Racism and Anti-Semitism: Issues for Teachers and Schools

All forms of racism are unacceptable

The ongoing instability in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, the continuing effects of September 11th, the election of BNP councillors and increasing numbers of racist attacks have led to fear and concern amongst all minority ethnic communities.

Anti-Semitism is on the rise. In Britain, attacks on Jewish people or property have increased by 260 per cent over a two year period. 1 There have been attacks on synagogues, Jewish schools and community centres and the desecration of Jewish graves with swastikas.

In France, 455 racist and anti-Semitic incidents occurred in one term prompting the French Government to take strong action to deal with racism in schools. Teachers were also reporting that teaching about the Holocaust in some classrooms had become impossible because of the hostility towards the subject by students of Arab origin.

Anti-Semitism has connections and similarities with other forms of racism. There are some important similarities and overlaps between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. There is a strong religious element, for example, in both kinds of hostility and negative stereotypes are used to justify exclusion and discrimination. It is therefore important that action at school level against anti-Semitism is integrated with action against other forms of racism and discrimination. The struggle against racism should be holistic and indivisible: an attack on one minority group is an attack on all.

Anti-Semitism

Discrimination occurs not only on the basis of ‘colour’, but also on the basis of culture, religion, custom and language. Anti-Semitism is a form of racism in which hostility towards culture and religion is a major factor.

The Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism said that “modern antisemitism tends to be quasi-racial, in that it is Jews as a people who are the objects of prejudice, rather than the religion”. The Commission went on to state that: “Irrespective of its origins or motivation, antisemitism has invariably involved harassment, abuse and violence against persons, buildings and symbols.” 2

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1 Searchlight, February 2003, p. 6.
2 A very light sleeper, the persistence and dangers of anti-Semitism, Review by the Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism, November 1997.
Anti-Semitism is the strong dislike or cruel and unfair treatment of Jewish people. Tackling anti-Semitism is a central element of any school’s efforts to address racism. Prejudice against Jewish students or staff may take the form of:

- Racist insults
- Graffiti
- Physical attacks
- Intimidation
- Exclusion by peers

It is also important that teachers respond to any racist language they hear even if they have no Jewish pupils in their class. Allowing racist language, whichever group it is directed against, to go unchallenged will give racism a degree of legitimacy to other pupils.

**The Jewish community in the UK**

Clear records exist of Jewish settlements before 1066. However, most Jews in Britain today are descendants of those who emigrated to the UK from Eastern Europe between 1870 to 1914 and established communities in the East End of London and Manchester. The Jewish population in the UK also increased as a result of persecution in Nazi Germany. Research indicates that there were over 400,000 Jews in the UK in the 1950s. Since this period there has been a steady decline in the Jewish population.

There are other large Jewish populations in Manchester, Leeds, Brighton and Hove, Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow and Cardiff. The 2001 census revealed that the vast majority of local authorities in England and Wales have Jewish constituents. As individuals, Jews can be found in all areas of Britain.

The 2001 census reported that there were 267,000 Jews living in the UK representing 0.5 per cent of the population. The figure is likely to be slightly higher as it was reported that some Jewish people did not wish to register their religion to the Government. The 2001 census also reported that 86 per cent of Jews in Britain are British born.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews estimated in 1995 that the main centre of Jewish population is Greater London and the contiguous counties, which comprises 72 per cent of the British Jewish population.

There are a number of Jewish-only schools. The Board of Deputies of British Jews reported in 1999 that there were 135 Jewish day schools and synagogue classes of which about 40 per cent are state maintained and follow the National Curriculum.

It is important to recognise the connections and differences between religion, culture and ethnicity when working with Jewish pupils. Some Jewish pupils may simply engage in Jewish events such as Passover without completely following Judaism - in the same way that students take part in Easter and Christmas events without identifying themselves as Christians. Pupils who neither follow Judaism nor take part
in Jewish cultural events may self identify as Jewish; others who do not identify themselves as Jewish or take part in religious or cultural events may be identified as Jewish by others and face hostility simply on the basis of their names. Jewish identity is complex. It is important to recognise that teachers and schools may not even be aware that they have Jewish pupils in the classroom.

**Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia**

The Runnymede Commission on anti-Semitism revealed some important similarities and differences between anti-Semitism 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.

Whilst recognising the sensitivities surrounding the situation in the Middle East, it is vital that there is an attempt to build understanding between Muslim and Jewish pupils in schools. It is therefore imperative that anti-racist work in schools embraces work to combat both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. This is entirely in keeping with the NUT’s policy on education for peace.

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 and has applications for all pupils throughout their school careers.

**Challenges for schools**

The challenge for schools in dealing with racism has never been greater. Schools do not operate in a vacuum. The racist views of some parents, or of people in the community, can often seep into the school and pose problems for teachers and support staff. The situation in the Middle East means that teachers may need to tackle particular issues around anti-Semitism within each school’s more general efforts to educate against racism.

*The potential challenges that schools face relate to:*

- Jewish pupils being targeted by other pupils and adults both within and outside the school;
- Jewish staff who may face hostility from pupils and parents;
- the use of racist or ill-considered language against Jews when discussing events in Israel; and
- the possibility of a hardening of views amongst the school community on issues such as Judaism and the role of Jewish people in the UK.
The advice contained in the NUT’s guidance is relevant to all schools, including faith based schools, whether or not they have any Jewish pupils on the school register.

**Supporting teachers**

Teachers may be personally distressed by racist incidents within their classroom. Many teachers who respond to racist behaviour within the classroom are criticised or face pressure from the parents of those who have been reprimanded. Therefore, teachers may need assistance and support with coping with the emotional demands made upon them.

Some Jewish teachers may also be particularly vulnerable in schools, both from pupils and parents. Where members believe that they are the victims of anti-Semitism they should contact their NUT Regional Office or, in Wales, the NUT Wales Office to seek guidance and advice.

It is vital that all teachers have professional development opportunities which aim to provide them with the tools to tackle anti-Semitism in schools. The NUT recommends that anti-Semitism is tackled as part of the schools’ professional development strategy on promoting race equality.

**Dealing with anti-Semitism**

Anti-Semitism is an issue for all schools regardless of the number of Jewish pupils or staff within the school. Schools have a crucial role to play in helping dispel myths about Jewish communities and promoting social justice for all pupils. Teaching about racism and anti-Semitism will have a profound effect on their understanding and attitudes. Set out in the guidance are possible ways of challenging anti-Semitism in schools. Depending on the age and maturity of the pupils and using their professional judgement, teachers can help pupils:

- examine the connections, similarities and differences between Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the context of religious education;
- understand discrimination experienced by Jews and the impact that discrimination has had upon the Jewish community;
- challenge anti-Semitism within the broader framework of anti-racism, equality, fairness and social justice. Encourage pupils to challenge their friends who display anti-Semitic behaviour;
- find out some basic facts and figures about the Jewish communities in Britain today. The Board of Deputies of British Jews website [www.bod.org.uk](http://www.bod.org.uk) is a useful resource;
- understand Judaism and Jews by rejecting popular stereotypes (the Jewish banker, greedy materialist, traitors);
- use the teaching about the Holocaust to illustrate the consequences of anti-Semitism (there is helpful material available from The Holocaust Educational Trust website [www.het.org.uk](http://www.het.org.uk));
- engage critically with stereotypes of Jews in films, art and literature; and
- challenge prejudice in whatever form it presents itself.

Schools should also reiterate to pupils and all staff in the school their policies and procedures for tackling racist harassment.
Race Relations (Amendment) Act

Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act schools have a duty to promote good race relations, equality of opportunity and to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination. All schools should have a Race Equality Policy in place and schools should address the issue of anti-Semitism as part of that policy.

Whole school approach

Teachers should take a whole school approach to dealing with anti-Semitism and racism in general by bearing in mind the points set out below:

- Curriculum opportunities could arise to improve pupils’ factual knowledge and understanding of Jews and the nature of anti-Semitism. The study of art, literature and history provide many opportunities to tackle issues of anti-Semitism. Further advice is available from the NUT’s document - Anti Racist Curriculum Guidelines available on the NUT website - www.teachers.org.uk.
- Religious education about world faiths could also provide opportunities for information and discussion at both primary and secondary levels.
- The new citizenship requirements mean that all pupils will be taught about the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK and the need for mutual respect and understanding. Citizenship provides a distinct vehicle for pupils to develop an understanding of fairness and social justice; the nature of prejudice; anti-social and aggressive behaviour; and the skills to challenge unacceptable behaviour in appropriate ways.
- Schools should also use the Holocaust Memorial Day as an opportunity to raise the issue of anti-Semitism and its potential consequences among pupils. The Holocaust Memorial Day website (www.holocaustmemorialday.gov.uk) has a site for teachers and is worth visiting.

Teaching controversial issues

 Teachers should be at the forefront of dealing with racism in all its manifestations within schools. Racism and prejudice have no place in schools.

A particular challenge for schools is around discussions of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict. Parents and pupils hold a wide range of different beliefs and no attempt should be made to take a politically partisan approach or one which belittles a particular set of opinions. In any discussion of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict it is important for teachers to take an approach that allows all pupils to participate and benefit from the exercise. When responding to enquiries from pupils about contentious issues it is important to remember the need to:

- organise classroom discussion in ways which enable every pupil to have an input into that discussion;
- ensure that the views of everyone in the class are properly heard;
- moderate negative opinions 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 different opinions.

The Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, said at the Parliamentary Council against Anti-Semitism that: ‘No democratic state is entitled to consider itself beyond reproach, and Israel is a democracy’. It is however, important that discussion about Israel does not descend into anti-Semitism. No discussions about the particular policies of a government should be allowed to develop into criticism of a particular religion or race.

**Support from outside agencies**

In looking at issues around anti-Semitism, schools may want to involve the wider community including parents, religious and community groups to provide an outside perspective to pupils on the impact of racist abuse and vandalism.

There are agencies which provide assistance to schools in teaching about the Holocaust and its implications for Jewish communities. The Holocaust Educational Trust works with schools throughout the country to promote education about the Holocaust and its relevance today. The Trust has worked with schools in providing speakers, teacher training, teaching aids and resource materials. The Trust can be contacted on:

Website: [http://www.het.org.uk](http://www.het.org.uk)
Email: info@het.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7222 6822

The Board of Deputies of British Jews have a useful website, as well as an education department which is able to provide advice, speakers and materials to tackle anti-Semitism in schools.

Website: [http://www.bod.org.uk](http://www.bod.org.uk)
Email: info@bod.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7543 5400

The Inter-Faith Network is a charity working to promote good relations between different religious groups. The Inter-Faith Network can be contacted on:

Website: [http://www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)
Email: ifnet@interfaith.org.uk

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3 The Guardian, 28th February 2002.
“Religion can be a source of discord. It can also be a form of conflict resolution. We are familiar with the former; the second is far too little tried. Yet it is here, if anywhere, that hope must lie if we are to create a human solidarity strong enough to bear the strains that lie ahead. The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and for the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search - each faith in its own way - for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of those who are not our faith. Can we make space for difference?”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
“The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations”, 2002

Further reading

- A very light sleeper, the persistence and dangers of antisemitism, Review by the Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism, November 1997.
- War in Iraq, The Impact on Schools, Advice from the National Union of Teachers, 2003.
- Islamophobia – A Challenge for us All, The Runnymede Trust, 1997