The riskiness of Gaza in the classroom: the experiences of UK teachers during an unfolding human rights crisis

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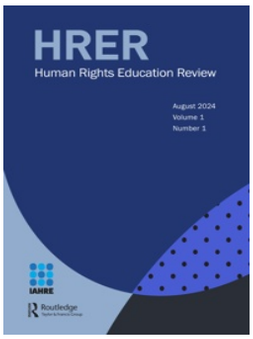

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ABSTRACT

In October 2023, Israel invaded Gaza after an attack by Hamas, the repercussions of which reached classrooms across the world. This paper reports on a study conducted in May-July 2024 with secondary school teachers in the United Kingdom through a qualitative survey and interviews. The findings highlight that teachers often construct the discussion of Gaza as risky, and face barriers including expectations of neutrality; concerns surrounding knowledge; and varying institutional approaches, including explicit bans leading to 'directive avoidance'. I argue that using a human rights framework and viewing the situation in Gaza as a human rights issue can shift what is often felt as individual problems and personal risk-management to a shared, principled approach. Even what might be considered modest engagement with human rights values, such as through cultural events or fundraising, can be viewed as radical in a context where any form of action can be considered contentious.

KEYWORDS

Human rights education; controversial issues; Gaza; teacher beliefs; teaching

Introduction and context

This article explores the experiences of teachers in the United Kingdom at the time of the war on Gaza, a conflict where children, young people and schools have been heavily affected. After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 which killed approximately 1200 people, with around 250 hostages also taken (BBC, 2023), Israel began its attack on Gaza which, as of 5 September 2025, has killed over 67,000 Palestinians, including at least 19, 423 children (UNICEF, 2025a). However, it has been asserted that the death toll is likely far higher due to the difficulties in recording these figures (Khatib et al., 2024). By mid-2025 it was reported that death tolls through starvation were also rising with children particularly affected (United Nations, 2025). The destruction of schools as well as the continuous bombardment led to around 658, 000 children being deprived of education (UNICEF, 2025b). Furthermore, in September 2025, a UN Commission found Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza strip (Human Rights Council, 2025). There is overwhelming evidence that the war in Gaza is the site of many instances of the most serious abuses of human rights.

The war on Gaza is considered a controversial issue in the UK in a way that other conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, are not. This is due to several reasons. Firstly, due to the lack of recognition of a Palestinian state until recently, this is not viewed as a war between countries since the UK has designated Hamas as a terrorist group (UK Parliament, 2025). Secondly, the UK government has encouraged the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism which has been described as problematic in that it has been used to limit Israel-critical speech (Gould, 2020), including during the time of the war on Gaza (Gordon, 2024). Thirdly, the UK has sold parts for F-35 jets to Israel, with a high court ruling that this was legal, despite an acceptance they could be used to breach international law (Wintour, 2025). Finally, community tensions have risen within the UK, with an increase in reported Islamophobic and antisemitic hate crimes by March 2024, 5 months after the attack by Hamas (Home Office, 2024). It should be noted that the war on Gaza did not begin with the attacks on 7 October 2023 and has been considered a pressing human rights issue for decades (Spangler, 2019).

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There has been other recent research on how the war is affecting educators, such as in United States universities (Hamzeh, 2024; Morgan, 2025), however, it has yet to be discussed in the context of the British secondary classroom. This study helps to fill that gap. The article reports the results of a study conducted between May and July 2024, when this specific conflict had been occurring for around half a year, by which point approximately 34,568 Gazans had been killed (UNOCHA, 2024). After a review of the relevant literature and an outline of the study design, the paper will go on to explore some of the main experiences of the teacher participants, both the barriers that they faced and the practice of those who felt more comfortable addressing the situation; namely the expectations of neutrality experienced by teachers; how subject knowledge, and lack thereof, affects their confidence; and how institutional approach makes a difference to the practice and comfort levels of the participants.

An editorial in this journal in referring to the war on Gaza argues that 'a key aspect of HRE is about building empathy with other human beings, so that regardless of their status, those that are vulnerable enjoy equal protection under the law from injustice' (Osler, 2025, p. 3). Therefore, this article will argue that HRE is essential for teachers to provide a framework for navigating the war on Gaza with their students and to recognise the common humanity of all involved. This will also allow the students to exercise their rights to have their voices heard.

Controversial issues and human rights education

An issue is thought of as controversial when 'clearly divided and significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions based on alternative values' (Stradling, 1984, p. 111), although other definitions have also been discussed in the wider literature (see Cotton, 2006; Hand, 2008). Hess and McAvoy differentiated between issues that are 'open' and 'settled', 'settled' issues have only one broadly agreed on view, whereas 'open' issues are matters of 'live controversy' (2014, p. 161). These open issues are ones that are considered controversial.

Previous research has shown that teachers often feel uneasy about teaching issues that may be considered controversial for a number of reasons. Firstly, this can be due to teachers lacking the confidence to manage the discussions that may emerge from certain topics (Byford et al., 2009; Von Der Lippe, 2021). This can lead to the self-silencing of teachers such as when they are apprehensive of students' voices (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019) and concerned about dealing with student prejudice, something which Tribukait (2021) argues is common for teachers across Europe, especially when it comes to xenophobia and antisemitism. Secondly, a lack of subject knowledge can have an effect on the way teachers handle controversial issues (Breitenmoser et al., 2024; Cassar et al., 2021; Flensner, 2020). Thirdly, teachers often struggle with how to manage their own personal and political views when teaching, and with what Hess (2005) calls the 'disclosure dilemma', the decision as to whether or not teachers should be sharing their own political beliefs with their students. Hess suggests this can lead to avoidance, where a teacher's view is so strong on a controversial issue that they deliberately avoid teaching it for fear of not doing it fairly (2005, p. 48). Nonetheless, Journell (2016) makes a case for disclosure, arguing that the idea of a neutral teacher is a myth, and the sharing of political beliefs can help young people develop as democratic citizens and understand the differences between fact and opinion. Finally, the lack, or perceived lack, of neutrality can also lead on to another issue for teachers – the fear of perceived consequences in terms of complaints from parents and disciplinary action from the school (Byford et al., 2009; Garrett & Alvey, 2021; Jerome & Elwick, 2020; Payne & Journell, 2019). However, as aforementioned, a strong case is made for the covering of these issues, emphasising how young people must be able to discuss issues that are controversial in order to actively participate in a democracy (Evans et al., 2000; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). At this point it should also be acknowledged that teachers in England (where the majority of my participants were based) are bound to the political impartiality requirements outlined by the Department for Education (DfE) that forbids the 'promotion of partisan political views', which the guidance clarifies are not just limited to political parties, but also include campaign groups (DfE, 2025). However, the guidance also states that there is no 'blanket prohibition' on teachers expressing their views, but care must be taken not to 'promote' these views, and it should be made clear that there are opposing views to be considered and a balance should be provided. The guidance leaves the decision as to whether there should be a school-wide policy on the sharing of views, down to individual institutions (DfE, 2025).

The case for learning about issues which may be considered 'political' can be underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including Article 13, 'the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' (United Nations, 1989), highlighting the need for classroom discussion as long as others' rights are upheld (Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2024). Lundy and Martínez Sainz (2018) further argue that children should be empowered to understand rights violations within their schools and elsewhere.

Attitudes to controversial issues in the History classroom have been discussed by Kitson and McCully, who identify a continuum of approaches, from the 'the avoider', to the 'container' through to the 'risk-taker', who is 'not afraid to push boundaries' (Kitson & McCully, 2005, p. 35). This is built on by Pace (2019) who in a cross-national study in England, Northern Ireland and the United States, found that teacher-educators prepared their students for 'contained risk-taking', which 'provides a set of principled practices that encourages the teaching of controversial issues with sensitivity, pragmatism, integrity, and protection from harm' (2019, p. 26). This includes strategies such as using dialogical practices, balancing an open classroom and safe space, confronting myths, and selecting topics with the students and communities in mind (2019, p. 27). However, this final point does not take into account when controversial issues enter the classroom unexpectedly, an issue that research shows can also make teachers feel vulnerable (Cassar et al., 2021).

When approaching controversial issues, it has been suggested that human rights principles can be used as a framework (Amnesty International, 2021; Kerr & Huddleston, 2021). Human rights education is described as consisting of education *about* human rights (including human rights principles), *through* human rights (a rights-respecting way of learning) and *for* human rights, which empowers learners to respect and uphold their own and others' rights (OHCHR, 2011). Various models of HRE have been discussed by Tibbitts (2017) who outlines three main approaches, namely values and awareness (socialisation); accountability (professional development) and activism (transformation). A transformative approach to HRE, which builds on Freirean concepts, has been described by several authors (see Duffy, 2025; Granholt et al., 2025), with Osler and Skarra (2021) describing it as 'addressing human vulnerability in society and defending the rights of others, at all scales, from the school and neighbourhood to the national and the global. It is about creating and enabling a cosmopolitan vision' (2021, pp. 194–195). However, Gollifer (2022) notes that this is hard to accomplish, identifying that HRE in schools is generally viewed as individualised and lacking in legal knowledge. Her study revealed that the approaches undertaken by teachers were reliant on tacit pedagogical intentions, as well as constrained by institutional issues such as a lack of relational critical dialogue amongst staff members and a system that did not prioritise education that challenged injustice.

HRE itself has been seen as controversial, with Struthers (2016) reporting that teachers construct human rights as being too abstract and biased for young learners. In addition, criticisms facing certain approaches to HRE have been raised, with Zembylas (2025) outlining how some scholars have disapproved of an overly sentimental approach. Whilst embracing an affective dimension, he outlined the 'risks' of empathising and grieving for the suffering of others, which can limit the action for change, although he acknowledges that sometimes such risks are necessary in critical pedagogy (Zembylas, 2019). Pyy (2021) suggests that a human rights culture can be developed in schools through a narrative approach drawing on political compassion although she recognises that this requires: a safe learning environment where teachers do not 'recoil from even the most difficult human rights topics and their related emotions' (2021, p. 35); a critical, reflective and compassionate approach to the stories of others; and the importance of counter-narratives to understand the experience of those who are 'historically marginalised' (Pyy, 2021, p. 37). This development of political compassion and a culture where difficult conversations can be had are essential for a topic as controversial as Gaza.

Education and human rights in context

The feelings of vulnerability in relation to teachers teaching issues that may be construed as controversial is seen when the topic links to the 'risky' issue of human rights and conflict. These issues have been considered by those working in Israel, with Pollak et al. (2018) stating that teachers in their study defused controversial issues by sidestepping and scholasticising them, leading to a superficial engagement. More recently, Weintraub and Gibson (2025) wrote on teaching the Nakba in Israel, which they describe as the 'most controversial event in Israeli history education' (2025, p. 90) finding that political stances influence what is

included in teaching materials on the topic, although it is not explicitly covered in 60% of teaching materials and when it is, it does not necessarily lead to critical engagement. Other conflict situations have also been considered, with Malinina (2024), discussing teaching during the time of social and political crisis in Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, finding that students' opposing views can take an emotional toll on teachers, ultimately making them feel vulnerable in their classrooms and impacting their sense of professional identity.

Less has been written about teaching around unfolding war and global conflict in classrooms where the countries are nominally 'at peace' such as England, although this excludes teaching about terrorism, where there has been recent literature (Jerome & Elwick, 2020). Although there has yet to be research published on the war on Gaza from England, there has been a recent paper from Australia where it is outlined that teachers have been attacked and targeted for speaking out against the war, with the author arguing that Palestine should be incorporated into the classroom, with a radical pedagogy necessary for the task, dismissing the argument that it is 'too political' (Al-Natour, 2024). Support for educators has come from other bodies, such as the US-based organisation Rethinking Schools, who have argued that teachers have a 'moral responsibility' to teach about Gaza, despite the 'risk of teaching the truth in the moment' (Rethinking Schools, 2025).

Given some of the barriers listed above, in this article I shall be arguing that even the most 'basic' human rights approaches can be 'radical' for teachers in a setting where exploring such issues and taking any form of action can be seen as contentious.

Methodology

My positionality

I am a lecturer in education, and I have a background in peace education, having worked as the education officer for a peace organisation for eight years, and I would describe myself as a peace activist. I am also Jewish, something I did not reveal to my teacher participants during the interviews in case this changed the dynamic. Although I am not religious, being Jewish is part of my identity. This identity has been particularly felt since the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023, where opposition to the Israeli assault on Gaza has been framed as antisemitic in nature (see above). Additionally, I am part of a group of researchers calling for greater discussion on the war on Gaza within educational research circles, which I joined after the research had taken place.

The study

The study was motivated by a desire to hear the voices of teachers who were at the forefront of navigating Gaza in the classroom, which seemed to be missing from the general media. The data was collected during the summer term of 2024, around seven months after the invasion.

The overall research question for this study was 'how do secondary school teachers address the conflict in Israel-Palestine in the classroom?' and the sub-questions most relevant to this article are, 'what, if any, barriers stand in their way?' and 'what, if any, resources do they draw upon in order to address the topic'? The study used a qualitative survey and then follow-up semi-structured interviews. The mixed (qualitative-dominated) survey method was chosen to provide a 'wide-angle lens' (Braun et al., 2021; Terry & Braun, 2017) and to get a 'snapshot' of the experiences and views of teachers from across the United Kingdom, in a diverse range of settings, with the speed allowing me to capture the issue as it unfolded. This diversity and breadth would not have been gained if I had done only interviews. The anonymous qualitative survey has also been proposed as ideal for research that is seen as sensitive (Braun et al., 2021, p. 644). The majority of the questions were open-ended aside from some early question to collect teachers' professional information (i.e., length of time teaching, type of school, subject taught, area of the country), alongside open-ended questions to fill in their job title and describe the demographics of their school. In the eight qualitative questions, teachers were asked about how comfortable they felt covering the topic, the interest level of the students, any barriers they faced, how supported they felt, what resources (if any) they used, and any changes they perceived as the conflict developed. They were also invited to share practice and add any further information if they chose.

After piloting, the survey was distributed online, through the sharing of an invitation to take part and a link to the survey on social media that was subsequently re-shared by teachers and teacher groups, such as trade unions and subject associations. Some of these groups also sent the survey link out via their e-newsletters. Teachers were advised of the topic of the survey and that it would take around 15 minutes to complete. The survey ran from mid-May 2024 to mid-June 2024 and received 61 responses. The respondents were largely from England, with a small number from Scotland. A variety of subjects were taught, although the majority were from the humanities, and most had been teaching for over 10 years. Participants reported teaching at an assortment of different schools with a range of socio-economic and cultural communities served. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to opt-in to take part in an interview. The responses included here have been edited to correct typos or to shorten. Removed sections have been marked with ellipses.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via video conferencing software during June and July 2024, with 15 teachers and 3 participants from organisations that support teachers in their practice. These will be reported upon in a further paper; snippets of the interview data have been used in this paper to enrich some elements, but a full report is not given. To ensure anonymity, survey participants have been indicated by 'P' plus their respondent number, and interview participants have been provided with pseudonyms. This was for two reasons. Firstly, as no personal information was collected from the survey respondents, it would have been impossible to assign suitable pseudonyms, and secondly the interviews involved in-depth conversations with named people, and ethically I wished to represent them with more than just a number to acknowledge their personhood. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Sheffield Hallam University Ethics Board. The research was funded by the Hallam Fund, after a particular call for applications from early career researchers.

The method used to analyse the data was reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This involved six phases of analysis: familiarisation with the dataset, initial coding, generating initial themes, developing themes, refining and naming themes, and writing up the data. A key consideration in RTA is that the researcher is never a neutral conduit in their research (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 15), and I made sure to consider my positionality as I went through the process.

A limitation in this project was that young people's views were not directly gathered to understand their experiences within schools. Further research is necessary to understand this perspective, as well as comparing the experiences of teachers in countries other than the UK for a wider global understanding.

Findings and analysis

In this section, I explore three key themes from my analysis on how the issue of Gaza in the classroom is perceived as risky. These are: the reaction of school leadership to the war; the felt pressures of neutrality in the classroom; and the impact that subject knowledge has for teachers, both theirs and their students. I then explore when teachers have used an approach incorporating human rights values but do not necessarily name them as such. I argue that naming and framing the war as a wider human rights issue can help to shift the concerns from individual risk-management to the use of a legally recognised human-rights perspective.

Pressures of neutrality

As discussed in the literature, the pressures of neutrality are concerning to teachers when a topic is seen as 'controversial', illustrating why Gaza is constructed as 'risky'. Below I outline three ways in which the pressure is felt by teachers: 'pragmatic', where practicality and risk management are considered; 'professional', where teachers consider the degree to which neutrality should be a teaching stance; and 'social', where the school (and wider) community are considered. As will be seen, running through this are the influences of the support of the institution, and various forms of silencing, including both top-down and self-silencing.

Pragmatic pressures

An element of the practical pressures felt by teachers is the school at which they teach. After the 7 October attacks and the Israeli retaliation, some senior leadership teams (SLTs) provided their staff with some firm instructions on how to proceed. For example:

> We have been instructed to not discuss the issues in classrooms. [P37]

> Headteacher and SLT have essentially banned any discussion of the ongoing situation and have only allowed for one short assembly to be shown in tutor time with no follow up sessions. There is practically a censorship of any discussion. [P16]

Even P16, for whom it was covered very lightly under strict conditions, still regarded it as 'censorship' as there was no chance of follow-up discussion. This move, which I call 'directive avoidance', differs from avoidance as a tactic seen in much of the controversial issues literature (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Oulton et al., 2004) in that discussing this unfolding very controversial issue was not a choice made by teachers, but often an outright ban from leadership. Furthermore, a contrast to the differences in how their school addressed the war in Ukraine was made by P47 who described special assemblies for Ukraine, with Gaza being 'brushed under the carpet' due to concerns of appearing antisemitic. This disparity could be linked to the aforementioned ambiguous IHRA definition of antisemitism.

Uncertainty surrounding what the messaging is from schools has also concerned teachers, making them consider their risk-management strategies. For instance, P50

> Would desire guidance from a higher power in school first, but happy to discuss once school's viewpoint on the matter or taboo areas of discussion are talked about first.

The use of the word 'taboo' here is indicative of the weight felt regarding the school approach. Evans et al. state that 'taboos exert control on our everyday lives, as well as our schools and determine the boundaries for what is acceptable and unacceptable' (2000, p. 296) and go on to say that such a tacit acceptance of these 'sends a powerful message … one burdened with silence' (2000, p. 301). The silencing and censorship mentioned by teachers are pertinent here, with schools arguably shutting down democratic engagement of their students by forbidding certain discussion.

It is also evident that the lack of school support puts teachers in fear of their jobs, with P21 stating that despite viewing it as 'vital', discussing Palestine 'puts me at risk of being disciplined' and P25 citing 'unknown repercussions' as a reason for neither staff nor students talking about it. These mechanisms of self-silencing will be explored more below. However, it should also be noted that not all teachers took a lack of messaging in this way, with P48 reporting that 'no one has told us we cannot teach it, and this is in itself support'. The lack of prohibition here is seen as tacit support and this teacher seemingly has not been given the impression that the topic is 'taboo'.

The context of these concerns is mentioned by an assistant head:

> It is a topic that is 'closed down'. Probably uniquely of all subjects in school. There is a fear that the school will be accused of antisemitism and supporting terrorism. There is a fear/lack of confidence in teachers being able to discuss it. As a result, the school avoids it as much as possible. People have a fear of being referred to Prevent and underlying it all is racism. [P57]

Here structural issues have been identified, with the teacher reflecting on potential consequences. Mention of the Prevent duty, a UK government programme aiming to prevent the radicalisation of young people (Department for Education, 2015) is significant. The duty has been criticised for, amongst other things, being Islamophobic in nature (O'Donnell, 2017; Qurashi, 2018) and constructing Muslims as a 'suspect community' (Awan, 2012). This concern is ongoing, with the National Education Union (2024) providing Prevent guidance to their members specifically relating to the expression of views on Israel/Palestine, by both teachers and students, citing an increase in Prevent referrals during the current conflict.

However, despite there being structural issues at play, these are often individualised by teachers leading to further pressures in their own professional practice.

Professional pressures

The expectation of neutrality also poses questions as to what extent teachers should be 'neutral'. Although some SLTs do not directly ban discussion, several participants stated that there were directives given to them around their stance, with P36 explaining they were told to be 'neutral' and cover 'both sides of the invasion'. A similar call for neutrality came from P18's school:

> There has been a whole school assembly, but students continue to ask questions and keep wanting to know 'which side' we support. The school has expressed that because this is a political event teachers should try not to say what they believe. [P18]

Here, the expression of views has been banned, building on to the 'silencing' seen in the previous section, and also removing the decision for teachers as to whether to 'disclose' (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2016) their beliefs or not. By saying that teachers should not say what they believe, the anxieties of the school leadership (such as those outlined by P57 above) are placed onto the teachers. These types of pressures can be seen in various ways and often lead to self-silencing due to concern at not being able to stay 'balanced' as is legally required (DfE, 2025), their discomfort at covering controversial issues, and worries about behaviour management.

As explained by others in the literature above, teachers worry about sharing views, such as P61 stating 'I find it very difficult not to let my own personal feelings and opinions come out when it is discussed. I'm not really sure how!' and P12 saying they need to be politically neutral in their place of work. Several participants voice concern about when the war has entered the classroom unexpectedly, often when students ask spontaneous questions. For example:

> Many students ask why it is happening. Some students ask for my opinion- I avoid giving it, but worry that any attempted explanation could sound biased to a particular listener. It has the potential to be extremely inflammatory, and the school has taken steps to deal with the subject in such a way that allows space for discussion but acknowledging the potential for creating tensions within the school. [P29]

This can lead to aspects of self-silencing or self-policing by teachers (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019) and can be seen as part of the individualised, and internalised, nature of response to issues as controversial as Gaza, and highlights the need for more collective responses. Also relating to tensions, P58 stated they 'would politely be neutral and move the conversation on. I encourage debate but such recent divisive issues create unnecessary tensions'. Here, it appears that the teacher is using neutrality as an excuse to *avoid* covering the issue, highlighting the impact of the contemporary nature of the topic and also exposing a contradiction between welcoming debate and a concern with the subject.

Several teachers also did not agree with the framing of the war as an issue about which one could be neutral. For instance, P21 expressed concerns that there was:

> Silencing of pro-Palestinian views. Presentation of [the] situation as two competing sides as opposed to a genocide of Palestinians.

In this example, silencing is seen as external to the teacher, rather than something internalised. The language use here is also notable, with the use of the word 'genocide', especially given the term was less commonly used during the time in which the data was collected (spring-summer 2024), although by this point South Africa had brought its case to the International Court of Justice that Israel was violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention, with the court ruling that genocide was plausible, ordering Israel to prevent genocidal acts (OHCHR, 2024). The term was also used by P15 who described the government's claim to offer balance and neutrality in the face of media and social media images as 'Orwellian', saying 'calling the images and news a genocide has been framed as risky and dangerous'. A related question was posed by P25 who asked, 'are we "allowed" to refer to the current conflict as a genocide?'. Furthermore, P52, whose school said the topic should be avoided as it was 'political', added

> This is not a political issue: it is an issue which our politicians, media and schools have politicised.

Here, the teacher appears to be putting the school in the context of the wider state, recognising the school system's place within it.

This links to the concept of the 'neutral teacher', which Journell describes as an impossibility. He builds on Kelly (1986)'s concept of 'committed impartiality' where teachers do not conceal their viewpoints, but do not try to convince students to their way of thinking, ensuring different viewpoints have a 'fair hearing through critical discourse' (1986, p. 130). Journell argues this approach is 'less likely to "indoctrinate" than attempts at neutrality' (2016, p. 101), and encourages tolerance. However, it appears that this is something that is difficult for my participants, both those who have seemingly internalised the concepts of neutrality, and those who challenge it.

As a possible consequence of the silencing within the school, teachers also reported that students themselves appeared to be self-silencing. This included P21 who said students feel 'politics is off the agenda' and P52 who stated that 'children have been frightened that they would get into trouble for expressing opinions'. Here, we have a perception that the students see the topic as unapproachable, and as P21 above stated concerns over being disciplined, this indicates that this school has not got a democratic approach to such issues, as suggested by many in the literature.

In this context, we should consider Hess and McAvoy (2014)'s consideration of 'open' and 'settled' issues. Examples of student silencing indicate that if students are viewing this issue as already 'settled', this may provide the message that they are unable to talk about it or even 'ask questions' [P57] without negative consequences. Similarly, I suggest that teachers themselves, especially when experiencing an explicit ban leading to 'directive avoidance', are left uncertain as to whether the issue is open or settled. It seems that by avoiding the issue, the status of the war on Gaza has not been addressed, leaving both students and staff floundering due to the 'unknown repercussions' P25 stated above.

Teachers also expressed concern over the possible reactions of students, perhaps providing insight into the reported self-silencing of the students. Teachers suggested this can be due to the 'passionate' feelings of students which might become 'hard to manage in a classroom environment' [P55] and P12 cites discomfort due to a lack of guidance on how to moderate discussions. In some cases, these concerns seem to link to the demographics of the school, which will now be discussed.

Social and community pressures

Aside from general concerns expressed by teachers, the impact of the community and social tensions were also mentioned by the participants in relation to neutrality, including the impact of their own cultural identities. As was seen above, concerns of accusations of antisemitism were raised, and this was also felt by one participant on a personal level as seen with P51 expressing concern that opening-up discussion could lead to antisemitic remarks as they are Jewish. A similar concern was raised by a Muslim teacher, who was concerned about being 'misperceived as being biased' when talking about Gaza and raised the fear that 'students may offend each other which could lead to violence'. The use of the term 'violence' here shows the anxiety felt around the issue and what these 'unknown repercussions' could be. The concern about community divides can also be seen with P14 stating that the topic is 'incredibly polarising' and it can 'lead to accusations of antisemitism, or racism against Palestinians'. Here, antisemitism is raised again. Tribukait (2021) raised the issue of teachers' concerns over student views in the classroom, including that of antisemitism. However, in this study, it is not just concern about the students being antisemitic, but teachers' fears of false accusations of antisemitism against themselves.

The uniqueness of the war has also provided challenges to teachers, as can be seen in the quote below:

> This particular conflict - perhaps more than others - can lead to comments made about the actions of a particular faith or ethnicity rather than governments or organisations. This means discussions are particularly difficult to hold if young people are angry. [P28]

P18 also mentioned the involvement of religion, saying that many of their Muslim students 'believe it is a war between Judaism and Islam'. They go on to explain that they tell the students that religion is not the only cause of the conflict and both sides suffer, and P10 explains that they find it difficult to teach because 'children from certain ethnic backgrounds have quite firm ideas on the subject, even though they usually don't understand the issue itself', making links to the diversity within the school. Similarly, P40, who cites concerns that students struggle to question information from the madrasah, says students have

> very clear [opinions] which are often not balanced. [I am] worried about engaging in discussions and there being a backlash from the community.

The community here is described by the teacher as 97% Muslim, and it is interesting to note that here the teacher appears to be expecting a 'balanced' student, in a way that teachers are also expected to be 'balanced'. Some of these assumptions made by students from Muslim backgrounds could also have an effect on students' silence, with P57 stating that 'brown students can often be viewed with suspicion, which is felt by young people'. This echoes Awan's (2012) argument that Muslim students can be seen as a 'suspect community'.

In sum, these different aspects of pressures of neutrality have a compounding effect, providing difficulties for teachers when addressing the controversial topic of the unfolding war on Gaza, and also providing issues for their professional identities (Cassar et al., 2021). However, this is not the only concern that teachers faced. In the section below, I shall discuss the impact that subject knowledge has on the practice of teachers.

Knowledge, information and misinformation

Another angle of the risk felt by teachers is their lack of subject knowledge or concerns on the origins of their students' sources of knowledge. This can be seen in the context of neutrality, with P27 worried about not 'being informed enough on all sides'. Other teachers cited a general lack of subject knowledge as a barrier, in line with other literature on controversial issues (Breitenmoser et al., 2024; Cassar et al., 2021; Flensner, 2020). One teacher explained that they felt they were able to 'discuss anything' but that their lack of knowledge held them back on this topic [P06]. This appears to indicate a contradiction, making Gaza a special case when it comes to discussion.

On the other hand, often those who described themselves as confident in covering the war stated that they had previous knowledge on the topic, including prior teaching of this conflict. Some of these teachers undertook a role of expert in their school, with P60 offering themselves as a resource for staff to refer students to if they were uncomfortable answering questions. Such a role has also been seen in my previous research when a teacher acted as a source to field questions after a terror attack (Liddle, 2021). Here, we also see an individualisation of the topic at hand, with a small number of teachers acting as a safety net within the school. Some of those who took a lead in the school were appreciated by their institutions, such as being 'thanked for it' [P49]. This is in contrast to schools which shut down the issue as explored above. However, those who considered themselves confident in their subject knowledge also found themselves challenged by the complexity of the topic and the fear of oversimplifying it in the space of a lesson, leading to misunderstandings [P46, P09, P29]. This indicates the challenges teachers face within the confines of the education system.

Teachers were also concerned about how students were obtaining their knowledge, stating that many of them were finding their information online, including on social media. They were worried that the students would be unable to recognise facts [P34], receive discriminatory information [P51] or 'fake news' they do not have the skills to analyse [P18]. This led to the opinion from a participant that it is the job of schools to educate young people for this reason:

> By refusing to discuss it, schools are tacitly encouraging children to find information online, exposing them to all sorts of content they do not have the maturity to evaluate. [P52]

This provides a case for young people to be provided with a space where they can talk about world events, which, as argued below, could be achieved through a human rights approach. The Association for Teaching Citizenship (ACT) links this to Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, calling for young people to have the right to express their opinions and try out new ideas. They suggest that practitioners should 'provide an environment where children can do this in a supportive and critical manner' (Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2021, p. 6).

The teachers also discussed the sources that they selected for teaching the topic. Several cited the BBC as a source used with it being described as 'reliable' by P11, although, conversely, P18 described branching out from this after Muslim students cited concern it was not properly representing the conflict. Other news sources included the Guardian, Sky News, Channel 4 and The Times. Interestingly, several teachers also cited using Al Jazeera as a news source, which has been found to be more likely to amplify Palestinian voices than the BBC (El Damanhoury et al., 2025). Trustworthiness is also raised by a participant who explained that they used 'trusted outlets', citing the UN as an example [P40]. Other sources that were used were textbooks, voluntary sector resources, and those from trade unions. However, some teachers warned against using resources leading students to a 'side' [P60]. I suggest that utilising a human rights approach can help teachers navigate the concerns they feel at their lack of subject knowledge.

Human rights approaches

As can be seen above, the institution, neutrality and subject knowledge can all be sources (or modifiers) of risk for teachers. A way of combatting the riskiness faced by teachers is the incorporation of a human rights approach, both direct and indirect. A more direct approach can be seen in the interview snippets, where teachers had more opportunity to explain their classroom practice when it came to using a human rights approach. In this section I shall also explore approaches which, although not named as human rights, could be considered as such.

Although one of the participants explained that their school had taken a 'humanitarian' approach (P55), including fundraising (discussed below), human rights approaches were not directly mentioned in the survey. However, follow-up interviews did include some discussion of this approach. For instance, one of my interviewees, Mariam explained

> The best angle, I always say, is from the human rights angle. That's where you can't go wrong. You avoid all the politics or whatever and you just say this is what's happening and then you just talk from a human rights perspective, and you use human rights organisations and say this is what they're saying, none of this is my opinion [. . .] I think if you do that, that's the easy angle to take. And no one should be then objecting to that, and if people do, then actually it comes to asking them why are you objecting to that?

Furthermore, Louise shared that her approach is to say

> Look at the people, look at what rights are being broken here. Defuse it from the personal to what role do international governments have, what about international law standards, and those sorts of things. From that point, I can always talk to young people, grounded in 'let's look at this from a rights perspective'.

These teachers are reframing the topic from being an individualised issue within the classroom and making links to the international and legal context. It should be noted that these two teachers have a background in using human rights for issues considered as controversial. However, this is something with which they were familiar, showing the usefulness of having such frameworks established for unfolding issues.

Some schools, although not directly referencing human rights or HRE (at least not in the survey), took approaches which could be considered as reflecting human rights principles and illustrating schools as sites of potential for more explicit engagement. Human rights principles include 'solidarity, justice, equality and dignity' (Osler & Skarra, 2021, p. 202) as well as 'non-discrimination, inclusion and participation' (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 6), along with building empathy with others (Osler, 2025, p. 3). There is also potential for framing these within the school as HRE: learning *about*, *for*, and *through* human rights.

An example of the aforementioned principles is the school mentioned above by P57, who explained 'we have set up a support group for those troubled by the conflict, taught a history lesson to all students in the school, and run an after-school event which focused on Palestinian culture'. This shows several elements of what can be considered human rights approaches to the situation. Firstly, a support group being set up shows a level of care towards students, something which could be considered akin to safeguarding approaches (Draugedalen & Osler, 2022). Secondly, all classes were given some historical background, providing students with information about this human rights issue. It can also be seen as countering the issues raised by teachers about lack of subject knowledge, assuming teachers were provided with appropriate teaching materials. Finally, the after-school event about Palestinian culture is an example of increasing understanding of others, also key for building a human rights culture (Koukounaras Liagkis et al., 2022) as well as showing solidarity. A similar event was also discussed by P28, who describes the event as being created as part of a collaboration between staff and students, to 'express their anger in more productive ways'. Although this expression of participation can be viewed in a mainly positive way, and to some extent meets Article 12 of the CRC which recognises children's right to be heard, it is unclear whether this was in place of any other sort of action the young people wished to take. P57's school was unusual in the extent it addressed the war head on. This could in part be due to this participant being an assistant head, showing how a supportive leadership team can help develop an approach where common humanity is acknowledged, an aim of HRE (Osler et al., 2023). Common humanity was also acknowledged by teachers who reported that they expressed that 'normal people' [P18] were affected by the conflict. This shows elements of human rights learning, even if arguably criticality was 'diluted' due to reliance on a tacit knowledge rather than an 'explicit pedagogical intention informed by human rights and HRE' (Gollifer, 2022, p. 6).

Participants also gave examples of other ways that young people expressed themselves in the school environment, and the schools' responses. This included wearing Palestinian flags, with one school's head 'allowing' this for the first time and advising young people on how to write to their MPs [P40]. P18 described:

> Lots of students drawing and wearing badges of Palestine. Many wanting to raise money for charity to support Palestine.

This point on fundraising is raised by other participants, with P34 and P14's schools raising money for UN organisations, and P55 sharing that they raised money 'for the victims of the terrorist attacks and victims of bombing in Gaza'. Taking such an action is another example of showing solidarity and participating. However, an incident from my interview data shows that it is not uncontroversial. Mariam, quoted above, also explained that in her school a bake sale was organised between staff and students, fundraising for the Save the Children Gaza appeal. The school's SLT informed them that money raised could not go to the appeal, just the general funds so the school was not seen to be taking a 'side'. This shows that even what may be considered by some critics as taking an overly sentimental approach (Zembylas, 2025) can actually be quite radical and controversial within a school environment. Although this example highlights the potential risks, others reported fundraising as a successful way of engaging young people in making a difference. Even though raising money could be assessed as being not critical enough (Body et al., 2023), it is a way to show common humanity and a way to take action, especially as students took the lead.

There were other reports of teachers engaging in what could be considered an unacknowledged human rights approach by incorporating the topic into their classroom, allowing students space to understand and explore. An example of this is from P22, who explained that they have used poems to explore the issue, including 'If I Must Die' by Refaat Alareer, a poet who was killed by an Israeli airstrike. It illustrates the possibilities of learning through a narrative approach (Pyy, 2021), understanding the stories of others. Also in the English classroom, P57 reported that some students incorporated Palestine into speeches in class, allowing freedom of expression.

This section shows that whilst it is possible for teachers, especially those with prior experience of addressing human rights, to explicitly incorporate this into their lessons, there are still human rights principles within the practices of some teachers and schools, such as building tolerance and understanding (OHCHR, 2011) and taking action. Although not being described as such, as I will conclude below, unnamed human rights approaches can be radical in a school climate that limits discussion and debate.

Concluding discussion

This article has argued that the pressures facing teachers in teaching about the war on Gaza are manifold. It paints a picture of a structural issue within UK schools which can lead to the issue being constructed as 'risky', when faced by individual teachers. First, the impact of institutional stance was evident when considering how teachers might approach the issue. Several participants reported an actual ban on discussion from their leadership teams, leading to what I call 'directive avoidance', with teachers silenced and unable to incorporate the topic in the classroom. Conversely, teachers whose schools supported them, or at least did not prevent them discussing the topic, were more confident in their practice. Secondly, balance and neutrality were a strong theme in the data, with the issue being considered as 'controversial'. The pressures of neutrality were seen as pragmatic, professional, and social, with teachers fearing the consequences of appearing biased, and some teachers voicing dissatisfaction with the approach of 'balance' or being 'non-political'. Thirdly, subject knowledge was important, with teachers voicing concern around their own and students' level and sources of information. Finally, there are instances of teachers seemingly drawing on human rights values and principles, without them being named as such and without the foundation of a wider human rights framework. However, following these principles can be powerful during an unfolding human rights crisis where the mere mention of the war was frequently seen as risky.

Addressing this topic through a human rights lens, is a powerful way forward. Specifically naming the war on Gaza as a human rights issue, and framing it using international law, may allow teachers to approach it in a manner that may appear less 'partisan' to leaders in their schools. Such an approach can be seen in the work of Quakers in Britain (2019) with their education pack 'Olive Branches and Razor Wire' which, written before 2023, takes a peacebuilding approach to understanding the conflict. Additionally, international

instruments such as the UNCRC provide teachers with a way to help young people to understand rights violations, as well as understand their own right to have their voices heard.

These approaches complement the lens provided by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training of HRE being 'about, through and for' human rights. In response to the war on Gaza, students could learn *about* whose rights have been denied and the people affected by the conflict (in both Israel and Palestine), *through* the strengthening of democratic skills in the classroom through discussion, and *for* human rights, considering ways in which a positive change could be made and their voices heard. For this to happen, human rights values need to be specifically named as such, since teachers need to be versed in this terminology in order to be able to educate *about, though* and *for* human rights in a holistic manner. Such a strategy can also be applied to other issues that might be considered controversial, with the potential to reduce feelings of teacher vulnerability and shift away from individual risk-management. A transformative HRE approach could create a 'cosmopolitan vision', as well as upholding the rights of children at school. I contend that is it necessary for teachers and students to have human rights knowledge in order to fully and explicitly engage with such issues.

What is key is that young people are given the opportunity to ask questions, discuss issues, take action, and recognise our common humanity, something that some schools in this study managed to do in a variety of ways. Equally importantly teachers need support in covering unfolding human rights crises as part of their initial teacher training programmes.

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