



TERRORIST ATTACKS – ADVICE FROM THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS

Bombings in London and the evacuation of Birmingham City Centre may cause fear, distress and heightened tension between ethnic and religious groups everywhere

Schools may face particular challenges arising from the traumatic events of Thursday, 7 July 2005, in London and from the evacuation of Birmingham city centre. This may be particularly so due to the extensive coverage being given by the media, especially television. In these distressing circumstances, it is important for teachers to be prepared for the challenges that may arise.

Challenges for Schools

The potential challenges that schools face relate to:

- pupils whose families may have been caught up in the events, as well as pupils and their families with connections to them;
- minority ethnic pupils, particularly Muslim pupils, who may be targeted by other pupils and adults, both within and outside the school;
- Muslim staff who may face hostility from pupils and staff;
- the possibility of a hardening of views amongst the school community on issues such as Islam, asylum and immigration; and
- all pupils, while not directly affected by the tragic events, who will inevitably feel their impact.

Following the bombings in London, teachers may need to tackle particular issues such as Islamophobia within each school's more general efforts to educate against racism. It is important to appreciate that the attacks killed and injured people of many faiths and religious beliefs, including Muslims.

A Whole School Approach

It would be helpful if teachers within schools were to consider collectively the difficulties they may face. A whole school approach could be developed to support individual teachers faced with pupils experiencing difficulties. Schools should endeavour to maintain as normal an atmosphere as possible: a stable environment will assist pupils to cope with any stress arising from their personal circumstances.

Support from Outside Agencies

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

- bereavement-counselling;
- educational psychologists;
- local authority support services with expertise in race-equality matters; and

- charities working in the field such as the Commission on British Muslims (www.runnymedetrust.org/projects/islam/islam.html) and the Inter-Faith Network (www.interfaith.org.uk)

Support for Teachers

Teachers dealing with pupils' emotional difficulties should be aware that they, too, may need assistance in coping with the emotional demands made on them. Staff support should therefore be built into the whole school approach.

Some minority ethnic teachers may be particularly vulnerable in schools, both from pupils and parents. Schools' support mechanisms should take this into account.

Support for teachers is available from the Teacher Support Network at www.teachersupport.info or at the Teacher Support Line number 08000 562561

Tension Between Different Ethnic Groups

A major issue which may arise is the possibility of heightened tension between ethnic and religious groups which has already been seen in wider society. This is particularly true where there are negative and stereotyped views of Islam and Muslims. The NUT advises that in dealing with any tension between ethnic groups, including racial harassment, schools bear in mind the points below.

- Teachers should be especially vigilant for any signs of name calling, abuse and bullying, particularly of Muslim pupils, and to any signs of tension between pupils from different ethnic groups.
- Early recognition and action to address problems will help to diffuse situations before they escalate.
- Schools should reiterate their policies and procedures for tackling racial harassment to teachers, pupils and parents.
- All racist taunting or abuse on grounds of assumed ethnic group or religion should be firmly and sensitively dealt with by

teachers as part of their whole school approach to discrimination and racism, including Islamophobia.

- It may be appropriate, if tension is observed, to hold school assemblies or class discussions as necessary to deal calmly and informatively with the situation. Pupils should be able to 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 racial harassment.
- Curriculum opportunities could be used to improve pupils' factual knowledge and understanding of the events and the ongoing uncertainties and anxieties. Schools should tackle these issues within the overall context of their approach to anti-racism in the curriculum. Further advice is available from the NUT's document – Anti-Racist Curriculum Guidelines available on the NUT website – www.teachers.org.uk
- Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and religious education about world faiths provides opportunities for information and discussion at both primary and secondary levels.
- The citizenship curriculum creates many opportunities where pupils are 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; and anti-social and aggressive behaviour such as racism. They can learn the skills to challenge unacceptable behaviour in appropriate ways.
- It should be recognised that parents and pupils hold a wide range of differing beliefs. No attempt should be made to take a politically partisan approach or one

that belittles a particular set of opinions. A balanced approach to discussion will allow all pupils to participate and benefit from the exercise.

- The aim should be to ensure that every child feels valued and secure in the school as a safe place to explore differences and conflicting views. Every effort should be made to maintain as calm an atmosphere as possible, whilst giving space to the strong feelings of anger, hurt, and fear that may be expressed.
- Pupils should be reminded of the respect due to all ethnic groups. 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 always be countered and replaced with information. 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

Many schools will have pupils who have relatives or close family friends who have been caught up in the events in London. Pupils may have particular worries about their relatives' or friends' safety. This may affect their emotional well-being and ability to concentrate or participate fully in school life.

There may be children and young people who have been frightened by the scenes shown on television and fear that the events might affect their own homes and communities. Teachers should seek to alert parents to the advisability of appropriate discussion with young pupils to allay their fears.

It will be important for teachers to respond sensitively to the worries and fears of all these pupils. Helping them express those fears may help them cope with the fears. It may also be useful to give all pupils opportunities to discuss their worries openly and help them get the dangers into perspective.

Some pupils may display signs of disturbance, including unusual tiredness, lack of concentration or emotional instability. Those who are normally cheerful may be tearful, irritable, withdrawn or unusually involved in quarrels and fights because of the stresses upon them.

Teachers will know their individual pupils and how best to respond to their individual needs. Some pupils will benefit from class discussion whilst others need an individual approach, which their teachers are well placed to provide. It is important that teachers provide a calm, rational approach to whatever needs the pupils have.

Older pupils may wish to have opportunities outside their homes to express their emotions in discussions with their peer group and other adults. Youth clubs and young people's centres, as well as schools, can provide such opportunities.

Discussing Terrorism

Most pupils across England and Wales, whilst not being directly affected by the tragic events in London, will nonetheless feel their impact. This will be particularly so due to the media reports and the discussions of those around them. Pupils will have concerns and questions about the events.

In dealing with pupils' anxieties schools may find the suggestions set out below helpful:

- When responding to the need for explanations, teachers should assess their pupils' level of understanding and emotional maturity, prior to deciding on how much information is appropriate.
- It is vitally important that opportunities be found, within the wider approach to anti-racism, for pupils to understand the concepts of fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism and that they exist within all religions.
- Pupils may be frightened and disturbed by media coverage. Teachers will have considerable demands placed on them to promote an ethos of tolerance and

understanding in a calm atmosphere where pupils can continue to learn effectively.

Challenging Islamophobia in Schools

Schools have a crucial role to play in helping dispel myths about Muslim communities and promoting social justice. Depending on the age and maturity of pupils and using their professional judgement, teachers can help pupils challenge Islamophobia in schools.

- Find some basic facts and figures about the Muslim communities in Britain today. The Muslim Council of Britain website www.mcb.org.uk is a useful resource.
- Understand that Islam is a religion of peace. There are extremists but these are present in all religions.
- Understand that there is no natural link between Muslims and terrorism.
- Understand Islam and Muslims by rejecting popular stereotypes such as hijabs, strict parenting, and fundamentalism. This may be achieved by listening to what young Muslims say about Islam.
- Engage critically with stereotypes of Muslims in films and TV programmes.

- Challenge Islamophobic lies within the broader framework of anti-racism, equality, fairness and social justice. Encourage pupils to challenge their friends who display Islamophobic behaviour.
- Understand discrimination experienced by Muslims in Britain by analysing their educational and employment prospects and status in society more generally.

It will be more than ever apparent to teachers that the life of the school is strongly influenced by outside factors. In the tragic situation of the events in London and the developing situation, the NUT is confident that members will continue to rise to the challenge of educating individuals who can contribute to a more peaceful future.

Further Advice

Further advice on the areas of explaining terrorism to children, how much information to give, how to assess children's emotional reactions and how to provide comfort and a sense of safety can be downloaded from the website of the Child Study Centre, New York University School of Medicine at www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war.html

