

UK teacher dismissed for discussing Gaza in response to a pupil's question

Our reporter
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Zara [an alias], a dedicated English teacher for over 20 years, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak about her dismissal as a supply teacher for speaking to her pupils about the situation in Gaza during a class debate on propaganda and the power of words. Her comments are posted below.

A key part of teaching English is helping students to develop the skill of reading between the lines. We must teach those skills in the English Language paper 1 and 2 and the English Literature paper. They are analytical skills. A large part of what the exam boards ask in their questions is basically recognising bias in text, which includes looking at propaganda and tone.

The background of an author and their own views and what they went through—a lot of that seeps through in the writing. Pupils must be able to recognise what message the writer is trying to get across. There are the hidden meanings to recognise, such as satire or bias. Context is a key part, whether it is a Shakespearian text or Victorian, to truly understand the characters and events in their time. And if it is a modern text too, followed by how you can make links to what is happening now.

You are getting pupils to think and be critical and analytical so they can express their views and opinions on what is happening to them and around the world. It is a vital skill, and they are supposed to be quite open and explore that and discuss that. This is what encourages them to be open minded and critical.

For 20 or so years, it has been fine. Whether it was teaching [George Orwell's] *Animal Farm*, dealing with Stalin and Russia, *Lord of the Flies* or works related to World War One or Two, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and the Holocaust. I never thought there would come a time where we are not allowed to talk about

things as openly as we once did.

I started at a school I had worked at before and with a good relationship with the students. In the second week we were looking at *The Book Thief* and how Jews were being treated by the Nazis, rounded up, starving in chains, and paraded through the streets. So much of this was resonating with what is happening in real time—how Palestinians are being treated in Gaza and the West Bank.

In one lesson about propaganda and the power of words, part of the lesson was for pupils to think about and express their ideas on Hitler's propaganda. We had a discussion on climate change protests and someone asked about the Gaza protests in London.

It reminded me that when the war in Ukraine broke out, we had to change a whole scheme of work to involve today's politics. Why should we suddenly glorify Ukraine? It seemed like there was an agenda.

Ironically the lesson I was challenged over was about the power of words and propaganda. A pupil asked whether Hamas was a terrorist organisation. I was totally neutral and explained this and did not express a personal view.

Some of the children were discussing about how the Palestinians are trying to defend their land. My job is not to engage in a political discussion with them, so I drew things to a close and we finished reading the chapter. I encouraged them at the end to not argue, but to listen to each other's differing views and to understand each other.

We've not been given any guidance about how to talk about this. We are expected to teach about things like the Holocaust, which are political, and now we are expected us to keep our lips sealed on Gaza. Why?

On the day after the discussion, I had just arrived in the classroom and was asked to have a word with the

safeguarding officer, with a replacement teacher staying with the pupils. When I got to the office, management started to question me about what happened in the lesson. I was asked, “Did you draw a map?” I said, “If you call that squiggle on the board to explain where Gaza and the West Bank is, then yes, I did draw a bit of a map.”

They responded, “So you told them to educate themselves? Did you tell them where to go and educate themselves?”

They then asked why didn't you go straight to safeguarding when this happened? I said it was at the end of the day and I did write a text, but I didn't send it and so I showed it to them.

They said this would be discussed with the deputy head and they didn't want me to be around the kids as I was still under investigation. I felt so upset as they were making out that I was a criminal.

The safeguarding officer said they were going to have to let me go as parents had complained about the lesson.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and said, “Surely by you doing this now, you are encouraging that child and his family to think what he said was right. That's the message you are sending out. Effectively, you have shown that the pro-Palestinian people's voices will be silenced.”

They were not bothered because I was only a supply teacher, otherwise they would have had to go through lengthy procedures.

The school have encouraged something, and others can see what has happened, i.e., do not talk about Palestine. The directives are coming from the top.

The point has been reached where they only want you to teach what the system is prepared to allow, hiding what doesn't suit them politically. It's all biased. There's a massive crisis in the Middle East, which is probably going to filter out to us. They don't want children to know that and ask us to keep pushing a false narrative.

A lot of pupils can see this because they are working-class and can see that the Palestinians are struggling. They may not be aware of the millions being spent on war, but they talk about the state of the National Health Service and how health care has been broken down. The whole system is broken. There is the housing crisis, the rising cost of food and many are having to go

to foodbanks. They can't even keep themselves warm. They talk about being allowed one hour of heating and then blankets only.

You've got children that can tell you all this. Some tell you they barely see their mum as she's working two jobs.

Then when they learn that the government is spending billions on weapons, they say, “Miss, they always tell us they haven't got any money. So how have they got so much to spend there?”

I think I'm done with the whole parliament and the main parties. Somehow you are always coerced into making the same decisions. There's nothing progressive happening and no real help. Those in parliament are for the elite and rich. How have they got the right to make judgments and decisions for the masses?

The few shouldn't be making the decisions for the majority, so for me the whole parliament thing is rubbish, as is the system. This system is not working and money is being squeezed by our leaders, like Scrooge, and people are in dire straits. We need something socialist for working-class people.

Gaza is a huge warning to the working class. If people do not stand up today collectively, then they will be forever silenced and be slaves to capitalist exploiters.



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