Creating a respectful environment and facilitating discussions about Palestine: Guidance for schools

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Creating a respectful environment and facilitating discussions about Palestine in Schools

A guidance note from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

June 2021

MEND's guide to facilitating discussions about Palestine

In recent weeks, MEND's Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) have received hundreds of reports from students and parents across the country highlighting the approach of many schools in curtailing or prohibiting expressions of Palestinian solidarity and shutting down debate rather than engaging in a civil and respectful dialogue about the current situation in Occupied Palestine.

Below is a brief guide detailing considerations and recommendations that schools may find helpful in ensuring that all students are provided with the opportunity to express their views, ask questions, and exchange ideas in a positive atmosphere.

A respectful school environment for the discussion of differences

Many students will currently wish to discuss the situation in Palestine and Israel, which may include expressing their views on the conflict and their solidarity with a given side. Unfortunately, recent weeks have seen a clampdown amongst schools regarding expressions of Palestinian solidarity fuelled by a lack of understanding of facilitating discussion. Democracy involves differences of opinion, and it is fundamental that schools be able to discuss contentious issues. This gives an opportunity for misconceptions to be clarified, and exposes pupils to contrasting points of view.

There are many examples of good practice for schools to follow, and it is our hope that schools would identify a 'champion' for the discussion of contentious issues to identify best practice and provide guidance. We draw attention to the Council for Europe's (2015) guidance on Teaching Controversial Issues, and the Association for Citizenship Teaching's (2015) guidance on the Prevent Duty and Teaching Controversial Issues. Topics need to be approached in a way that allows the expression of legitimate differences of opinion so that a topic can be fully explored in a setting that is supportive for all children.

- While anti-Semitic language and behaviour must be confronted and should not be tolerated, the mere advocating for the human rights of Palestinians or criticising the actions of the Israeli Government cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic. The shutting down of these expressions of opinion sends a false and discriminatory, message that they are anti-Semitic and, therefore, these students themselves are somehow racist.

- Misguided and inaccurate statements have been made by some senior school officials equating Palestinian activism with terrorism and violent behaviour. In at least one example reported to us, the Palestinian flag was even described as a "call to arms". Again, supporting the human rights and freedom of Palestinians is in no way an indication of violent intent but is a symbol within democratic engagement and debate. As such, the implicit labelling of students who care deeply about human rights and justice as violent or equating them with terrorism is a disservice to their genuine desire

to make the world a better place. At the same time, due to the securitised lens through which Muslim students are often seen, these students are especially sensitive to the perceived threat that measures under PREVENT will be used against them.

- As well as this, in some of the cases received by the IRU, there have been incidents where teachers have made problematic statements. Some concerning statements include stating that it is Palestine's fault that they were being bombed; that Palestine does not matter; and, even using Islamophobic language and slurs (such as P**i). Such divisive and prejudicial language should be resolutely condemned and challenged at all levels. Schools need to be able to appreciate what behaviour and statements from staff members is not acceptable and is prejudicial, and be aware of the consequences of statements made by their staff. If you believe your school could benefit from specific guidance on how to identify problematic behaviour from staff members, and how to tackle it, please contact MEND.

Facilitating healthy expressions

Small expressions of solidarity can be very beneficial to students' own sense of self and agency. Examples of activities that can encourage positive mechanisms of expression include:

- Wearing a pin badge, kufiyahs, or wristbands.

- Allowing the display of the Palestinian flag.

- Encouraging artwork, poetry, or other creative activities that facilitate student expressions of solidarity.

- Fundraising for humanitarian aid charities working in the region, and which are chosen in collaboration with the students.

- Schools may wish to consider implementing a suggestion box for students to raise their own ideas for approved activities.

Conversely, a prohibition of such expressions can be counter-productive, leading to escalation of behaviours rightly of concern to a school (such as graffiti or anti-social behaviour). Such restrictions also severely damage the trust that students have in their school and teachers. They compound a sense of frustration and helplessness that will necessarily impact their wider engagement with the school, and therefore their relationship with education and wider society as a result. This is why we believe that facilitated discussions and expressions are not only beneficial to all parties, but is vital to establish and maintain the trust required for a flourishing school community.

Facilitated discussions

Many students have become frustrated about the lack of progress to resolve the situation in Palestine and would benefit from an organised and supported opportunity to discuss their concerns. As this is a highly emotive topic, things to consider are:

- **Discussion style**: These discussions are often more suited to smaller groups as they provide greater opportunities for individual engagement. Large assemblies and large group settings do not always allow students to say everything that they would like and are more difficult to chair and fairly manage. It is useful to consider the format of the discussions:

  o **Open forum**: A general open discussion can be guided by pre-prepared open questions for discussion and allows for students to freely express their own

opinions. However, they also run the risk of students feeling intimidated if they are of the minority viewpoint. Students should be encouraged to understand the positions of those with whom they initially might disagree.

- o **Organised debate:** An organised debate may be preferable as it encourages students to consider viewpoints that contradict their own. Students should be separated into opposing groups by numbers and without reference to their individual perspectives (i.e., some students will find themselves arguing for a position that they don't necessarily agree with). At the same time, it is helpful to identify a specific and targeted question that avoids a broad analysis of a conflict that is far too wide to attempt to analyse in a short debate. In this way, students can be given the opportunity to thoroughly research the issues and present a case with greater reflection. At the same time, it avoids the risks found in an open forum where students from a minority viewpoint may feel intimidated or inhibited from participating. The format may be thought to involve a significant amount of time and preparation, but we think it might be considered as part of a school's general approach to citizenship education.

- **Ways to facilitate discussions**: It is important that staff, guest speakers, and/or senior pupils facilitating these discussions allow space for students to express themselves without judgement, regardless of their own political viewpoints. Their own viewpoints may be used to stimulate debate, but this should only be done with a view to legitimate the expression of different views, rather than to uphold one view against others. This does not mean ignoring or allowing hateful, Islamophobic, or anti-Semitic rhetoric. It is for this reason that it is important to introduce the overall discussion with an exploration of ground rules and terminology (as discussed below).

- **Encouraging participation:** Students may feel uncomfortable contributing, particularly if they are in the minority and if the discussion is very passionate. However, facilitators should also be aware of wider sensitivities that impact their students and which may impact their ability to participate fully:

- o *Muslim students:* Muslim students have been shown to be inhibited from contributing to classroom discussions due to the chilling effect of the PREVENT strategy and fears that political engagement will be interpreted as a sign of extremism. As highlighted by Rights Watch UK, "the Prevent strategy is leaving a generation of young Britons fearful of exercising their rights to freedom of expression and belief". Considering the wide-ranging evidence of PREVENT's disproportionate focus on Muslims, students from Muslim backgrounds will likely need particular reassurance that their contributions are valid and welcome. The wider issue of PREVENT in classroom discussions about Palestine will be discussed further below.

At the same time, Muslim students are likely to also experience Islamophobia, particularly around the issue of Palestine, with accusations that support of Palestine is tantamount to support of terrorism or anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, with Palestinians being majority Muslim and continuing to live under what the UN describes as illegal occupation whilst being deprived of all physical, political, social, and cultural freedom, many Muslim students may feel frustrated and a sense of helpless in these discussions. This feeling of helplessness can only be compounded if students feel that they are likely to experience negative consequences and judgement for standing against such injustice.

o *Jewish students:* Jewish students frequently suffer anti-Semitism in relation to Israel and assumptions that they support or are in some way responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government. Furthermore, Jewish students may also experience accusations of Islamophobia on account of the conflict. As such, it is important to have conversations with students about the terminologies outlined below and highlighting the need to be mindful of how language and assumptions may impact fellow students.

A useful practice at the beginning of any discussion is to acknowledge the emotive quality of the conflict and reassure students that feeling frustration at injustices is to be expected. It is important that students are made to feel at the outset that their views will be respected without judgement.

It is also helpful to consider techniques for managing the discussion to ensure that all students have the time and space to express themselves, for example having timed speaking allocations or assigning a speaker order list.

Understanding terminology and describing opposing parties

One of the great difficulties in discussions surrounding Palestine is the risk of falling into Islamophobic or anti-Semitic rhetoric. When creating the safe environment outlined above, it is helpful to introduce students to the below concepts and explain the limits of the discussion around these terms. If attempting this exercise before an organised discussion, it is advisable to reserve considerable time as it is essential in delineating legitimate political discourse and ensuring that all students are mindful of the risks of inadvertently reverting to hateful words and behaviour.

- **Israel does not represent all Jews:** in fact, many Jews ardently oppose the Israeli Government's treatment of Palestinian populations.

- **Hamas does not represent all Palestinians:** Again, many Palestinians do not support Hamas, and everyday Palestinians have no power to control their actions.

- **A Jewish vs Muslim conflict:** Stress that this is <u>not</u> a religious conflict – it is about rights to the land and representation. Reducing the conflict to one of hatred between Muslims and Jews is unhelpful and divisive as it obscures the political and historical context of the conflict.

- **The Israeli Government:** In avoiding discussions surrounding Jewish communities, we advise practitioners to concentrate discussions around the actions of the *Israeli Government.* Critical analysis of any government is a legitimate part of democratic debate and removes the risk of assigning blame to communities.

Avoiding the language of security

We are aware that schools are required to promote 'fundamental British values'. We believe that it would be beneficial if schools were to shift the term 'British' from being a description of the values – an adjective – to a noun describing a place. In other words, emphasis might be on fundamental values that facilitate living together in Britain. In this way, the traditions – religious, cultural – of pupils from different ethnic and minority religious backgrounds might be used as a resource for understanding and interpreting those values. For example, during the Covid 19 pandemic, many religious communities have provided support for others within their localities.

However, it has come to our attention that PREVENT teams across the country have sent guidance to a number of schools. We are concerned that this may result in framing the issue

of Palestine within the lens of security and counter-terror. This is a hugely dangerous approach with severe consequences for democracy and for any attempts to nurture students into mature and active citizens.

While this brief guidance note does not provide space to fully discuss the problematic nature of PREVENT and its discriminatory impact upon Muslim students specifically, it is helpful to explore Rights Watch UK's report *Preventing Education? Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools* and MEND's *Evidence to the Independent Review of PREVENT*.

One of the key criticisms of PREVENT is the chilling effect that it has on the political engagement of Muslim students. Therefore, it is important that teachers and staff are mindful of their Public Sector Equality Duty to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. This necessarily involves encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low. As such, it is essential that schools actively support their Muslim students in expressing their views by creating an environment where they feel safe and supported enough to do so.

An understanding of the potentially devastating consequences for students if schools uncritically subsume the issue of Palestine within the apparatus of PREVENT can be found in the case study of Rahmaan who was referred to PREVENT for handing out leaflets highlighting the water shortage and humanitarian aid crisis in Gaza when he was in year 10 (read about Rahmaan's case in pages 35-40 of the Rights Watch UK report). In reflecting on his experiences and a friend who had similar experiences, Rahmaan described his friend as someone who "has completely withdrawn from politics. He turned from, [someone] in year 10... [who] was a very proud Palestinian supporter, [someone who would] always go out on rallies and demos and always hand out pamphlets, and now, because of Prevent, he...[has become] really quiet and submissive and withdrawn from society. And if you look at all those people that have gone to ISIS, it's because they have been withdrawn from society that they found these different societies on the Internet." If schools are to nurture active citizenship amongst their students, it is imperative that they heed the lessons from such cases.

Understanding 'non-partisanship'

The Department for Education has signalled to schools that they should utilise organisations to support discussion around Palestine/Israel which are 'non-partisan.' This is problematic because supporting the right of the Palestinian people should not be caveated with a need to support the nation occupying their land. Furthermore, accurately highlighting the disproportionate impact of the conflict on the Palestinians (including the death toll) does not equate to non-partisanship. Indeed, in pursuit of non-partisanship to compromise on accuracy is flawed and in itself demonstrates bias against Palestine and Palestinians which undermines non-partisanship. This position is further troubling because some of the organisations which have been proposed by the Department for Education and PREVENT teams are themselves partisan in their support for Israel. As but one example, the Secretary of State for Education has suggested schools use *Solutions Not Sides*. However, an insightful piece in the Middle East Eye highlights that this organisation is far from 'non-partisan' and should be avoided by schools as reliance upon such organisations can only ever produce an inherently pro-Israeli bias.

Instead, schools should be looking to impart accurate information to their students, including information about breaches in human rights and international law that have been committed by Israel and which have been observed by the UN and Human Rights Watch.

Concerns of bias have also been raised about recent comments of the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson. Williamson wrote to headteachers of all state secondary schools in the UK on the issue of discussing Palestine and Israel in a school setting, and made particular mention to cases where Jewish students/teachers had been made victim to anti-Semitic sentiment – something against which caution should be taken and which useful advice is found further above. However, many have expressed concern that despite widespread and growing Islamophobia across recent years and also in relation to the issue of Palestine specifically, Williamson has failed to express any kind of concern for Muslim children who face such prejudice. In the context of current tensions, this failure to treat both groups with equal concern can only be seen as in direct opposition to his suggestion that schools, students, and staff remain politically neutral.

In reality, true political neutrality can only involve allowing all factions to express their views in a democratic manner whilst protecting all concerns from abuse and hateful rhetoric. In their mission to nurture healthy and engaged citizens, it is this path that we urge schools to follow.

If you or your school have any questions or would benefit from any further resources or guidance, please do not hesitate to contact MEND at
www.mend.org.uk

We would be happy to assist in any way that we can.