



# **Advice from the National Education Union**

Conflict in the Middle East:  
Issues for Schools



## Background

The NEU believes that education can and does change lives.

The long-standing and many-sided conflict between Israel and Palestine generates a wide variety of deeply-held opinions. People supporting both sides of the conflict often hold strong and passionate views.

The life of a school or college is strongly influenced by outside factors and the conflict can pose difficult challenges for staff. Staff may find that they must deal with the sensitive task of responding to pupils' reactions to violent events, particularly when there is a flare up in the conflict as in spring 2021. The NEU is confident that its members are skilled professionals who can meet the challenge of educating young people who can develop a firm understanding of human rights and can contribute to a more peaceful future. This advice aims to support members to do so.

It is important that any discussions within schools and colleges – both those formally arranged as part of classroom teaching and those that may take place informally between students and between staff – are conducted respectfully and calmly.

The advice contained in this document is relevant to all schools and colleges, though some of its content may be more appropriate to some sectors than others. While some of the challenges staff face may require short-term measures to be taken following an escalation of violence in the Middle East, there are also longer-

term issues around antiracism that can be addressed on an ongoing basis through the curriculum and by the promotion of a positive all-school environment and ethos.

## The Challenges

- ◆ Pupils and parents with family or friends in Israel or Palestine are likely to be particularly distressed by an upsurge in violence there, fearing for the lives and wellbeing of their loved ones.
- ◆ Some pupils and families may have been bereaved by the conflict. They will need support and understanding.
- ◆ Pupils may have seen media images of homes, public buildings or places of worship being attacked which can be deeply distressing.
- ◆ Events in the Middle East can trigger increases in both Islamophobia and antisemitism in the UK. Muslim and Jewish pupils, or those perceived to be Muslim or Jewish, may be the target of anger, hostility, racism or even violence both within and outside the school. This might come from other pupils, parents or the wider public.
- ◆ There may be a hardening of views about the conflict amongst some in the school and wider community which may spill over into the expression of wider negative views.
- ◆ Staff may struggle to deal with pupils' questions about political conflicts and violent events and the issues these raise around democracy, justice and human

rights. However, this can also be an opportunity to address these important subjects by building them into planning and teaching across the curriculum. Resources listed at the back of this advice may help you to do so.

- ♦ Some students may not want to participate in discussions about the political situation in the Middle East because they worry that their opinions will be ridiculed, that they may be misinterpreted, that others may become angry or that it will provoke strong feelings in themselves because the topic hits close to home.

## Community Tension

A major concern is the possibility of heightened tension between different communities within the school or college. Early recognition of the potential problem and an action plan to deal with it will help to avert or diffuse the situation before it escalates.

The NEU advises the following:

- ♦ Schools and colleges should be vigilant for any signs of tension between pupils such as graffiti, name calling, abuse or bullying and take appropriate action immediately.
- ♦ It may be appropriate, if tensions are observed, for schools and colleges to reiterate to staff, pupils and parents their policies and procedures for tackling racial or religious harassment. Holding an assembly or class discussion so that pupils can voice their feelings in a

controlled and secure atmosphere may be useful.

- ♦ 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/college approach to tackling discrimination and racism.
- ♦ Schools/colleges should ensure they have access to appropriate support, counselling and mediation services.
- ♦ Individual pupils may need to receive support and/or counselling away from the classroom on a one-to-one basis.
- ♦ Schools/colleges could consider taking advantage of curriculum opportunities such as history, geography, politics, citizenship education and religious education.
- ♦ It may be helpful to hold discussions and undertake activities around conflict resolution.
- ♦ Pupils should be reminded of the respect due to all viewpoints.

## A Whole School/College Approach

Staff should consider the challenges they may face collectively. A whole school/college approach should be developed aimed at supporting individual pupils or staff directly impacted by the Middle East conflict, or strongly engaged by the issues it raises, as well as supporting staff to identify and address any negative fallout arising from the conflict among pupils or families.

The response taken by schools/colleges will vary according to their particular circumstances and the individual needs of their pupils and families. However, staff should be aware that racist attacks on Muslim and Jewish people, or those perceived to be Muslim or Jewish, have risen in recent years and often spike as a result of events in the Middle East.

Addressing the issues with pupils at an early stage may help to avoid problems arising or becoming more serious.

To create a safe and supportive environment, schools/colleges, form groups and classes should be encouraged to make agreements about how discussions are conducted. These might include guidelines like 'listen respectfully', 'don't interrupt – wait your turn to speak', 'no name-calling', 'listen without judgment', 'share to your level of comfort', 'you have the right to pass'. Remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should be careful to use the word 'some', not 'all'; they should not ascribe political views to members of a particular faith group; and

that they should avoid stereotyping.

It is important for staff to model how to talk about sensitive and controversial topics by showing understanding and respect for different points of view and accepting that students may hold strong feelings.

## Media Literacy

Schools and colleges may also need to address what may be a less than balanced picture of the conflict in the media. Teaching media literacy has many benefits for students. These include:

- ◆ Learning how to think critically.
- ◆ Developing the ability to differentiate between fake and real news.
- ◆ Recognising perspective and the message 'behind' the message.
- ◆ Differentiating between 'fact' and 'opinion'.
- ◆ Understanding the need to consult a range of sources.
- ◆ Checking the veracity of source material.
- ◆ Learning how to use and to create media responsibly – both mainstream and social media.

Media literacy can be built into, and support, curriculum planning and teaching across a wide range of subjects.

## 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. Staff may need to alert parents to the advisability of appropriate discussion with young children to allay their fears.

It is important for staff 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. Staff will know how best to respond to the individual needs of 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.

## Supporting Staff

Staff may be faced with the additional responsibility of helping pupils deal with their emotional responses to conflict in the Middle East. In turn, staff may need support to cope with the emotional demands being placed upon them. They too may be vulnerable in schools and colleges, fearing difficult conversations or situations with pupils and/or parents. Staff may also face discrimination, harassment, or isolation in the workplace.

For these reasons, support for staff must be included into the whole school approach.

Support may already be available in schools and colleges via a pastoral support system or through access to clinical support services. In addition, there are links at the end of this document to organisations that can provide support to educators such as NEU Advice Line and the Education Support Partnership.

## Teaching about controversial issues

Education professionals understand the importance of distinguishing between their role as citizens and their role as public educators. Education staff 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.

However, the duty not to promote partisan political views does not require teachers to avoid controversial issues. In practice, this can mean:

- ◆ 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.

- ♦ Challenging a one-sided consensus that emerges too quickly in the classroom.
- ♦ Presenting all information and opinion as open to interpretation, qualification and contradiction.

## The Role of Staff

Staff 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 with other pupils and adults peacefully is therefore important. Parents and pupils hold a wide range of different beliefs and, in discussions on the conflict, staff should take an approach that allows all pupils to participate in and benefit from the exercise.

When responding to enquiries from pupils and/or discussing contentious issues, staff should seek to:

- ♦ Establish ground rules to create a safe environment, including rules of debate that make pupils feel safe to participate and share their opinions, whilst setting parameters that exclude intolerant, racist or abusive language or behaviour.
- ♦ Ensure there is sufficient time for all those who wish to share their views to do so.
- ♦ Encourage pupils to understand that there are no easy solutions to complex issues but enable them to appreciate complexities and different perspectives.
- ♦ Help pupils to understand that there are

often many and conflicting narratives, all of which may be equally valid.

- ♦ Promote dialogue, including helping pupils to identify assumptions, appreciate different points of view and analyse information sources for bias, credibility and balance.
- ♦ Moderate negative attitudes and strong emotions.
- ♦ Represent the different points of view as accurately and fairly as possible.
- ♦ Where possible, include a variety of outside and community sources.
- ♦ Demonstrate respect for all opinion holders but challenge if necessary and where opinions stray into prejudice or racism.
- ♦ Provide space for pupils to share feelings, based on agreed ground rules, while discussing what may be emotive subjects.

## What Staff Can Do

- ♦ Understand discrimination experienced by Jewish and Muslim communities historically and in contemporary society and the impact this discrimination has had upon their communities.
- ♦ Find out more about the conflict in the Middle East and other conflicts, their origins and recent developments and the ways in which the UK has influenced or been touched by them.

- ♦ Make a range of resources available to pupils from a number of different organisations (see Resources section), ensuring there is balance across the resources provided.
- ♦ Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer to a pupil's questions. Adopt an approach of saying "Why don't we try and find out the answer as a class?" It can be a useful way of modelling enquiry.
- ♦ Challenge stereotypes about Jewish or Muslim people, or those perceived to be Jewish or Muslim, and use the curriculum to explore how such stereotypes manifest themselves and are perpetuated in films, art, literature and so on.
- ♦ Use curriculum opportunities to explore the contribution of Jewish and Muslim people to the arts, literature, mathematics, philosophy, politics, science and so on.
- ♦ Challenge Islamophobia and antisemitism within the broader framework of antiracism, equality, fairness, human rights and social justice (see resources section).
- ♦ Ensure that pupils know where to go in school and to whom they should report hate speech or racist incidents.
- ♦ Celebrate diversity and challenge prejudice in whatever form it occurs.

## Schools and Colleges' Legal Duties

### Equality Act Public Sector Equality Duty

Schools and colleges, along with all public institutions, have a legal duty to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.

Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010.

Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Foster good relations across all protected characteristics - between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

## Resources and Support

### Anti-Racism Resources

#### ♦ NEU Anti-Racism Charter

The Charter is designed to help educators explore ideas around race equality and plan how to tackle racism with children, young people and staff

#### ♦ Tackling Antisemitism

A page of useful resources produced by the NEU for educators, schools and colleges

#### ♦ Mosaic – victims of Nazi Persecution

A comprehensive set of teaching resources on the Holocaust and Nazi persecution, produced by the NEU and Holocaust Educational Trust

#### ♦ Talking about Antisemitism – A Guide for Union Representatives

A TUC guide for union reps on discussing and tackling antisemitism in the workplace.

#### ♦ Facing History and Ourselves

Facing History's resources address racism, antisemitism, and prejudice at pivotal moments in history. The organisation produces a wide range of flexible, multimedia materials, from primary sources and streaming video, to teaching strategies, lessons and units, and more.

#### ♦ Islamophobia Damages All of Us

A page of useful resources produced by the NEU for educators, schools and colleges

#### ♦ Tackling Islamophobia: A Children's Rights Resource for Secondary Schools in Wales.

This resource from the Children's Commissioner for Wales consists of three lesson plans, designed for secondary schools, to help increase awareness of Islamophobia, tackle common myths and misconceptions about Islam, and present the real-life experiences of young Muslims in Wales

#### ♦ Show racism the Red Card – Islamophobia Pack resources

Islamophobia education resource packs from the UK's largest anti-racism charity

#### ♦ Islamophobia Awareness

Resources from Islamophobia Awareness Month, co-founded by MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) to deconstruct and challenge stereotypes about Islam and Muslims



## NEU Behaviour Resources

The NEU has a host of useful behaviour resources on managing pupils/students' behaviour on its website [here](#)

### ♦ A Sense of Place and Belonging

The NEU's 'Belonging' research offers examples of how intentional whole-school practice can help create a climate of welcome and belonging in school.

Part 1 of the research, Belonging and Leadership, shows that where school leaders develop an intentional approach focused on changing learning and teaching, that this led to reshaping expectations and the culture of the school by all.

Part 2 of the research, Belonging and Culture, puts relationships between students and staff at the heart of the cycle of connectivity where they are heard and seen for who they are.

## Legal Resources

### ♦ The Public Sector Equality Duty

Teaching Difficult and Controversial Issues

### ♦ Young Citizens

Young Citizens is an education charity working in primary and secondary schools to help educate, inspire and motivate the active citizens of tomorrow. It provides advice and ideas for teaching about current affairs. It provides downloadable, free teaching resources on a range of citizenship issues including:

## Managing Controversy in Schools

### Teaching Controversial issues

#### ♦ Oxfam

Oxfam has produced Teaching Controversial Issues, A Guide for Teachers, which aims to support staff in developing essential skills that allow learners to constructively discuss their own values and ideas and develop as active global citizens.

## PSHE/Citizenship Education

### ♦ Association for Teaching Citizenship

The professional subject association for citizenship education:

[teachingcitizenship.org.uk](http://teachingcitizenship.org.uk)

Its website signposts to a range of resources - see the full list [here](#)

**Unit 15 in key stage 3 looks at migration including Syria and children's rights**

**Unit 6 at key stage 4 lesson about the UK's role in the global community**

### ♦ PSE Association

The association for PSHE teachers, leads and other practitioners

## Literature

Much writing for children touches on themes of conflict. UNICEF has published **'Poems for Peace'**

**The Love My Books** team have highlighted picture books which enable younger children to respond to issues of conflict.

## Support for Staff

- ♦ **Education Support Partnership**

A mental health and wellbeing charity for those working in education

- ♦ **NEU Advice Line**

NEU advice line providing guidance to NEU members about employment rights or help with problems in the workplace.