

Rethinking Schools

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The World Up Close

A 5th grade teacher helps his students explore issues of war and terrorism as they look at the war in Afghanistan.

By Bob Peterson

It was Sept. 12 when Rafael, one of my fifth graders, pointed out the window and asked, "What would you do if terrorists were outside our school and tried to bomb us?"

Clearly, the tragic events of the day before had left my students confused and fearful. Such questioning continued when the United States started bombing Afghanistan in October. "Will they bomb us like we are bombing them?" one student asked.

Sometimes we stop and immediately talk about such questions. Other times we postpone them until the day's lesson on "current events." I often have students write their questions in a spiral notebook, labeled "Questions That We Have," that sits in front of the class.

It quickly became clear that a single lesson or even series of lessons on Sept. 11 would not suffice. I realized that two things were necessary. First, students must express and share their emotions. Second, they must start to look at the broader context of global injustice. Following are some of the ways I have started to approach these complicated issues.

WRITING AND POETRY

I want my students to be comfortable expressing their fears about war and terrorism. This allows for emotional release and also provides insight into my students' thoughts on topics such as stereotypes, Islam, immigration, or grief about loss of a family member. I help students express their feelings partly by encouraging them to write in their journals, and by having a bulletin board with photos, maps, and students' writings.

Two poems, in particular, provided a structure for students to express their feelings. One poem is "If I Were in Charge of the World," by Judith Viorst (Atheneum, 1981). After reading the poem together I encouraged students to write their own versions. One wrote:

If I were in charge of the world there would not be any stereotypes in the world. bin Laden who America accuses of the September 11 tragedy would never have happened. And one day the whole world would figure out that we are all equal and you're not more than me and I am no more than you.

A second poem, useful for discussing stereotypes, is Lucille Clifton's, "We and They." ([view poem](#)) Using the poem as a model one student wrote:

We are from America
they are from Afghanistan
We are rich to them
they are poor to us
We sometimes like war
they never do
We have houses
they have refugee camps with tents
We have shoes

some of them do not
 We cry good cries
 They sometimes cry bad cries
 But we are all sisters and brothers in God's Way!

WHY DO THEY HATE US?

One of my lessons focused on getting students to think about why some people might attack the United States. To get the discussion going, I made an overhead of a Sept. 16 photo of a demonstration in Pakistan with a banner reading, "Americans, Think! Why You Are Hated All Over The World!"

As a class, we brainstormed why people might dislike the United States. Many students parroted President Bush's claim that terrorists hate us because of our freedoms. I suggested that matters were more complicated and that throughout the year we would explore this topic.

I mentioned that many people blame the United States for sanctions against Iraq that have led to the deaths of some 500,000 children. (See article, page 21.) Hands shot up with a multitude of questions and comments. Not surprisingly, we got bogged down on the concept of sanctions and the Gulf War. After a half hour we put our remaining questions - including one by a girl who wondered if the sanctions were a form of terrorism because they led to children dying - in our Questions notebook and moved on.

The lesson ended with more questions than answers, but that didn't bother me. Early in the year, it's less important to "answer" such questions than to raise them.

LAND MINES AND CHILDREN

In late September, we read in a news article that there are 10 million land mines in Afghanistan. After explaining what a land mine was, I mentioned there was an international campaign to end the manufacture and sale of land mines. Out of this discussion, a few students formed an "Action Research Group." After a few recess sessions on the Internet (www.banmines.org), they made a poster with pictures of victims of land mines, maps locating the world's 110 million land mines, an essay about land mines, and facts about land mines such as: "Over 120 countries have signed a treaty to ban land mines, but the United States has refused to sign the treaty."

A couple of weeks later I used information about land mines in a math lesson on fractions and percent. I posted on my overhead projector a picture of a sign which reads, "Every twenty-four hours seven people step on mines in Afghanistan. Be careful not to be one of them today and tomorrow." The sign hangs on a wall at a customs station as one enters Afghanistan (www.iranian.com/Opinion/2001/June/Afghan/).

We figured out how many accidents happen per week, per month, and per year. I then shared that 30 percent of the victims of land mines in Afghanistan are children. We did more calculations. One student said he heard that the United States was dropping yellow mines on Afghanistan. Another responded that the yellow things were food, not bombs. I explained that unfortunately both students were right and we were dropping both food and bombs.

"That's doesn't make sense!" one student said. "If we want to help them why do that?"

GLOBAL INEQUALITIES

As part of social studies and math, students do activities that alert them to the inequities in the world's wealth and power. We look at child labor, hunger, colonialism, and the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child. While I have always done such lessons, after Sept. 11 they became more useful in helping students understand why some might resent the United States. While our attention currently is focused on the U.S. war in Afghanistan, I frame such involvement in broader issues of global exploitation.

One good resource is a short video from the Canadian organization, Adbusters, explaining that while North Americans constitute only 5 percent of the world's population, we consume 33 percent of the world's resources and produce 50 percent of the world's non-organic waste.

We also do a lesson on "World Poverty and World Resources" (explained in detail in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, Vol. 1). Groups of children each represent an equal percent of the world's population and each group is given chocolate chip cookies to reflect the distribution of resources. Needless to say, some groups get more cookies than others, and emotions run high. The students make graphs, write about their feelings about such inequities, and most importantly ask questions such as, "Why does Asia have so many people and so little resources?" "How did Europe and North America get to be so wealthy?" "Why are things so unfair?"

SEPT. 11 AND THE WAR

Students have polled their families and we've graphed our own opinions about the U.S. war in Afghanistan. At the time of this writing, more support the war than oppose it, although most see both "good and bad" in what the United States is doing. Virtually all say they are scared.

News commentators have consistently argued that Sept. 11 changed the world forever. Working with preadolescent children, I see matters differently. These fifth graders are just becoming aware of the world around them, so they have little to compare to the current situation. For them, the world isn't so much changed as it is, for the first time, out there in front of them - in their face, so to speak.

For those working with this age group, current events are full not only of heartaches but incredible opportunities. As teachers, we have two formidable responsibilities: to help this emotionally volatile age group to express their feelings and thoughts and to help these developing minds examine underlying issues of global injustice.

One girl who said she supported the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan when it started later wrote this poem.

Twisting
Turning
Turning
Twisting
Twisting and Turning
My feelings are burning
Like the Twin Towers
My heart is broken
from all the hating
All the killing in Afghanistan
has made my brain to start
twisting, My feelings are burning
My heart is broken.

She gave it to me and said, "We need to keep learning about this stuff so I can really understand what's going on over there."

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