

GUEST ESSAY: March 2026

Education for a World in Turmoil Simon Watson

Remember when we thought it couldn't get any worse than Covid? Believe me, it can. *Education for a World in Turmoil* is the purpose of schools these days.

We need to prepare students for the most extreme circumstances, from war to climate issues to social fragmentation, all wrapped up in a post-truth world. Students need extreme emotional resilience, and the critical skills of a PhD student to help them decipher conflicting information from multiple sources. Jigsawing fragments of information into something that vaguely resembles coherence is now a skill for us all, a bit like a carpenter who has passed their prime, whose cut pieces of wood no longer quite align.

This uneasy approximation of truth may be the best we can hope for in today's world.

Writing from Bahrain, with missiles and Shahed drones exploding or being intercepted overhead, is the new norm for many educators, students, and families in the Middle East. The visuals and sounds from social media video clips do not come close to the intensity of the BOOM or the shaking of the windows when these weapons impact or are destroyed on their downward arc.

Being woken at 3am by a government alert indicating an incoming attack is at first disorientating, followed shortly by an increased heart rate and then the inevitable BOOM, BOOM, realising that you are spared, and then the hope that no one has been injured. The promise of the future has now been replaced with a quiet, brooding pessimism about what tomorrow may bring.

So while alerts disturb sleep at night, often waking us in the early hours and returning us to a fitful sleep at best, but most likely no sleep at all, during the day they interfere with the dystopian calm of the glow from online learning. A situation far beyond any measure of normality, yet this has all too quickly become the accepted *modus operandi* for teaching and learning across the region.

The level of professionalism from teachers and all school staff is staggering. No teacher signed up to teach in a war zone. Yet every day teachers in the Middle East go online and provide stability and routine for their students.

Teachers know the comfort and care that their presence provides to young people. The calm and reassuring voice of trusted adults becomes an anchor in a sea of uncertainty. So despite the chaos of the world around them, teachers are able to do their work. And this is rewarded with smiling faces framed in rectangles, with younger students experimenting with the animation features of the online platform, bringing joy to their peers and teachers.

But apart from the curriculum understandings and skills students learn, what are the indirect lessons they will take from this experience? That we live in a mad world; that family is the important constant for them; that their once secure world can be snatched away at the whim of another; that stability is precarious; and that resilience is developed through time and experience, and cannot be assumed.

Perhaps they will also learn that communities matter most when circumstances are at their most fragile. Hopefully, the power of support, whether through community or personal interactions, will be remembered as a central pillar of being human.

And when teachers are asked the simple and obvious question, “Why?” How can educators relay the horrors of what is happening in the world to a child of any age? What sense can teachers impart? There is no sane answer and therefore this fundamental question is left unanswered.

The accepted mode of being for school leaders is that they remain apolitical. Should leaders avoid giving opinions on such fundamental issues that have shaped the current war? The history of the region is complex and nuanced far beyond an easy distillation of facts and ideologies. Yet if education cannot help young people think, question, and debate these issues, then it risks becoming irrelevant.

And so the question becomes: how do we prepare educators and leaders for a world in turmoil?

Simon Watson is Principal of [St Christopher's School](#), Bahrain. He is the author of [The A – Z of International School Leadership](#).