important for us.

The lines are drawn between 'good' and 'bad' with the Western media firmly positioned on the negative side. The students broaden their critique to educational institutions, framing teachers as subjects shaped by dominant societal discourses. Keila, for instance, contrasts Western secularism with Islamic values, positioning Islam as morally grounded and peaceful. This contrast functions as a resource for negotiating cultural distance and non-belonging within the Swedish school context. For students with personal ties to the region, this positioning draws on lived experience to challenge dominant repertoires of neutrality and presumed teacher objectivity (cf. Blennow, 2019).

For others, the expectation to take a stance, sometimes described as pressuring, can create classroom dilemmas. Below, Lina describes how neutrality itself becomes a contested, unstable position.

Interviewer: Because I think, do you have to take a stand? Or can you discuss the conflict and have opinions on this hatred, or whatever it is, without taking a stand?

Lina: Well, I think. . .it depends on who you're talking to. If it's someone who is pro-Palestine, and you say, "I don't want to take a stand", they'll likely assume that you are pro-Israel. But if you were to talk to someone who doesn't want to take a stand, then you could maintain a neutral position.

Interviewer: So just to be clear, if you talk to someone who. . .

Lina: . . .is Pro-Palestine, against Israel, and who thinks: "Yes, there should be a Palestinian state," then saying, "I don't want to take a stand", would probably make them assume that you are pro-Israel and the Israeli state.

Interviewer: Because you don't say that, right?

Lina: Yes, or there are. . .It feels like in this conflict, there are, like, extremes on both ends. Let's say that you are pro-Palestine, and you hear: "How can you not, like, hate Israel and the Israeli state for what they have done?" It's like. . .well, you can compare it to Russia-Ukraine. Like this: "How can you not be against Russia, it's crazy". And if you say that you don't want to take sides. It's the same. It is assumed that you take the other side. Because it's unthinkable that you could be neutral since it's such an awful thing.

Lina negotiates the impossibility of neutrality, noting that the conflict's severity and asymmetry compel her to take a stand. In a polarised context, non-alignment is rendered intelligible as alignment. Her analogy to the Russia-Ukraine war reinforces expectations of moral positioning. This creates a dilemma: to remain neutral is to risk being misread; to speak is to risk conflict. William supports this positioning by drawing on a personal school-based anecdote, and Axel extends this reasoning:

William: I talked today in the school cafeteria with a girl who was, like, pro-Palestine, and I said that I was neutral, but she said, "You cannot be neutral, there is no way".

Axel: It is so emotional, and with so many who have died on both sides, neutrality seems offensive, because you can't just not choose a side. From their [the pro-Palestine] perspective. So, if they [pro-Palestinians] say: "Yes, but 10,000 of my people have died. How can you not see what has happened?" And then the Jews say: "Yes, but in one day 1,700 died", or how many there were, "of my people. How can you not take sides from what you have seen?" And the more people that die, the more this issue gets. . .the harder it gets to be neutral.

Interviewer: But are there other ways to think than being either neutral or taking a stand, so to speak?

Axel: Yes, to be more nuanced. You could be that if you wanted to. For example, you can say, now I'm only saying something, for example, that: "Yes, Israel was right these and those times, but, on the other hand, Palestine was right these and those times". This opinion, however, is the most uncommon opinion to have. Because on both sides, they have so many reasons to do what they do. For example, Israel claims to have history on their side, Palestine claims to have history on their side. It's even more problematic. So, I don't think you can be nuanced. It's very hard to do. Or you could, but it's. . .

Like Lina, William and Axel highlight the perceived impossibility of neutrality. Yet, when interacting with the interviewer, Axel proposes neutrality and nuance as alternatives to taking sides. Still, these are regarded as unattainable, given the conflict's complexity. This stance requires access to diverse perspectives, ontological frameworks, factual knowledge and dialogic tools – resources the students admit lacking.

To summarise, students' moral positionings in response to the attacks and their aftermath are shaped by negotiations around justice, human decency, personal connections and opinion-based knowledge claims. Awareness of the conflict's human consequences generates a perceived moral imperative where students are called upon to take a stand, often resulting in binary constructions and expressions of intensified alienation. Meanwhile, institutional expectations of teacher neutrality, framed as professional objectivity, explain teachers' hesitancy to engage directly and their efforts to moderate emotionally charged discussions. As the following section explores, this discursive space leads students to construct their own interpretative repertoires – single stories shaped by 'othering' practices – potentially contributing to the reproduction of (anti-) antisemitic discourse.

The anti-antisemitism discourse

Throughout the interviews, students struggle with distinguishing between Jews, Israelis, and the Israeli state, negotiating what connects or separates these categories. Thus, students position themselves and others within a discourse where distancing from antisemitism becomes a strategy.

It is plausible that students introduce this anti-antisemitic position themselves as informed and morally responsible subjects, thereby distancing themselves from antisemitic positioning. Simultaneously, these ways of speaking contribute to the reproduction of 'antisemitism-informed knowledge' (Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023). In negotiating what can be said and known about others, some students invoke the Holocaust to make sense of the present. In the following exchange, Jews are repositioned through a framing where historical victimhood is used to account for, or justify, present-day aggression.

Celmira: Well, I don't know that much about Jews. The only thing I know is that they were treated badly. I mean, by Hitler.

Janna: In the same way that they are now treating the Palestinians.

Hawa: Exactly.

Celmira: Maybe that's why they are treating the Palestinians in such a bad way now. Because there is anger.

Kedar: They turn to anger, yes.

Janna: Yes, they want revenge for how they were treated.

In this exchange, Janna claims that Jews are now treating Palestinians in the same way they were treated by Hitler, prompting the group to collectively construct a positioning of Jews as modern-day Nazis and Palestinians as Holocaust-era Jews. This strategy, commonly known as Holocaust inversion (Lipstadt, 2019), repositions Jews from victims to perpetrators. In doing so, Holocaust memory is mobilised as a symbolic resource for expressing animosity towards Israel, contributing to what Klaff (2014: 2) terms the ‘iconography of a new antisemitism’. This analogy also illustrates how emotionally charged framings shape how students make sense of the conflict during discussion.

A further manifestation of Holocaust inversion emerges in students’ invocation of the term ‘genocide’ to frame the conflict. In the following excerpt, Naima, prompted by the interviewer, elaborates on an earlier claim accusing Israel of committing ‘fucking genocide’ in the ongoing war.

- Interviewer:** Mm, and you called it ‘genocide’, Naima?
Naima: Yes, it is what it is. It is the same thing as. . . What was his name?
Adesina: Hitler.
Naima: Yes, [Hitler] did to the Jews. Now, Israel is doing the same thing to Palestine; it is really like. . . dangerous.

Naima’s statement, framing Israel as a genocidal perpetrator, exemplifies a more explicit form of Holocaust distortion (IHRA, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, n.d). This analogy inverts the Holocaust by equating Israel with the Nazi regime, trivialising it and weaponising its memory for political condemnation – thereby reproducing antisemitic discourse.

Simultaneously, across interviews, students negotiate identities shaped by the categories of ‘Jews’ and ‘Israelis’, drawing distinctions between ‘good Jews’ in the diaspora and ‘bad Jews’ linked to Israel and Zionism. In doing so, they position themselves by asserting their ability to separate criticism of Israel from antisemitism and thereby avoid being positioned as antisemitic. The following excerpt illustrates how students negotiate distinctions between ‘Jews’, ‘Israel’ and ‘Israelis’.

- Emir:** Well, honestly speaking. They. . . Israelis. . . are Jews, but we don’t see them as Jews.
Interviewer: No. . .
Dabir: Not everyone are Jews.
Emir: All of them are Jews. . .
Keila: Because I think, well, I think. . .
Emir: . . . Israelis.
Dabir: Yes, but some are. . .
Malik: All Israelis are Jews, but. . .
Dabir: . . . Okay, they are all Jews. But there are Jews who are not from Israel.
Malik: No. . . yes, that’s right.
Keila: Because I cannot believe that someone who. . .
Emir: Nobody is from Israel. There is nothing named Israel. But Jews everywhere. . . they must go to Israel to do this military thing. It’s a must for them.

Emir asserts that ‘Israelis are Jews, but we don’t see them as Jews’, reflecting a discursive strategy that separates Jewish identity from the Israeli state. He also denies the existence of Israel and, along with Dabir and Malik, frame opposition to Israel as political rather than antisemitic, aligning with a delegitimising repertoire common in antizionist discourse that challenges the Israeli state’s legitimacy (Loeffler, 2021; Seymour, 2019). By positioning themselves within an anti-antisemitism discourse, the students seek to legitimise their critique while distancing it from antisemitic connotations. They also reflect on the conflict’s origins, framing it as a political power struggle,

rather than one rooted in religious history. In discussions on paths to peace, they negotiate that Palestine should reclaim its land, while continuing to distinguish between Jews as a people and the Israeli state as the primary political actor.

- Interviewer:** Has someone stolen their [the Palestinians'] country? Who took. . . ?
Emir: Exactly, yes, the Jews.
Interviewer: So, Jews took their country. . . ?
Keila: Israel.
Malik: Israel.
Dabir: Not Jews. Israel. Jews are. . .
Interviewer: Are there any differences?
Dabir: Jews are different from Israel.

Emir's initial claim that 'the Jews' took the country from the Palestinians is quickly corrected by Keila and Malik, who replace 'Jews' with 'Israel'. This repair marks an attempt to reframe the account in political terms, managing the risk of potential antisemitic generalisations. Dabir builds on this by explicitly separating Jews from the Israeli state, positioning them as different collective identities. The interviewer probes further.

- Interviewer:** In what way? This is interesting.
Dabir: People can be from different countries, for example, Syria, Sweden. . . different countries—they can be Jews—but Israel is a country where Jews live, though other religions exist too. You cannot say that Jews have taken over, but you can say that Israel has taken over.
Keila: It is more like a political view. It's like they. . . they want to take over. . . the politicians and the like, but ordinary people there think differently.

Dabir and Keila draw on a repertoire that separates Israeli state actions from Jewish individuals, constructing Israel as a political entity neither necessarily representative of its citizens nor synonymous with religious identity. This distinction enables them to critique the state without aligning with antisemitic discourse, positioning themselves within an anti-antisemitism-informed framework shaped by antizionist perspectives (cf. Seymour, 2019).

By framing the conflict as political rather than religious and constructing Zionism as a colonial ideology separated from Judaism, students argue that their critique targets 'Zionists', not all 'Israeli Jews'. In one interview, Kedar reinforces this distinction by emphasising that conflict does not concern Jews as a religious group.

- Kedar:** What sets them apart is the Zionists. So, Zionists. . . It was actually, before Israel occupied Palestine. . . then Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in Palestine. And. . . Were they Arabs? Yes, there were Arab Jews. . . So I think, not all Jews come from Europe, the USA, and Russia. I know there were also Arab Jews, and when they became Jews, they had no problem living in Palestine. But then, as you know, when it was going to become Israel. . . And I don't want to get political here now. . . But it was Britain that brought them [Jews] to Palestine. With the help of the USA, too. So that was it. . . The Zionists wanted to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. That was the difference.

Kedar draws on historical-political references to position Zionists, supported by Britain and the USA, as responsible for intensifying the conflict, linking it to the historical occupation of Palestinian territory. By distinguishing Zionism from Judaism, he constructs a morally defensible and politically resonant critique of the Israeli state, distancing it from antisemitic connotations. This strategy reflects an ideological dilemma within antizionist discourse: the need to criticise Israel without or while risking reproducing antisemitic tropes.

However, the boundaries between Jews, Israelis and Zionists often blur in practice, as students' criticism of Israel sometimes generalises to Jews (cf. Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023; Thomas, 2016). This highlights how the line between political critique and antisemitism is framed as unstable and contested. The following exchange demonstrates how Emir, Malik and Keila negotiate shifting perceptions, positioning Jews as either 'enemies' or 'friends' in relation to the conflict.

- Emir:** They [Jews] are not enemies, but when. . .What's it called, how can I say this. . .When they try to take your land, then they become enemies.
- Keila:** It is they who torture, fight, and bomb. These are. . .but they. . .Yes, for example, Jews who grew up here [in Sweden] . . .who understand this. . .We don't see them as enemies.
- Emir:** Yes, you can be friends with a Jew, as long as. . .they don't come near my country.
- Malik:** Yes.
- Interviewer:** Because then you are not friends anymore?
- Emir:** Yes, because he wants my land, right?
- Keila:** At the same time, it's not only that he takes your land, but he also has this way of thinking, that it is right what they are doing, that it is right to hurt children. I don't want a friend who thinks that's acceptable.

Emir and Keila frame Jews dichotomously as 'enemies' and 'friends' to reinforce a moral boundary between 'good' and 'bad' actors. Framing 'Jews' as 'enemies' (cf. Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023) in the context of territorial claims emphasises Palestinian victimhood and morally justifies their stance. Simultaneously, these negotiations reveal the difficulty of disentangling political critique from ethnic or religious prejudice, as antisemitism and antizionism often overlap. This conflation complicates efforts to maintain a clear boundary between legitimate critique of the Israeli state and rhetoric that risks becoming 'antisemitic antizionism' (Seymour, 2019).

Although several students struggle to distinguish between Israel and Jews, antisemitism and antizionism, others adopt a broader perspective, drawing on personal experiences and mobilising a repertoire that emphasises the importance of recognising these distinctions. This approach warns against generalising Jews collectively or conflating an ethnic or religious group with a political state. In the following exchange, students negotiate this issue in relation to the various forms of prejudice Jews experience, discussing an incident where the Israeli flag was burned outside a synagogue in the city shortly after the October 7 attacks.

- Nour:** [. . .] It [prejudice against Jews] can also have a bit of a background in the Israel-Palestine conflict. And that's something we've talked about before, that one should be able to distinguish between the state of Israel and Jews. One must know what antizionists and antisemites are, you know. So that one should. . .
- Malte:** I also understand, like. . .people who have burned the Israeli flag outside the synagogue. . .as a. . .well. . .in support of Palestine. But it doesn't. . .well. . .it doesn't help anyone.
- Interviewer:** Now or earlier?

- Malte:** Now. And it's unhelpful, because that's when, well, you confuse the state with the people. And it's not even the people, the people are just the ethnic group. And it doesn't help at all; it just makes Jews feel threatened.
- Lukas:** Exactly. And I can say, it's very dangerous, that too, because the problem, as you say, is that you bind together, well, a state and an ethnic group globally, you know. And it's very dangerous to generalise in that way, because burning it outside a synagogue is not a sign of. . .well, support for what you support, you know, but it's a sign of. . .it's actually a sign of hate, I would say.
- Nour:** Yes, it's hate.
- Malte:** And it's also, then, an attack on a religious group, if it's outside a synagogue specifically. Well. . .

Nour articulates a distinction between Israel and Jews and between antizionists and antisemites, highlighting the risks of conflation. Malte extends this by referencing the burning of the Israeli flag outside a synagogue, emphasising how such acts can be interpreted as both political dissent and ethnic hostility. Lukas further rejects the idea of a state representing an entire population, noting that such actions are perceived as expressions of 'hate' rather than 'support'. Together, the students negotiate the meaning of this symbolic act through a moral lens that problematises generalisations. While intended as political, the act is simultaneously interpreted as targeting a religious group. Drawing on liberal tolerance, they position themselves as morally discerning and politically literate, emphasising contextual sensitivity (cf. Judaken, 2024). This enables a more multifaceted framing of the conflict, resisting reductive binaries and foregrounding the ethical stakes of political expression.

In another group, Axel and William reflect on how tensions between religion and politics are negotiated in everyday school interactions, demonstrating how broader societal discourses are reproduced locally.

- Axel:** Yes, there are some [students] that on a religious level regard one another as religious arch enemies; in that sense, one cannot exist without the other. It's like. . .destiny, like it's written that this is the way it's going to be.
- Interviewer:** What religious. . .
- Axel:** Muslims against Jews, I guess.
- William:** But then I want to be clear that most Muslims are not like that. Most criticise Israel's regime, but there are always exceptions, those who are, what's it called, like worse.
- Interviewer:** Yes, and in what way are they worse?
- William:** But then they take all the Jews. Because many Jews are criticising the Israel regime, but they. . .they get mixed up with the rest when they include all Jews in the critique against Israel.
- Axel:** Exactly, it's really hard to separate Zionism and antisemitism because there are many who direct strong hatred against Israel as a state, and thus against Zionism. But, since Israel is a state, like based on being the state for the Jewish people, it's really easy that this, yes, that opinion gets filled in with antisemitism against Jews as a whole. And it often happens, if you haven't seen it in school, you have to be blind.

In this interaction, Axel and William negotiate the boundaries between religion, identity and political conflict. Axel invokes a trope of inevitability, framing antagonism between Muslims and Jews as historically inscribed and resistant to change. 'It's like. . .destiny, like it's written. . .', he states, recasting the concept of 'enemies', with religious rather than territorial connotations. William

counters by emphasising the diversity of Muslim perspectives and framing the conflict in political rather than religious terms, while acknowledging that some still conflate religion and politics. His phrase that ‘exceptions of muslims take all the Jews’ shows how the boundary between critique of Israel and antisemitism becomes blurred; an issue that Axel further elaborates. Axel highlights the difficulty of separating Zionism from antisemitism, asserting that this conflation is a visible, almost self-evident reality within the school context: ‘if you haven’t seen it in school, you have to be blind’.

Through this accounts, students position themselves as morally conscious observers navigating the complex entanglement of religion, ethnicity and state politics. They draw on repertoires of political literacy and liberal tolerance to make sense of an issue they perceive as problematic.

In summary, the findings highlight how antisemitic and antizionist discourses shape students’ meaning-making, with significant implications for educational practice. They underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that enable critical reflection on language and the assumptions it carries, given the sensitivity surrounding these interactions. As Nour reflects: ‘So, it’s very complex. . . You have to think from different perspectives’ – a reminder of the importance of fostering awareness and multifaceted engagement in classroom dialogue.

Discussion

This study examined the discourses and subject positions students draw upon when negotiating the October 7 attacks and the subsequent Israel–Gaza war. Three discourses were identified: a knowledge positioning discourse, a moral positioning discourse and an anti-antisemitism discourse. These discourses illustrate how epistemic, moral and identity-related resources shape students’ participation in dialogue on controversial issues that are emotionally charged and interactionally delicate.

The knowledge positioning discourse significantly influences students’ willingness – or reluctance – to engage in discussions. Limited knowledge, particularly when peers are perceived as holding strong views or ‘personal related-informed knowledge’, often results in silence driven by fear of being wrong or misunderstood. The lack of ‘teacher-informed knowledge’ reinforces this hesitation, leaving students to rely on ‘(social) media-informed knowledge’, which they regard as both informational and moral guidance. Within these repertoires, students position themselves as cautious observers, morally and emotionally engaged participants, or uncertain outsiders – each with distinct implications for classroom dialogue, shaped not only by epistemic concerns but also by the affective pressures of the moment.

These findings not only resonate with previous research on epistemic ambiguity and teachers’ avoidance of controversial issues (Blennow, 2019; Flensner, 2020) but also advance the discussion by demonstrating how deliberative dialogue depends on epistemic security and benefits from structured opportunities for critical engagement, thereby deepening Hess’s (2009) argument. Without such scaffolding, students’ dependence on media narratives risks reinforcing polarised framings rather than fostering democratic competencies. Paedagogical strategies must therefore critically engage the discursive sources students draw upon and integrate diverse perspectives when addressing complex and controversial issues such as the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Second, through a moral positioning discourse, students describe a perceived pressure to take a stance, shaped by moral imperatives and reinforced by ‘opinion-informed knowledge’, particularly among those with personal or emotional ties to the region. Neutrality is frequently positioned as morally inadequate, or even complicit, while teachers remain constrained by institutional expectations of objectivity. This tension raises questions about whether controversial issues can – or should – be addressed in the classroom at all, highlighting dilemmas that emerge when educational spaces intersect with global political controversies. These observations align with research on the affective dimension of social studies education, which emphasises the dual challenge of emotional

intensity and epistemic complexity (Blennow, 2019; Franck, 2023). Through moral framings, students both reproduce and contest binary narratives, complicating distinctions between victims and perpetrators and linking classroom discourse with broader geopolitical narratives, including land disputes and analogies to other conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war. While deliberative ideals emphasise pluralism and respectful exchange (Kerr and Huddleston, 2016), our analysis suggests that moral positioning can simultaneously enable and constrain dialogue, sometimes reinforcing polarisation and, for some students, deepening feelings of alienation from Swedish society.

Finally, students engage in an anti-antisemitism discourse in negotiating the identities of Jews, Israelis and Zionists, exposing the instability of these categories and how critique of one can easily slide into prejudice against another. In navigating these tensions, they draw on competing repertoires and grapple with ideological dilemmas, often invoking dichotomies such as politics–religion, enemies–friends and Zionism–Judaism. This framing enables a critique of Zionism while distancing itself from antisemitism. By producing what may be termed ‘antizionism-informed knowledge’, students attempt to position themselves as anti-antisemitic while maintaining antizionist views. However, these efforts are entangled with contradictions. Some students reproduce anti-semitic tropes, trivialising Jewish historical suffering or rely on distorted analogies, particularly in discussions of landownership, Zionism and religion, reflecting the difficulties involved in articulating views on a highly emotive and historically sensitive topic. These strategies reveal how attempts to separate antisemitism from antizionism may, paradoxically, legitimise a form of antizionism underpinned by ‘antisemitism-informed knowledge’ (cf. Hübscher and Pfaff, 2023). These findings extend Thomas’s (2016) observation that students often conflate Jewish identity with Israeli state actions by showing how such confluences persist even when students actively seek to draw clear distinctions between religious, ethnic and political identities. Paradoxically, they occasionally reproduce the very confluences they aim to resist. This underscores the need for educational approaches that critically engage with the politics of language and the discursive entanglement of antisemitism and antizionism. By fostering awareness of how discursive resources are mobilised – and the subject positions they enable or constrain – school professionals can support more reflective and dialogic classroom practices when addressing controversial issues.

Conclusion

This article contributes to understanding how students negotiate knowledge, morality and anti-antisemitism when engaging with highly controversial issues. By illuminating how personal, social and institutional knowledge shape participation, the study extends previous research and confirms that controversial issues are not static curricular topics, but dynamic, relational phenomena shaped by students’ identities, emotions and discursive resources.

Addressing these challenges requires pedagogical approaches that move beyond factual transmission towards dialogic engagement and critical reflection. When controversial issues such as the Israel–Palestine conflict enter the classroom, teachers face epistemic ambiguity and emotional intensity – conditions that can both enable and constrain dialogue. The findings underscore the importance of fostering epistemic security so students can participate without fear of being wrong or misunderstood. This entails providing structured opportunities for deliberation and equipping students with tools to critically evaluate the discursive sources they draw upon, including social media and peer-informed narratives.

Equally important is the need to address moral positioning in ways that enable disagreement without polarisation. While moral framings can stimulate engagement, they also risk reinforcing binary narratives and intensifying divisions, especially in moments marked by heightened sensitivity. Paedagogical strategies that promote perspective-taking and deliberative dialogue can help

transform these tensions into opportunities for democratic learning, aligning with the normative ideals of pluralism and respectful exchange articulated in European and national policy frameworks and research on democratic education (Hess, 2009; Kerr and Huddleston, 2016; Skolverket, 2022).

Finally, the discursive entanglement of antisemitism and antizionism underscores the importance of antisemitism-critical education that distinguishes legitimate critique of Israeli policies from prejudice against Jews. This requires explicit attention to the politics of language and the subject positions made available in classroom interaction. By fostering awareness of how discursive resources are drawn upon – and the identities they construct – school professionals can support more reflective and dialogic practices when addressing controversial issues. Such efforts are not merely pedagogical but democratic, ensuring that classrooms become spaces where complexity is acknowledged, stereotypes are dismantled and students are empowered to engage critically with contested histories and contemporary conflicts.

Building on these findings, future research could incorporate teachers' perspectives, examining how they navigate such dilemmas in practice. Studies across diverse school contexts and investigations into specific didactic strategies for addressing controversial issues related to geopolitical conflict and promoting inclusive dialogue would further enrich understanding. School-based knowledge – shaped by opinion, (social) media and personal experience – demands pedagogical strategies that address the dangers of generalisation and the tendency to perceive issues in black-and-white terms. Without engaging the grey areas, classrooms risk reproducing single stories. As the interviews revealed, students are eager to share their narratives. It is crucial for schools to create space for such expression – regardless of singularity, othering or definitiveness.

Recognising the power of discourse and the danger of a single story, Adichie (2009: 17:37) reminds us that 'Stories matter. Many stories matter', and that 'when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise'. Focussing solely on one (hi)story, while overlooking the contextual and complex nature of multiple (hi)stories, produces distorted and incomplete reconstructions of both past and present. Ultimately, fostering students' capacity to critically engage with contested (hi)stories is not only a pedagogical imperative, but a democratic one.

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Consent to participate

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Consent for publication

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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