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Critical adult education and community organizing: The case of diverse communities in Israel

Dassi Postan-Aizik[1,2]

[1]Department of Social Work, Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Jezreel Valley, Israel

[2]The Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Poverty and Social Exclusion, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Correspondence
Dassi Postan-Aizik, Department of Social Work, Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Haifa, Israel.
Email: hadassap@yvc.ac.il

Abstract

Community organizing is an effective approach to face social, economic, and racial injustice at the local level. However, since the 1970s, neoliberal policies, growing social divisions, and political disengagement have challenged community organizing. This study explores the use of critical adult education to address local organizing challenges with diverse and socially excluded communities in Israel. Building on a case of a local partnership to promote inclusive urban development, we analyzed data from interviews, focus groups, and participant observations conducted with activists and paid professionals. The findings suggest that critical education was instrumental in organizing across diversities through three processes: transposing knowledge, disrupting power hierarchies, and negotiating diversity. Critical education was perceived as empowering for activists at the individual-family level and promote change at the local level. However, at the national policy level, limited changes were achieved. The advantages and limitations of critical education for local organizing are discussed.

KEYWORDS

comunity organizing, critical education, diversity, social justice

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1 | INTRODUCTION

For almost 5 decades, economic, cultural, and political forces have negatively impacted community efforts to organize for social change and social justice at the local level (Gaynor, 2020; Harries et al., 2020; Nelson, 2013; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Sites et al., 2007). Nevertheless, there is evidence that community organizing is gradually attracting more attention in research, practice, and education (Brady et al., 2014). Grassroots organizing and leadership building in communities have taken many new forms. Recent examples include political youth organization (Rosen & Conner, 2021) as well as local organizing of ethnic, racial, or minority groups and the advancement of gender equality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender+ rights (Diebold, 2020; Menon & Allen, 2020; Nystrom & Jones, 2003).

The renewed engagement with community organizing can be seen as a much-needed response to globalization and state-supported neoliberalism, which has encouraged individualism, expanded inequality, and adopted welfare austerity measures that marginalize communities (Brady et al., 2014; Sites et al., 2007). As community organizers confront the challenges of the 21st century, they must also face growing racial, ethnic, and gender divisions, as well as political disengagement and social fragmentation (Fisher & Shragge, 2000; Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018). In light of these challenges, scholars have called upon practitioners to cross boundaries and move beyond traditional barriers which reflect unequal structures (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Sites et al., 2007). This type of boundary-crossing concerns bridging social divides and forging joint community initiatives, extended networks, or broader coalitions (Sites et al., 2007). However, there is a gap in scholarship regarding the process of constructing such bridges in the context of organizing in diverse communities. Critical adult education (CAE) may offer a conducive framework for theory and practice. The link between social justice organizing, community practice, and education is not new. However, since the 1960s and 1970s it has been weakened (Brookfield, 2018; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Levine, 2004). This article revisits this link by exploring the use of a CAE to address current organizing challenges. Building on the case of community academy, a local university–community partnership in Israel, the current study explores the uses of CAE for organizing in diverse communities. First, we review the literature regarding the current challenges of community organizing and the link to critical education. Then, the study context and methodology are described. Lastly, we present the main findings and discuss implications for practice and research.

1.1 | Community organizing for social justice

Community organizing can be defined as a process through which community members take collective action regarding social issues of mutual concern (Christens & Speer, 2015). As Western societies are becoming ever more diverse, confronting social exclusion, marginalization, and oppression have become central to community practice, often requiring professional facilitation and support for community organizing. Growing inequalities and divisions based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and other attributes at the state level, raise social (in) justice issues manifesting at the local community level. Social justice is a fundamental value in community practice, research, and education for community psychology, and social work (Dutta, 2018; Postan-Aizik et al., 2019; Prilleltensky, 2001). According to Prilleltensky (2001, p. 750), a central goal of community psychology is "the elimination of oppressive social conditions conducive to problems in living." Thus, community practice that resists oppression, discrimination, and violence can potentially advance the well-being of individuals as well as entire communities (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Community practice addressing social justice issues focuses intervention on organizing disadvantaged groups to make demands for resources, recognition, or broader social change (Sites et al., 2007). Conceptually rooted in critical theories of power and inequality, this approach defines community as a political actor and emphasizes strategies of conflict and mobilization linked to the redistribution of power and resources, as well as full democratic citizenship, movement building, and social transformation in the long run (Fisher, 1994; Sites et al., 2007).

One of the most influential models of community organizing, which spread from Chicago to the rest of the world, was developed by organizer Saul Alinsky. The model proposed by Alinsky (1971) was incrementally adapted to social and political change and continues to be salient for both practice and theory to this day (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Schutz & Miller, 2015). This organizing strategy emphasized pragmatic, ideology-free mobilization of communities around concrete problems and neighborhood issues. Although the current social, political, and economic state is very different than that of the 1970s, neo-Alinskyite models remain relevant for neighborhood organizations, community groups, and religious institutions organizing disadvantaged groups to make demands on the larger community for resources, recognition, or broader social change. Successful campaigns have resulted in major changes to civil rights legislation and labor laws, as well as antidisplacement actions against urban renewal (Sites et al., 2007).

Despite its success in bringing groups together to accomplish shared goals, Alinsky's pluralist and pragmatic approach to organizing has been critiqued for its neglect of systemic issues that are often at the root of injustice at the community level. As this approach regards engagement with ideology as nonproductive, it focuses on incremental and limited expressions of self-interest, deliberately avoiding fundamental issues, such as racial justice, and ethnic and gender diversity of both organizers and their communities (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017). It is also important to note that community organizing does not necessarily compare with social justice. Community practice can be informed by deep-rooted perspectives and established structures of inequality, as influential communities organize to capitalize their local power to exploit individuals and groups within their own community or other, more vulnerable, communities (Dutta, 2018; Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018).

Current community practice has been criticized for conforming with neoliberal policies and growing welfare austerity (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015). Nelson (2013) suggests that many of the social problems with which community psychology is concerned to have been exacerbated by neoliberal policies and the diminishing role of government in addressing them. Brady et al. (2014) discuss three trends in community organizing, through which neoliberalism has negatively impacted the practice: the dominant place that evidence-based practice has claimed in professional practice, decreased attention and misrepresentation of social movements, and the increasing professionalization of community organizing (Brady et al., 2014). Scholars have also addressed challenges related to engaging with community diversity. As a society in most of the Global North has become multiracial and multicultural, community organizers now operate in the context of superdiversity, reflected by a growing number of residents with increasing diversity regarding nationalities, languages, religions, traditions, and lifestyles, as well as diversity in migration background and class (Gutiérrez & Reisch, 2017; Vertovec, 2007). Finally, the idea of power politics in counseling, as well as postmodern conceptions of community and identity, such as anticolonial practice, challenge community organizing by questioning traditional conceptions and revealing existing power relations embedding oppressive constructions of the community (Dutta, 2018; Sites et al., 2007).

1.2 | CAE and organizing

According to Brookfield (2018, p. 53), "The notion of what constitutes CAE theory and practice is strongly contested." Indeed, there are many critical education theories and a variety of interpretations of what constitutes critique in this regard. In this article, the term CAE is used broadly to describe adult education and learning processes that develop critical consciousness, identify the shortcomings of systems, institution,s and practices, and envision a more humane, compassionate, and equitable way of organizing. Critical education is often connected to the Marxist tradition, as well as socialist and communist politics. However, it is also grounded in the tradition of democracy and pragmatism, which requires an openness to new ways of thinking and acting in relation to current systems and practices. Associated with the Habermasian theory of communicative action, CAE can be viewed as an approach to ensure democracy rather than to promote alternate forms of economic systems or government. Following the notion that democracy requires that people participate in comprehensive, free, and equal discourse,

critical education strives to promote meaningful civic participation of all groups in society (Brookfield, 2018; Habermas, 1987; Morrow & Torres, 2002).

CAE theory suggests that social and economic systems are purposefully structured to block and contain social empowerment and transformative action. Ideas about happiness, what is considered good or of value, and how to relate with others are structured by often-oppressive systems that misinform people about their identity and their needs. Through the process of socialization, these systems reproduce in people's subjectivity, blinding them to the manifestations of an unjust and unfree society (Brookfield, 2018). Like socialization, learning is also very much a social process, so understanding people's everyday practices and struggles against injustice can help build alternative forms of knowledge and tools for political praxis (Choudry, 2016). Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and writer, was one of the most passionate advocates for social justice, and an influential proponent of critical education. In Freire's (2006) seminal work, he proposed a critical pedagogy that shifts relationships among teachers, students, and society as are challenging hierarchies and empowering learners to become co-creators of knowledge. This approach differs from traditional knowledge systems that treat learners as passive objects who require support, rather than subjects that must actively participate in their own advancement. It is, therefore, the educator's social and political responsibility to move people towards critical transitivity, ultimately empowering them to organize to oppose oppression. Freire saw the work of a critical educator, be that a teacher or a community professional, as an act of liberation, which results in "conscientization," or critical consciousness. Some of the main critiques of Freire's work emanated from feminist theorists, who pointed out its failure to conceptualize women's oppression or subjectivity, and its neglect to examine the personal and domestic world (Weiler, 2002). Despite this critique, Freire's teachings are widely accepted worldwide and continue to influence other threads of critical education and psychology (Brookfield, 2018; Gokani & Walsh, 2017).

Following their wide acceptance, CAE ideas, and particularly Freirean concepts, have been incorporated into community organizing in the past. For organizers at the national and local levels, applying CAE strategies has the advantage of supporting the development of critical consciousness for individuals and communities who can then identify unjust systems and practices and move to change them. Critical education entailed teaching skills necessary to organize opposition or build a revolutionary force, in cases such as the Cuban peasant militia, the UK Chartists, the Black Panthers or the US Civil Rights Movement. Progressive parties and civil society institutions, such as trade unions and labor unions also imbed CAE as an important element of their activities (Brookfield, 2018). At the local level, community-based CAE operates informally and changes constantly. It can be employed in grassroots groups allowing members to teach and learn from each other how to organize neighborhood protests, plant community gardens, run food cooperatives, promote public schools, prevent gentrification, or protest police brutality (Brookfield, 2018).

However, in many respects promoting critical education runs counter to the pragmatic Alinsky model and may have disadvantages for organizers when rapid, unified, or uncontested action is needed. In the past, the Highlander Folk School provided social justice training, support, and resources to leaders of the U.S. civil rights, labor, and women's rights movements (Brookfield, 2018; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017). Yet despite their achievements and popularity across Europe and the USA, many folk schools and popular educational institutions ceased to exist after the 1960s and 1970s (Levine, 2004). The reasons for this decline are not entirely known; however, it has been suggested that rising neoliberal policies and their consequences have influenced the demise of CAE institutions, as they quietly decreased the rights and freedoms of people to organize, speak to power, and vote (Levine, 2004; Reisch, 2013). It has also been noted that CAE programs diminished at the same time as social movements and social action decreased, arguably due to people's content with the social change achieved in previous decades, and the relatively calm sociopolitical environment (Cooke & MacSween, 2000).

1.3 | Applying critical education to organizing with diverse communities

Despite the decline in CAE programs, scholarly interest in critical consciousness as a resource for the empowerment of marginalized individuals and groups has grown tremendously in the past decades (Heberle et al., 2020). However,

much of the empirical research is focused on developing critical consciousness for children (see, e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Hope & Bañales, 2019), while few studies focused mostly on young adults. A recent quantitative study found that for American Latinx and Black young adults critical reflection of structural inequality was positively linked with the likelihood to vote and with sociopolitical action (Bañales et al., 2020). Similarly, a study that explored the educational influences that shaped the political identities of members of the Scottish Socialist Party, found that CAE influenced national and local political identity (Kane, 2007). At the community level, empirical studies have demonstrated that critical consciousness encourages localized organizing in diverse groups. Mayo (2013) found that critical pedagogy was useful in creating a gay–straight school alliance in a midwestern high school by creating a foundation for reflective, activist-oriented learning experiences. A study of local organizing of undocumented students and their community allies also found that critical consciousness supported activism. In this study, where ethnic diversity was a significant factor, finding common ground between groups with different values was identified as an important strategy that encourages community engagement for different groups (Forenza et al., 2017).

These empirical studies suggest that raising critical consciousness encourages social justice activism and organizing for individuals from diverse groups. However, the focus on students and young people in formal settings leaves critical education for local adult groups in diverse communities largely understudied. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature regarding the educational processes and the pedagogy of community activism (Ollis, 2015). The goal of the current study is to address this gap by developing a better understanding of the motivation, experiences, and perceived outcomes of community activists and professionals who organized to promote inclusive urban development in a diverse community in Israel.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study context and setting

The study was conducted in Haifa, which is the third-largest city in Israel, and the economic, public, and administrative center of its northern metropolitan area. Two reasons made this location suitable for the study. First, Haifa's population is multicultural, consisting of diverse ethnic and religious groups, with a majority of Jewish residents, including many recent immigrants from the former USSR and Ethiopia, as well as Muslim and Christian Arabs (Haifa Municipal Strategic Planning and Research Department, 2018). This demography is representative of the diversity challenges that community organizing for social justice faces worldwide. Second, like many Western postindustrial cities, decades of state-led neoliberal policy have changed the city's economic and social rationale (Kipnis, 1998), thereby increasing the socioeconomic divisions among communities.

The sociopatial context of this study is situated in Haifa's coastal neighborhoods, home to approximately 15% of the city's residents. This area has a high poverty rate and is perceived to be socially excluded and spatially disconnected (Postan-Aizik & Strier, 2020). Although it features mostly apartment blocks built in poor construction standards during the 1950s and 1960s, it is attractive due to its proximity to the coast and to main transportation routes. Recently, state and municipal agencies have promoted local urban renewal and development through market-based programs. Many plans involve demolishing entire blocks, building new high-rise buildings, or adding construction to existing buildings. These prospects have encouraged investors and have driven up real estate prices in this declining area (Nardi, 2019).

The organizational context of this study is a partnership program developed by the University of Haifa and local agencies to address social exclusion through research and community projects. This article examines one of these projects, that facilitated community organizing to help residents and local professionals organize to respond to market-based urban renewal in the area. To this end, a project called community academy was created to provide action-oriented courses taught by academic faculty and

urban-renewal experts at local community centers. The courses were designed by the partnership, which included academics, community practitioners, local professionals, and activists. Many of the staff also participated as learners, as community activists, and professionals from local agencies studied together, often joined by academic faculty. Courses were tuition-free, except for minor enrollment fees to cover the cost of insurance and accreditation. After completing the courses, local activists and professionals continued to work together, sometimes joined by the city and other civic organizations.

At the time of data collection, the researcher held a professional management position in the partnership. The researcher had previously lived in the city and worked with diverse communities in the area for many years. This gave her personal and professional experience regarding the project and the context. While this distinct position allowed for a mix of insider–outsider perspectives and accessibility to many data sources that informed the study, it also raised ethical and methodological considerations. All study participants were made aware of the researcher's position before the initial request to participate in the study.

2.2 | Data collection and analysis

Data for this study was gathered through interviews, focus group, and observations. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Haifa. Interview and focus group participants represent the ethnic, religious, gender, and age-diverse composition of the area. Purposive sampling was applied for semistructured interviews with local activists ($N = 20$) and paid professionals ($N = 10$) who were involved with the program. Participants were asked to sign a consent form informing them about the study and their rights as participants. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. Most interviews were conducted at the participant's home or workplace, lasting 60–90 min.

Table 1 details information about study participants and presents categories that relate to religion, country of birth (ethnicity), and gender corresponding with participant's own self-identification as provided during the interviews and focus groups. The information presented is restricted to preserve study participant anonymity.

Two focus groups with a total of 10 participants were conducted with activists in local community centers after the course had ended. In both groups, there were equal numbers of Jewish and Arab participants. Study participants consented to join the study on the phone upon invitation and affirmed their consent at the beginning of the recorded session. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The study also draws on observations conducted during project meetings and classes to obtain a rich contextualized understanding. The researcher was a participant-observer throughout the project, from initial organizing and design to participation in the course sessions, spending numerous hours on site. The data included written notes and open-ended conversations with participants. An informed consent process was used so that the researcher's role was explicit to any and all study participants.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed according to a constructivist grounded theory approach, which promotes a deeper understanding of people's social, political, and experiential realities. This approach is particularly suitable for research relating to social justice issues as it attempts to minimize social hierarchies, considering research interactions to be a site of coconstruction and an opportunity to recover marginalized voices (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell, 2012; Priya, 2019). Emergent themes (Charmaz, 2000) and patterns (Creswell, 2012) were identified within the transcribed interviews. Key themes from each source were coded by the researcher and reviewed by another researcher that was familiar with the context, but not directly engaged with this project. The initial themes referred to participants' motivation to join the project, experiences in the course, and in the subsequent organizing process, which was at its initial stages at the time of data collection. Data were then converted into axial categories refined to include the major categories. To enhance research rigor, triangulation through different data collection techniques was used to capture the participants'

TABLE 1 Study participant information

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of birth/ethnicity	Religion
1	Elizabeth	48	F	Israel	Christian
2	Merry	65	F	Israel	Christian
3	Muhamad	32	M	Israel	Muslim
4	Lili	38	F	Israel	Jewish
5	Hannah	75	F	Poland	Jewish
6	Sophie	42	F	Israel	Jewish
7	Sol	65	F	Turkey	Jewish
8	Alona	36	F	FUSSR	Jewish
9	Gal	37	M	Israel	Jewish
10	Haim	50	M	Morocco	Jewish
11	Shmuel	76	M	Romania	Jewish
12	Alex	39	M	FUSSR	Jewish
13	Taspa	42	M	Ethiopia	Jewish
14	Mekonan	53	M	Ethiopia	Jewish
15	Asmara	45	F	Ethiopia	Jewish
16	Vered	18	F	Israel (Ethiopia)	Jewish
17	Smadar	42	F	Israel	Jewish
18	Bella	60	F	FUSSR	Jewish
19	Shai	45	M	Israel	Jewish
20	Shoval	33	F	Israel	Jewish
21	Baruch	31	M	FUSSR	Nondisclosed
22	Avishai	50	M	Israel	Jewish
23	Ruth	60	F	Israel	Jewish
24	Zehava	42	F	Israel	Jewish
25	Yasmin	39	F	Israel	Muslim
26	Shadia	55	F	Israel	Muslim
27	Amit	34	F	Israel	Jewish
28	Ofer	36	M	Israel	Jewish
29	Daniella	31	F	Israel	Jewish
30	Naama	27	F	Israel	Jewish

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male.

various viewpoints. Bracketing was applied to diminish the influence of the researchers' early assumptions and allow for deeper reflexivity in data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Finally, the main findings were communicated to several participants as a form of member checking to enhance research credibility (Padgett, 2016).

3 | FINDINGS

As study participants reflected upon their motivation and experiences, four main themes arose. The first three themes: “transposing knowledge,” “disturbing power hierarchies,” and “negotiating diversity” refer to organizing and critical learning, and the fourth theme “organizing outcomes” relates to how participants perceived the outcomes of organizing using CAE strategies.

3.1 | Transposing knowledge

This theme involves the process of learning information, questioning traditional knowledge about the area and market-based urban renewal, and developing new knowledge for change. Organizing allowed activists to openly discuss their interests and critically question development in their area. As activists started sharing their personal knowledge, they realized that several years before an official announcement of development, private investors had already started buying real-estate at higher-than-market costs and renting it back to the sellers or other local families. Discussing this in the group surfaced this otherwise inconspicuous change, as an activist explained: *"Private entrepreneurs steer their capital to smart investments. He doesn't have a problem. He can invest 450, the property will be 700 in two years, and he will receive interest… It's a dangerous and deadly way of thinking"* [Haim, M]. The words "deadly" and "dangerous" emphasize a deep concern of displacement shared by participants living along the coastline in some of the city's poorest communities. Referring to the history of his neighborhood, which was built as temporary dwellings for new immigrants, this activist perceived the development as unjust: *"They brought in people who went to live in this community in the '50s and '60s, and we created a neighborhood out of a camp. Suddenly Hi-Tech people come to the coastline, rich folks, and they call it development now"* [Haim, M]. These words echo a proud narrative that some of the participants shared, as they worried that wealthier people would take over their neighborhood. As the process progressed, more nuanced discussions exploring different aspects of the change emerged. Activists voiced new ideas and recognized personal and community potential in development:

> *On the other hand, ask a man like me if a developer comes here who wants to get rich at my expense - I don't have a problem as long as I benefit from it too. If I improve my quality of life and I end up getting a better house and a better-looking neighborhood and a pleasant environment, that can benefit the developer as well. He also has to make a profit* [Gal, M]

As both activists that completely objected to development and those who were inclined to see it as an opportunity organized together, they expressed a need for formal knowledge to address market-based systems. First, they voiced a need for information about urban renewal, a complex process that requires coordination between property owners, the city, and developers, involving countless private and community considerations. This complexity is compounded in Israel, which still has little experience with urban renewal so that regulation and legislation are constantly changing, and information is not presented clearly to the public. Study participants articulated this concern:

> *We came to the community worker and told her – Listen, with all due respect, you know this neighborhood is not made up of engineers and lawyers. So, we're not smart enough to stand up to developers and contractors and make demands. We don't have the knowledge and power to stand up for our rights* [Sol, F]

The second kind of knowledge relates to organizing. Although most study participants had community volunteer experience, they asked to enhance organizing and leadership skills: *My expectation was to learn tools because I was an amateur in the work I did with the community, and I wanted to do it more professionally* [Elizabeth, F].

Third, study participants soon started to co-create new knowledge about their own communities. Activists and professionals shared information that allowed them to see neighborhood processes from a wider perspective and change their tactics accordingly. For example, after learning about their legal situation and sharing information, activists and professionals realized that property owners may be vulnerable to manipulation by entrepreneurs, who strategically offered prominent community members cash incentives to sign up their neighbors. Thus, owners who were reluctant to give their legal rights to unknown developers were convinced to do so by their neighbors, unaware that they, too, were working on behalf of developers. An activist described how he was approached: "*I was offered 1,000 for each tenant's signature to incentivize me to go door to door and [I would] get money for that*" [Gal, M]. As this information became clear in class, new tactics were created to educate other neighbors: *"I soon realized my goal was not to help the developer but the community"* [Gal, M].

By learning about urban renewal, co-creating knowledge through the organizing process, and developing their own local knowledge, study participants questioned conventional market-based systems as well as their own initial ideas about community development.

3.2 | Disrupting power

This theme refers to the organizing process, that challenges hierarchies and disrupted traditional power structures. The educational component of the organizing project was designed by community activists, local professionals, and academic faculty who participated in the process at an equal standing. For example, a syllabus was developed jointly, and topics were discussed and agreed upon by representatives from the academic faculty, local professionals, and activists. Power relations were intentionally disturbed by unconventionally assigning responsibilities between professionals and activists as they all learned together in class. Traditional academic hierarchies were also challenged as faculty traveled from the university campus to local community centers to make the course accessible. Study participants took pride in their ability to change this tradition: *"I don't go to the university – the university comes to me. The best professors come all the way to us here"* [Mary, F]. An activist with a physical disability was able to overcome accessibility issues that would have otherwise prevented her participation: *"All the lecturers came to the people. Not that we were going to them, but they asked for us"* [Goldie, F]. She continued to describe how shifting power relations also changed her perspective as an organizer:

> *This is where a lot of us saw that we can learn, and we can speak up. That we shouldn't hesitate [to talk] because he's a professor. That we are equal. He is the one with a diploma, but we are also humans and can work together and show that, even though I come from this area, today we had [police] searches here, that's a lot* [Goldie, F]

Goldie reiterated how the experience of critical education not only empowered activists to speak up but also confronted the stigma of the neighborhood.

Towards the end of the course, the attention turned from classes to community action. Several study participants stated that the elated sentiment shifted towards disappointment, as they felt they had been abandoned by academia and professionals: *"I was actually very scared. I didn't feel good about it. I thought we'd continue. The knowledge - it was great but it's not enough. I spoke with the professor and asked if he can talk to the people in charge"* [Mary, F]. The joint learning experience of professionals and activists created expectations of continued shared action. However, in the shift towards a task-oriented dynamic, stakeholders moved back to their traditional positions. In the following interview, which took place shortly after the course ended, A seasoned activist, spoke directly to the researcher:

> *I'll give you a lecture on this subject - the university, the community center and the city… failed me. We sat in class, folks who never got the chance to study in school, and we got skills. This was unusual… And*

> *then there was an impressive ceremony where we got our diplomas… If you stop now - what can you accomplish? So why did you even start?* [Haim, M]

Taking the role of lecturer, the activist insisted that his claims be acknowledged by all stakeholders. Thus, the shift to restore traditional power structures and responsibilities were disturbed again. Soon after this, the university and community stakeholders decided to commit to the project for a longer period of time than originally planned and divert greater resources to support it in response to activists' demands. Power structures were not dismantled during the organizing process. However, a more egalitarian structure developed, which later re-emerged in the interaction between activists and city officials, as demonstrated in the last part of Section 3.

3.3 | Negotiating diversity

This theme centers on the challenges of organizing in light of the historical context of the area and its diverse make-up. Organizing across diversity was uncommon, although not entirely unprecedented, in this area. In this project activists of all genders, ages, religions, and ethnicities studied and worked together. Study participants generally regarded diversity as a source of strength. In the following example given by a Jewish-Ethiopian activist, he compares between former organizing experiences and this one:

> *We had a leadership course for Ethiopians. But it wasn't enough to deal with real problems. The Ethiopian community has been struggling alone until now. [This group] is not just for our community. Here we are Ethiopian, Arabs, Russians together in our neighborhood. It's for everyone* [Mekonan, M]

Another study participant, a recent immigrant from Russia who was also previously involved in local projects, said: *"You find yourself with Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs, and Russians, and there are Ethiopians. We are like a group. So, we could do big projects… together there were a lot of people"* [Alex, M].

Despite the overall positive sentiment expressed by the study participants, bridging differences among activists in a setting that involves critical reflection often spurred conversations in which diversities were discussed and negotiated. These exchanges touched on social, religious, and ethnic divides, often threatening to dissolve the organizing efforts. One of the notable times in which the group cohesion was compromised was during a conflict between Israel and Gaza, which was followed by contentious parliamentary elections. Activists and professionals worked to resolve the dissonance between shared ideas about social justice at the local level, and conflicting opinions about fundamental issues of justice at the national level. In the following example, taken from an exchange between focus group participants, two activists—one who self-identifies as an Arab-Israeli and the other who self-identifies as Jewish-Israeli, discuss this matter:

> *Elizabeth: I really know [you] accept me. But first and foremost, I'm an Israeli-Arab. [When I said] that word it was like a bomb*
>
> *Sol: It wasn't like that. I'm sorry to cut you off, but it will take time. We told you we are all equal in this group. I don't see you as an Arab*
>
> *Elizabeth: Yes! See me as an Arab! I don't need to be different, but I am an Arab… this is what makes me special… do you get what I'm saying?*
>
> *Sol: I can't say I don't see you as an Arab, but I'm saying that when we gather round the table and work together, we have one goal… this is how I see all of us as equal. There is no need to emphasize [differences]*

Elizabeth recalled a class in which she discussed her conflicting feelings at work and in a mixed neighborhood. However, acknowledging this at a time of armed conflict was difficult for some of her Jewish colleagues. In this exchange, Sol presented a “color-blind” approach which she viewed as promoting equality. However, it prevented hard conversations and a critical discussion regarding group diversity. The community practitioner that later facilitated the activist group stressed that despite tensions, local organizing continues even during national turmoil and conflict: *"[What helped was] their relationship. What they gave each other. The fact that they continued to work even when it was a complex and difficult time. I see this as success"* [Shadia, F]. Although discrimination and other injustices at the policy level cannot be ignored, at the local level these words illustrate the importance of relationships, built over time and forged by common goals, for withstanding local conflict.

3.4 | Organizing outcomes—Personal, community, and policy

Local activists and professionals described the outcomes of organizing on three interrelated levels: the individual-family level, the community level, and the policy level. At the individual level, many participants described a positive influence on their well-being. A long-time activist explained how critical education made her feel: *"Just empowered. I feel I (still) don't know everything, (but) I know more today. I came to this from (knowing) zero. Today I know a few things on an academic level that I've learned here. I feel proud and confident"* [Elizabeth, F]. Another activist, who could not afford to go to university when she was younger, said: *"(Do)you know how proud I was to say I was going to university? It didn't feel like I was walking on the ground, I was floating*” [Mary]. A local professional that shared classes and community action with activists noted that many advanced their careers or assumed other leadership positions:

> *Look at what they gave each other, their individual process. It can only be the group. One manages the center now (where she worked). Another got promoted, and there are more. It's definitely because of the group. And that's just work. I believe it also affects the home* [Daniella, F]

Study participants confirmed that this experience impacted the family. An activist described the family experience at the graduation ceremony of the academic course: *"What I've learned here is not only for the community, but also for home. I'm having the conversations at home, too. So, when I took the family to get the diploma, they were shocked. Wow father! We didn't know!"* [Mekonan, M].

On the community level, activists described how organizing through CAE helped them move from loneliness to solidarity: *"Problems that once seemed huge, (now) seem smaller because we're more powerful. I don't do the talking alone anymore, I don't shout alone, it's us"* [Alex, M]. Using CAE strategies for community organizing motivated study participants to act on community issues. An activist described how critical consciousness motivated her to act:

> *I'm more aware, I dare to participate and be more active. The situation in the neighborhood disturbs me more. The gap between the neighborhood closest to us... compared to the slum we live in. I have more motivation to invest in reducing this gap* [Sophie, F]

In community action, activists and professionals joined power in egalitarian strategies continuing their joint learning experience. In one neighborhood, they canvassed the main street together to promote inclusive development plans and raise awareness:

> *Go from door to door, building to building, to map the neighborhood, (to ask) Did you sign for someone (a developer)? who was it? When? What did you sign? Did you understand the document?* [Gal, M]

Study participants also strived to promote policy change. Although some city departments initially ignored or objected to their organizing, activists, and professionals successfully established regular monthly meetings between community representatives and city officials. Attempts were also made to change national policy. For example, activists collaborated with national advocacy organizations and professionals to compose a policy paper submitted to the Committee for Urban Renewal in the Israeli parliament. They were also successful in organizing a visit of parliament members to their neighborhoods. Despite these actions, professionals perceived the change as limited:

> *It's a very big area and it's like tiny drops. It's not large-scale. I think you must do something much bigger and not just rely on activists or community organizers* [Naama, F]

An activist who discontinued to work with the group after almost 2 years, shared his disappointment regarding policy change:

> *Our group is an example of people being more involved within their local and general society… But if the group sees that there's not enough support or even resistance from others, if they don't give us the feeling that we can change, then they'll give up from the start* [Muhamad, M]

Thus, despite advances towards policy change at the local level, both activists and professionals perceived that only limited success was achieved in promoting change at the national level.

4 | DISCUSSION

This article explores the use of critical education for social justice organizing in diverse and excluded communities. Building on the case of the community academy in Israel, we studied the experiences of local activists and professionals who organized to promote inclusive urban renewal in their area. One of the main goals of CAE is to build alternative forms of knowledge and tools for political praxis to promote social justice (Choudry, 2016; Welton, 1993). The study findings demonstrate that this educational goal can support organizing through *transposing knowledge* from those who traditionally hold power, such as city officials and private developers, to the people on the opposite side of the power equation. Specifically, the study elucidates the process by which alternative knowledge is developed: first by learning from existing information relevant to the issue; second by a critical engagement with the issue, combining multiple points of view and local knowledge; third by obtaining organizing tools and leadership skills; and finally building alternative knowledge that promotes inclusive solutions and propels community action.

The findings highlight the importance of shifting power during the organizing process and redrawing traditional lines between paid professionals and activists. According to Prilleltensky (2012), a critique of social conditions is not sufficient to create critical consciousness. The realization that one can act upon these conditions and change them is vital. In the case of community academy, creating solidarity enhanced both activists' and professionals' critical consciousness. Although organizing across traditional divisions was a complex endeavor, it was often successful in *disrupting power*, which not only transformed how activists and professionals engaged but subsequently changed relationships with city officials and developers. Thus, reaffirming the premise that critical consciousness can also be developed by people who have not marginalized themselves, through working with marginalized groups and understanding discriminatory conditions (Prilleltensky, 2012).

A significant contribution of this study is its focus on how activists *negotiate diversity* in the context of social, ethnic, and religious divides. Although study participants commonly referred to diversity as a source of strength, cohesion was compromised due to ethnic and religious divisions, intensified in times of national conflict. Some of the current challenges that face community organizing include growing racial, ethnic, and gender divisions,

combined with political disengagement and social fragmentation (DeFilippis et al., 2010Fisher & Shragge, 2000; Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018). Community organizing that promotes social justice must strive to cross traditional barriers that reflect inequality (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Sites et al., 2007). However, the pedagogy of community activism is still in its infancy worldwide (Ollis, 2015). Alinsky's approach, which is often applied for community organizing, brings people together by intentionally enhancing similarities to unite people in strategic conflict against those who oppose social change (Reitzes & Reitzes, 1987). This study shows that departing from the classic Alinsky approach by using CAE in community organizing, may indeed add to in-group tension, because rather than blurring participants' identities to create unity, CAE openly engages with diversity. As participants reflected on community marginalization, they also discussed discrimination of individuals and groups within the community. While this process can impede the organizing goal, it has the potential to increase participants' consciousness of other forms of injustice.

The findings emphasize the importance of relationship-building for organizing in diverse communities. Han (2014) maintains that organizing is fundamentally relational. Often people do not commit to an idea, but to other people, and those commitments stimulate their motivation and dedication (Diebold, 2020). Rebuilding relationships is not only a core practice of organizing for social justice but also generates new resources in the process (Speer & Han, 2018). In this case, applying critical pedagogy in class supported the creation of strong relationships that sustained organizing during the conflict, although arguably at the cost of depoliticizing it. Relational models of community organizing, which direct group attention inward and focus on collaborative forms of social action, are often critiqued by political organizing groups for their perceived docility and moderation (Christens, 2010). In diverse communities, the cost of moderation may disproportionately affect minority groups within the community.

Aceros et al. (2021) found that although activism can promote well-being and liberation, members of vulnerable groups may feel stress relating to the failure of systems to support their action and warn that community leaders may be especially prone to burnout. In the case of community academy, activism had positive outcomes at the individual family and community levels. However, on the policy level, change was very limited.

In the past, rising inequalities inspired community activism around the world, in areas such as civil rights, occupy movements, and the environment (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018). At the threshold of a new decade, social and political divides deepen, and inequality is growing in many countries, and the call for social change is on the rise. Once again sweeping social movements highlight the power of local communities to support and inspire social action. Community organizing has the potential to shift power and propel change, particularly when implemented within a well-developed, clear framework (Diebold, 2020). The study suggests that using CAE in community organizing can promote such change. Critical thinking and social action have an age-old connection, articulated in one of Marx's best-known quotes: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (Marx, 1845). The concept of praxis, which refers to the relationship between theory and practice, implies that critical ideas without social intervention are insufficient, and vice versa (Freire, 2006; Ollis, 2015).

This study's findings suggest that incorporating CAE into community organizing has several advantages for multiracial and multicultural communities that face injustice. Since it openly engages with racial, ethnic, gender, and other forms of group diversity, applying CAE to community organizing has the advantage of building stronger relationships and facilitating sociopolitical consciousness for both activists and professionals. The critical consciousness developed through this process can potentially counter neoliberal policies that have exacerbated the social problem community professionals face (Nelson, 2013). When working together, the dynamics of critical pedagogy encourages activists and practitioners to reexamine traditional power structures and consider the mechanisms that diminish human rights and the freedom to organize, while expanding power to businesses and corporations (Reisch, 2013). The study also highlights factors that should be considered when implementing this approach. First, compared to classic community organizing strategies, CAE requires longer learning processes that generally consume more time and resources. This may be a drawback for organizers that have little resources or when people need to be quickly organized to take urgent action. Second, critical engagement within-group diversity in communities is a complex endeavor. Even when skillfully facilitated, it entails conflict that might not be resolved

during the organizing process and may be influenced by conditions that are out of the communities' control. Lastly, although CAE was empowering for activists at the individual-family level and promoted a significant change in the community, the national policy change was perceived as negligible. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the use of this approach for wider policy change.

Brady et al. (2014) suggest that critical education initiatives, such as folk schools and freedom schools, that are separate from mainstream community-based organizations, government, and academia, can replace some of the neoliberal practices in dominant institutions. In Israel, schools for community activists were historically initiated by the government, and courses were given by private and public organizations, yet their numbers have declined (York & Havassy, 1993). This calls attention to the role of professionals and institutions. Since organizing is a highly participatory practice, people and their communities, rather than professionals, are considered the experts of their predicament and of the social change they seek (Diebold, 2020). Social justice initiatives in many countries have been successfully pursued, both at the state and at the community level, by broad social movements which did not formally involve the work of professionals. In the past, Highlander and similar institutions have employed professionals to help provide expertise, financial resources, and social support. Outside professionals worked with community members as equals, creating an atmosphere of mutual learning, respect, and support (Brady et al., 2014; Horton & Freire, 1990; Levine, 2004). In this model, professionals acknowledge their place in the existing power structures and adopt a nonexpert position. Governments and other institutions, that have participated in creating and sustaining mechanisms of exclusion, may continue their involvement in community organizing. Therefore, professionals must examine the institutional setting in which their work is facilitated with respect to community trust and traditional power hierarchies involving racial, ethnic, gender, and other differences.

This qualitative study has limitations due to the number of participants and the specific social setting in which it was conducted. Further research in other social, political, and institutional contexts is needed to explore the application of CAE with respect to community organizing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Dassi Postan-Aizik http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5629-005X

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