

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 NUT believes that education can and does change attitudes.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing and complex dispute which generates a wide variety of views and opinions.

Any escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine causes much distress and anger. In the UK real or perceived increases in Islamophobia or antisemitism can arise as a consequence of the events in the Middle East. The life of a school is strongly influenced by such outside factors and poses a challenge to teachers.

Teachers at some schools, for example, face the sensitive task of responding to pupils' reactions, more so Muslim and Jewish pupils' reactions to the events. 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 advice is designed to help them do so.

The advice contained in this document is relevant to all schools. While some of these challenges relate to short-term measures which may need to be addressed following any escalation of violence, there are longer-term issues around antiracism 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 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

Teachers should consider the difficulties they may face collectively. 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 events in the Middle East over the past decades. Addressing the issues with pupils may help to avoid racist behaviour or cut out racist or abusive language. Schools should seek to address what may be a less than balanced picture in the media.

Support from outside agencies

In looking at issues around racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia, schools may want to involve the wider community, including parents, religious and/ or 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, where they still exist, 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), and Citizenship Foundation (www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk)

Supporting teachers

Teachers may be faced with the additional responsibility of helping pupils deal with their emotional responses to conflict in the Middle East. In turn, teachers may need assistance in coping with the emotional demands being placed upon 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.

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

Community Tension

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 Arabs, Islam and Muslims, 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 graffiti, name calling, abuse and bullying, particularly of Asian, Middle Eastern, Muslim or Jewish pupils, and for any signs of tension between pupils and take appropriate action.
- 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 or actual 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 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.
- Counselling, mediation and support.
- Take advantage of curriculum opportunities such as, Citizenship education and religious education about world faiths.
- 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. Schools should reiterate to teachers, pupils and parents their policies and procedures for tackling racial or religious harassment.

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 and other forms of social media. Teachers should try to alert parents to the advisability of appropriate discussion with young children to allay their fears.

It is 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 concerns openly and help them get their fears 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

It is important for teachers to distinguish between their role as private citizens and their role as public educators. Teachers work within a legal framework which gives rights and places duties on those within the education service. It is part of a teacher's duty 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, 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.

What teachers can do

Antisemitism and Islamophobia are issues for all schools. Schools have a crucial role to play in helping dispel myths about Jewish and Muslim communities:

- find out facts and figures about Muslim and Jewish communities in Britain today and the history of these communities in the Middle East;
- examine the connections, similarities and differences between Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the context of religious education;
- understand that there is no link between Islam and terrorism;

- understand Islam and Muslims and Judaism and Jews by rejecting typical/ common 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 antiracism, 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.

Resource Material

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

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.
www.ltscotland.org.uk/antisection/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

Education and Extremism

This NUT **advice and guidance** on the Prevent strategy for members in England and Wales includes practical suggestions about steps that you can take in your school/college towards discussing difficult, complex or controversial issues openly and safely. It also includes information about the Prevent duty statutory guidance, school inspection and useful resources for teachers.

Inservice Training and Educational Development

Countering Intolerance against Muslims through Education by Robin Richardson are notes designed to support *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance against Muslims* report by OSCE and ODIHR.
www.insted.co.uk/islam.html

Holocaust Educational Trust

Resources for citizenship education, including reference to racism, fascism, human rights and the role of the media.
www.het.org.uk

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

Oxfam

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

www.teachers.org.uk

