

Advice from the National Union of Teachers

# Conflict in the Middle East – issues for schools

*“If we are to have real peace, we must begin with the children.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

## Background

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing dispute which generates a wide variety of views and opinions. Some of the major aspects of the conflict include: its history and work to bring peace; groups and how relations between groups can lead to conflict; injustice and skills in dealing with conflict.

The recent escalation of violence in Israel/Gaza has caused much distress and anger. In the UK increasing levels of racism against Muslim and Jewish communities in particular are a consequence of the events in the Middle East. The life of a school is strongly influenced by such outside factors and challenges the work of teachers.

Teachers at some schools, for example, are facing a sensitive task responding to Muslim and Jewish pupils' reactions to the events (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 16th January 2009). The NUT is confident that members will continue to rise to the challenge of educating individuals who can contribute to a more peaceful future. This guidance is designed to help them do so.



The situation in the Middle East means that teachers may need to tackle particular issues such as anti-Arab or anti-Asian sentiment, Islamophobia and antisemitism within each school's more general efforts to educate against racism. The advice contained in this guidance is relevant to all schools. While some of these challenges relate to short-term measures that may need to be addressed following the recent escalation of violence, there are longer-term issues around anti-racism that can be addressed through the curriculum and the promotion of a positive school ethos.

## The challenges

- Muslim and Jewish pupils may be targeted by other pupils and adults both within and outside the school.
- Muslim and Jewish staff may face hostility from pupils and parents.
- There may be a hardening of views amongst the school community on issues surrounding Islam, Judaism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Pupils with family or other personal connections in Israel or Palestine may be particularly distressed.
- There may be a need to deal with questions from pupils on issues around democracy, justice and human rights.

## A whole school approach

It would be helpful if teachers were to consider collectively the difficulties they may face. A whole school approach should be developed, aimed at providing support to individual teachers faced with pupils experiencing difficulties. A calm environment will of course assist pupils to cope with any stress arising from their personal circumstances.

Although the response of schools to the impact of the Middle East conflict will depend upon circumstances and the individual needs of pupils, it is worth noting that racist attacks on Muslims and Jews in the UK have risen as a result of similar events in the Middle East over

the past decades. Addressing the issues with pupils may help to avoid racist attacks and abuse and ensure that they are given a more balanced view than may be provided by the media or their peers.

## Support from outside agencies

In looking at issues around racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia, schools may want to involve the wider community, including parents and religious and community groups, to provide an outside perspective.

Information on outside agencies which can offer additional support to staff should be made available in the school. For example:

- educational psychologists;
- local authority support services with expertise in race equality matters, PSHE, citizenship and religious education; and
- organisations working in the field such as Inter Faith Network ([www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)), and Citizenship Foundation ([www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk](http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk))

## Supporting teachers

Teachers may be faced with the additional responsibility of helping pupils deal with their emotional responses to the conflict in the Middle East. Teachers too may need assistance in coping with the emotional demands made on them. Some Jewish, or Muslim teachers may be vulnerable in schools, fearing abuse from pupils and/or parents. Teachers may also face discrimination, harassment, or isolation in the workplace. This quote is from the Jewish Teachers Association but is equally applicable to Muslim teachers: "teachers...might have a range of opinions about the conflict which they might feel apprehensive discussing" and "Jewish [or Muslim]...teachers are often a tiny minority in the staff...and thus can feel pressure as a representative of an entire people. This can be more intense when in an environment of people with contrary views."

Hence, there is a need for staff support to be built into the whole school approach.

## Tension between different ethnic and religious communities

A major issue which may arise is the possibility of heightened tension between different ethnic and religious communities within the school, mirroring that already being seen in the wider society. This is particularly true where negative and stereotyped views of Islam and Muslims, Arabs, or Judaism and Jews are held. An early recognition of the problem and action to deal with it will help to diffuse the situation before it escalates.

The NUT advises the following in dealing with tensions between different ethnic and religious communities:

- Schools should be vigilant for any signs of name calling, abuse and bullying, particularly of Middle Eastern, Muslim or Jewish pupils, and for any signs of tension between pupils.
- Schools should reiterate to teachers, pupils and parents their policies and procedures for tackling racial or religious harassment.
- Any taunting or abuse on grounds of assumed membership of an ethnic or religious community should be firmly but sensitively dealt with as part of the whole school approach to tackling discrimination and racism.
- It may be appropriate, if tensions are observed, to hold a school assembly or class discussion as necessary so that pupils can voice their feelings in a controlled and secure atmosphere. The situation may require opportunities for individual pupils to receive counselling away from the classroom on a one-to-one basis.
- Support should be offered to both the recipients and the perpetrators of religious or racial harassment.
- Curriculum opportunities, for example through History, could arise to improve pupils' factual knowledge and understanding of the events. Schools should tackle these issues within the overall context of their approach to anti-racism in the curriculum.

- Citizenship education and religious education about world faiths could also provide opportunities for information and discussion at both primary and secondary levels.
- It may be helpful to hold discussions and undertake activities around conflict resolution.
- Pupils should be reminded of the respect due to all ethnic and religious communities. It may be helpful to plan co-operative projects involving pupils from different ethnic groups as a way of reducing tension. Above all, prejudice should be countered and replaced with information, and respect should be fostered throughout the school as a community. In cases of difficulty, relationships established with local community groups may prove very beneficial and parental involvement may be required.

## Pastoral support

There may be children and young people who will be frightened and upset by pictures and reports they see on television or the internet. Teachers should try to alert parents to the advisability of appropriate discussion with young children to allay their fears.

It will be important for teachers to respond sensitively to the worries and fears of all pupils. Helping them express those fears may enable them to cope. It may also be useful to give pupils an opportunity to discuss their worries openly and help them get the dangers into perspective. Teachers will know how best to respond to the individual needs of their pupils.

After school and youth clubs and young people's centres, as well as schools, can provide opportunities for older pupils to discuss the issues with their peer group and other adults.

## Teaching about controversial issues

The Citizenship Foundation points out that it is important for teachers to distinguish between their role as private citizens and their

role as public educators. Teachers are bound by law not to promote partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in schools. The Education Act 1996 (Sections 406 and 407) requires governing bodies, head teachers and local authorities to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to pupils' attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of conflicting views.

In practice, the Foundation says, this means:

- giving equal importance to conflicting views and opinions;
- not presenting opinions as if they are facts;
- not implying a correct opinion through the choice of respondents in a discussion;
- not failing to challenge a one-sided consensus that emerges too quickly in the classroom; and
- presenting all information and opinion as open to interpretation, qualification and contradiction.

Teachers have a responsibility to help their pupils understand and formulate their views on important areas of public debate. In doing so, they cannot ignore the scope and seriousness of the situation in the Middle East. The emphasis on developing skills to resolve conflict peacefully is therefore important.

Parents and pupils hold a wide range of different beliefs. In any discussion of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict it is important for teachers to take an approach that allows all pupils to participate in and benefit from the exercise. When responding to enquiries from pupils about contentious issues it is important to remember the need to:

- establish ordered ways of proceeding that enable every pupil to have an input into the discussion;
- ensure that the views of everyone in the class are properly heard;
- moderate negative thinking and strong emotions;

- focus on evidence and valid information;
- represent the different points of view as accurately and fairly as possible;
- where possible, use a variety of outside and community sources; and
- demonstrate respect for all opinions.

## Challenging Islamophobia and antisemitism in schools

The Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, said at the Parliamentary Council against Antisemitism that: *'No democratic state is entitled to consider itself beyond reproach, and Israel is a democracy'*.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, important that discussion about Israel does not descend into antisemitism, just as discussion of Palestine should not descend into Islamophobic or anti-Arab sentiment. In any context, discussions about the particular policies of a government should not be allowed to develop into criticism of a particular religion or race.

The Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism pointed to some important similarities and differences between antisemitism and Islamophobia. The similarities include the following: both Jews and Muslims are perceived by people hostile to them to be foreigners and intruders; there is a strong religious component in both kinds of hostility and the negative stereotypes prevalent in both kinds of hostility are used to justify exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination.

## What teachers can do

Antisemitism and Islamophobia are issues for all schools regardless of the number of Jewish or Muslim pupils or staff within the school. Schools have a crucial role to play in helping dispel myths about Jewish and Muslim communities and promoting social justice for all pupils. Depending on the age and maturity of the pupils and using their professional judgement, teachers can help pupils:

- find out some basic facts and figures about Muslim and Jewish communities in Britain today and the history of these communities in the Middle East;

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, 28 February 2002

- examine the connections, similarities and differences between Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the context of religious education;
- understand that there is no natural link between Muslims and terrorism;
- understand Islam and Muslims and Judaism and Jews by rejecting popular stereotypes;
- understand discrimination experienced by Jews and Muslims and the impact this discrimination has had upon their communities;
- engage critically with stereotypes of Jews and Muslims in films, art and literature;
- challenge Islamophobia and antisemitic lies within the broader framework of anti-racism, equality, fairness, human rights and social justice;
- encourage pupils to challenge their friends who display Islamophobic and/or antisemitic behaviour; and
- challenge prejudice in whatever form it presents itself.

### **Issues to consider when discussing the conflict in the Middle East**

While discussing issues arising from the conflict in the Middle East, teachers should seek to:

- promote dialogue, including helping pupils to identify assumptions, appreciate different points of view and analyse sources for bias and balance;
- encourage pupils to recognise that there are no simple questions and certainly no easy answers;
- help pupils understand that there are often many and conflicting narratives, all of which may be equally valid;
- enable pupils to appreciate complexities and different perspectives; and
- provide space for pupils to share feelings, based on agreed ground rules, while discussing what may be emotive subjects.

### **Further advice**

Useful websites for further advice and guidance, particularly on issues related to teaching about controversial issues, Islamophobia and antisemitism, are:

#### **Anne Frank House**

There are several websites teaching about antisemitism and racism, and tolerance and anti-bias education more generally, through the inspiration of Anne Frank's diary. Links to most of them are accessible through the site of Anne Frank House, based in Amsterdam. [www.annefrank.org](http://www.annefrank.org)

#### **Anti Sectarian Education**

'Don't give it, don't take it': definitions and vivid practical suggestions for primary and secondary classrooms, with a recently added section on Islamophobia. Intended for schools across Scotland, but the approaches are relevant in many other contexts as well. <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/antisectarian/index.asp>

#### **Citizenship Foundation**

Many ideas for teaching about current affairs and controversial issues, including situations in the Middle East, Education for Citizenship, Diversity and Race Equality: a practical guide contains several valuable discussions of how to plan and organise lessons about race and racism. [www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk](http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk).

#### **Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia**

The full text of the Commission's 2004 report, plus also some extracts from it, including articles entitled *Islamophobia and Race Relations and Debate and Disagreement*. More recently, there's the full text of *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media*, plus several articles similarly about depictions of Islam in the media. [www.insted.co.uk/islam.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/islam.html)

## **Council for Arab British Understanding**

Contains resources for citizenship education, particularly in relation to media literacy.  
[www.caabu.org/education](http://www.caabu.org/education)

## **Holocaust Educational Trust**

Resources for citizenship education, including reference to racism, fascism, human rights and the role of the media.  
<http://www.thinkequal.com/>

## **Oasis of Peace**

A citizenship project for 14 to 18 year olds including mediation and peace making skills based on ideas developed at the School for Peace in the Arab/Jewish village Neve Shalom~Wahat al Salam  
[www.oasisofpeaceuk.org/5-dwc-01.htm](http://www.oasisofpeaceuk.org/5-dwc-01.htm)

## **Oxfam**

Very useful guidance for teachers on dealing with controversial issues  
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/>

## **Philosophy for Children**

'We need above all to help children develop the general disposition to think better': the practical techniques and theoretical insights of Philosophy for Children (P4C) are highly relevant for teaching about controversial issues, particularly issues to do with prejudice. The website gives a flavour of the approach and information about courses and publications.  
[www.sapere.net](http://www.sapere.net)

**[www.teachers.org.uk](http://www.teachers.org.uk)**

