Teaching and talking about the war, 2003

Introduction and summary

In the current international situation, teachers, youth workers, parents and carers have great responsibilities.

Shortly after 11 September, an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* reported that adults were having to deal with questions such as the following in their contacts and conversations with young people:

- Will I myself be in danger?
- Could something bad happen to my family?
- Why do Arabs hate Americans?
- Why is Osama bin Laden suddenly a bad person when during the time he fought the Russians he was a good person?
- Why did God let this happen?
- Why should we believe in religion when such bad things happen because of it?
- Why should I bother at school if there is going to be a war?

A similar range of questions is being asked about the conflict with Iraq. How should adults respond? This paper suggests a number of points you may wish to bear in mind, and to discuss with friends and colleagues. The headings in the paper are:

- Be available and 'askable'
- Be vigilant about bullying and racism
- Oppose the demonising of Islam
- 'Clash of civilisations'?
- Religions, violence and peace
- Controversy
- Defend refugees and asylum-seekers
- The importance of literature, art and music
- Taking action
- Nurturing hope
- Websites to visit for further information

Be available and 'askable'

Research in the United States during 2002 found that large numbers of children and young people felt that they had been let down by their teachers and parents in the days and weeks following 11 September. Adults had clammed up and had not encouraged talk about what had happened, and about how young people were feeling.

Certainly it wasn't easy to talk about 11 September and it's not easy now to talk about the conflict with Iraq. But it's important that children and young people should know that it is OK to talk about their anxieties, uncertainties and fears. Even the youngest children are familiar from TV about the war, and in any case they pick up anxieties from adults close to them. Not talking about the war, and not listening to young people's concerns, doesn't protect them. It may well, however, communicate that the subject is taboo and that adults are insensitive.

So it's important that adults should listen to what the young think and feel. By listening, we can find out if they have misunderstandings, and we can identify the support they may need, and the knowledge and ideas that would help them.

Be vigilant about bullying and racism

A number of local authorities in Britain have already found, through their routine monitoring of racist incidents, that there has been an increase in early 2003 in attacks on Muslim pupils, and on pupils believed to be Muslim.

At this time of international tension it's particularly important that schools and youth services should keep themselves well informed about what is happening amongst pupils and young people, and should be ready to intervene to prevent violence, verbal as well as physical.

Oppose the demonising of Islam

Always at times of international tension there is a tendency to demonise the enemy – the enemy is portrayed as evil and barbaric. Responsible politicians and newspapers stress that Islam is not an essential feature of the enemy at the present time. But judging by media coverage of 9/11 and preparations for the war on Iraq, and earlier of the first Gulf War, this is certainly not the view of all opinion leaders.

There are likely, therefore, to be increased levels of attacks on Muslims, or people supposed to be Muslims, on the streets of British towns and cities, and British Muslims will be made to feel that they do not fully belong to British society.

Schools and youth services need to show solidarity and sympathy towards their Muslim pupils and local Muslim communities at this time; to take active steps to oppose the demonising of Islam amongst non-Muslim pupils or in the local media; and to affirm and celebrate British Muslim identities.

'Clash of civilisations'?

Some of the intellectual rationale for the attack on Iraq is derived from the work of American academics who claim that there are irreconcilable differences between what they call 'the West' and Islam. Part of the irreconcilable tension, they argue further, is to do with religion – Saddam Hussein, at least one leading American diplomat has stated, hates all Christians. Theories of a clash of civilisations are rejected by most mainstream politicians, but are nevertheless widely accepted amongst non-Muslims.

Youth services and schools need to stress that 'the West' and Islam are *not* two separate civilisations, nor are Christianity and Islam two entirely separate religions. They have the same roots and over the centuries have frequently influenced and enriched each other.

Religions, violence and peace

It's important to stress that all religious traditions contain emphases on peace and non-violence, and openness and generosity towards strangers and aliens. Most American churches have spoken out against the war on Iraq, as have all churches in Britain. A wide range of Muslim leaders emphasised after 11 September that there is absolutely no religious justification for Muslims to engage in terrorism.

Also, however, all religions have frequently over the centuries been used to rally support for, even indeed to give their blessing to, aggression, injustice and oppression. Adults must acknowledge this, not try to sweep it under the carpet.

A recent book by a Christian theologian opens with the following statement: 'The question today is what is true religion, not what is *the* true religion.' (Marcus Braybrooke, *What Can We Learn From Islam?,* 2002).

Controversy

Whether the war on Iraq is justified is a matter on which both British and American society is divided. The divisions are only loosely related, if at all, to political affiliations. This is particularly the case in Britain, where many Labour voters and leaders of trade unions are opposed to the government's policy on the war whilst many Conservative voters are supportive.

In schools and youth services, the basic task is to help pupils and young people to think for themselves, and to sort out and clarify their emotions, judgements and values. They therefore need skills in weighing up evidence, choosing between alternatives, thinking about pros and cons, showing respect for people with whom they disagree, and abiding by rules and conventions of courtesy and civil argument. So it often helps to turn pupils' questions round – 'What do you think?', 'Why?', Have you always thought that?', 'Are there other ways of seeing this?', 'What do you think might cause you to change your mind?'

It can be reassuring to children and young people, as distinct from alarming or depressing, to be reminded that their elders are in disagreement with each other about important matters. It may be more important for them to live with differences and uncertainties than to settle for over-simple solutions.

At the end of this paper there are notes on where fuller information about pro-war and anti-war arguments can be obtained.

Defend refugees and asylum-seekers

Much more than in any previous conflict in recent times, certain sections of the media are mixing together the international and domestic scenes – they argue or imply that the war on Iraq is bound up with the need to control, police and repel asylum-seekers. Asylum-seekers have been described in the tabloid press as 'a sea of humanity ... polluted with terrorism and disease [that] threatens our way of life', and there has been reference to 'the colonisation of this country by people with no right to the sanctuary they claim'. Refugee laws, it has been said, have been 'hijacked by parasites'. A parasite, it is said, is 'a creature which obtains food and physical protection from a host which never benefits from its presence'. It has been alleged that refugee and asylum-seeking children are harming the quality of education given to 'our [sic] children'.

Inflammatory and inaccurate reporting about refugees adds to the stress that refugees already experience, and is likely to incite racist crimes against them by sections of the white population. Such crimes will target not only refugees, alas, but also anyone perceived to be 'different' from the so-called indigenous population.

Schools and youth services need to make a stand against misrepresentations and falsehoods in relation to refugees and asylum-seekers in the media, including perhaps particularly their local media, and to assure pupils from refugee communities of their support.

The importance of literature, art and music

Using stories, poetry, drama, art, puppets or music can help young people to acknowledge and explore their feelings and reactions. They may want to draw pictures and then destroy them, or they may want to display them or send them to someone. It's important that teachers and youth workers should be flexible.

Taking action

One important way to reduce stress is to take action. This is true both for adults and for the young. For example, children and young people may want to write a letter about their feelings, or get involved in an organisation committed to preventing war, or send money to help victims or campaigners.

Nurturing hope

It is not enough, though, to let young people take action by themselves. Children who know that their parents, teachers or other significant adults are working to make a difference feel hope. They feel safer and more positive about the future. So do something. It will make you feel more hopeful, too. Hope at times of tragedy is one of the most valuable gifts we can give children and ourselves.

Websites to visit for further information and ideas

Several of the points in this paper are derived from articles and papers by Judith Myers-Walls, a child development specialist based at **Purdue University, Indiana**. Her paper entitled *When War is in the News* was published in February 2003. You can find it through a google search for the author's name, or alternatively for the phrase 'Terrorism and Children'.

Dr Myers-Walls also wrote a fine piece for teachers and parents about the Columbine High School shootings and she then re-issued this on 11 September 2001. Many local authorities in Britain downloaded it and sent it to their schools.

The **Rethinking Schools** website, based in the United States, has a wide range of materials for teachers about the current international situation. There are maps, statistics, notes on history, suggestions for poetry and songs, facts about Islam and about Arab culture and civilisation, definitions and discussions of terrorism, details of anti-war campaigns, resource lists, and several lesson plans. The address is www.rethinkingschools.org/war.

The **National Union of Teachers** has provided clear and comprehensive guidance entitled *War in Iraq – the impact on schools*. It is available as a PDF document and also as a Word document so that you can re-format and customise it, if you wish, for your own school. It can be found through www.teachers.org.uk.

There is a wealth of material at www.re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk, run by **St Martin's College, Lancaster**. Click on 'War on Iraq' when you get to the home page. The website is intended primarily for teachers of religious education. But it contains many items of general interest, and much that will be invaluable for the planning of school assemblies. It is frequently updated.

The **British Columbia Teachers Federation** has compiled a useful list of sites in Canada and the United States. They include **Educators for Social Responsibility** ('Understanding world events'), **American Psychological Association** ('Resilience in time of war'), **National Association of School Psychologists** ('Helping children cope in unsettling times') and **National Council for Social Studies** ('Current events: Iraq'). The address is www.bctf.ca. Click then on What's New and New Reports.

The **Inter Faith Network for the UK** published some valuable papers on its website in the wake of 9/11. They are well worth re-visiting at www.interfaith.org.uk. There are also several papers and documents about the war on Iraq.

For sound information about Islam and many links onwards, visit the **Muslim Council of Britain** (www.mcb.org.uk), **IQRA Trust** (www.iqratrust.org), the **Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism** (www.fairuk.org) and **Muslim Heritage** (www.muslimheritage.com). The last-named of these has much valuable material on Islamic science, mathematics and technology.

For **anti-war arguments and reports**, and a comprehensive list of anti-war sites, go to www.guardian.co.uk/antiwar. Pro-war sites include **Americans for Victory over Terrorism** at www.avot.org and **Patriots for the Defense of America** at http://defenseofamerica.org. Sites providing discussion of **a range of views** include www.wardebate.com and www.opendemocracy.net.

This paper was compiled by the Insted consultancy, London, and was published in the journal **Race Equality Teaching**, spring 2003. There is information about the journal at www.trentham-books.co.uk.