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Don't Teach Your Kids to be Afraid of the World

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What's the difference between protecting kids from negative media and sheltering them from the real world? Siblings Cherian George and Mary Cherian have found the answer in *What's Up*, an award-winning newspaper for students that would make life easier for teachers.

Never has it been so difficult to introduce children to the world we live in. As teachers, we are painfully aware that training students for the future also means helping them understand what's going on in the present. And as stories on sex scandals, suicide bombers and recession flood the headlines, one can't help but wonder how much we can really achieve in the classroom.



So what is the "right way" for young students to learn about current events? A good answer or resource would be *What's Up*, an award-winning newspaper which aims to report news in ways that are appropriate for young people. Founded by siblings Cherian George and Mary Cherian, *What's Up* advocates the idea that children can learn about what's happening in the world and still feel hopeful and optimistic about life. They do so through thought-provoking articles that's interesting and compelling for young people.

Sounds too good to be true? *SingTeach* talks to Mary about the tricky task of helping children deal with current events and how *What's Up* can help teachers go about it.

Q: Aside from getting students to read, how can current events help students learn about language?

A: When students are engaged in reading about current affairs, they absorb the nuances of language used to tell the stories. This provides us with opportunities as educators.

First, when we introduce and explain concepts that the stories illustrate, students learn not only these concepts but also how to use language to describe them. Take, for instance, the concept of "soft power". We've written about how countries use soft power effectively. Students may pick up the term itself as well as words and phrases that are used with it. It's not just a matter of growing vocabulary – the words and phrases bring with them an understanding of an alternative type of power that applies both at the global and personal levels.

Second, as a matter of policy, we try to be diversity-sensitive and inclusive in our language throughout *What's Up* and our websites. For example, we alternate male and female pronouns where appropriate; we say "wheelchair users" rather than "wheelchair-bound", and so on. Using diversity-sensitive language can also raise the student's awareness about what it means to be inclusive as a person.

Third, we sometimes carry news stories about languages. Recent examples include information about an endangered language in Siberia and a dying language in Canada. We hope this deepens students' appreciation of their own languages: the value of keeping them alive and well.

Q: How do we maintain the balance between values-driven journalism and

"sheltering" kids from the real world?

A: When we say we practise value-driven journalism, we mean that our selection of stories and how they are written are driven by values about what's appropriate for children to read and what they need to know. We won't include stories or pictures merely because they are juicy or titillating, even if they're splashed across grown-up media.

Neither are we blind to the negative influences in advertisements. There are adult newspapers that carry the occasional educational article promoting healthy lifestyles and positive body image – but then accept an endless stream of ads for dubious diets and slimming centres, regardless of how they may hurt impressionable youth.

In that sense, we are indeed sheltering students – but only from what would be abusive to expose them to. Fortunately, the path we tread is well lit. There's ample international research that suggests that children and young teens can be traumatised even by second-hand exposure to violence just by, for instance, what they see on a screen. To grow into confident, resilient adults, children need to feel safe and secure in this world.

Do we have to worry about over-protecting them? Not really. The reality is that children and teens should be sheltered far more from some of the harsher realities of adult life than they are these days. Primary school children are not yet emotionally equipped to deal with much of it and that leaves them feeling fearful about growing up.

We must add that we don't exclude stories that are potentially the stuff of nightmares. If it's important for children to know what happened or if the story presents a teachable moment, we work hard to write it up in a child-sensitive way. For instance, we reported the violence in Sudan, the Bombay rail and London underground bombings, the Iraq war, the Virginia Tech shootings and child abductions for slave labour in China. So, in fact, we probably have more serious, "real world" news than any other children's medium. We refuse to condescend to children by confining them to fantasy and entertainment, but neither will we sidestep our responsibility to give them something positive to believe in.

One reader recently said to us, "We're the generation that has been taught to be afraid of the world!" As professionals who care about children and teens, our challenge is to reduce that fear and help instil a sense of hopefulness and trust that there is more goodness than evil in human beings.

Q: What are some of the ways teachers can use *What's Up* in the classroom?

A: Many of our partner schools use the paper as a supplementary reader for English language lessons, with some teachers developing their own comprehension questions for *What's Up* stories that they assign for students to read. It's also used for whole-level reading programmes.

We also offer activity ideas on our website, www.newsforkids.com.sg IDEAS is a free teacher resource where teachers can download ready-to-print files of written exercises, project guidelines and other handouts. Every month, there are English, social studies, science, maths, CME (Civics and Moral Education) and NE (National Education) activities linked to *What's Up* stories. At times, there are also art, drama, music and even PE activities.

Mother Tongue teachers who teach CME can use *What's Up* along with the CME activities at IDEAS. The IDEAS handouts are in English but are easy to translate. Every month, there is also a PowerPoint presentation that teachers can download and use in the classroom. Typically, it facilitates a whole-class discussion of a *What's Up* story.

What's Up is also a way to encourage students to write. Most often, it's for the Letters page. We deliberately set the hurdle low to let as many students as possible see their names in print. Those who have the interest and a flair for writing can contribute longer articles. Although *What's Up* is meant to be a newspaper for children and not by children, we've had some marvellous student contributors over the years. We should add that, in all these cases, they didn't need their teachers to intercede: the students took the initiative to approach us of their own accord.

Q: What advice can you give teachers who feel unprepared to answer children's questions on sensitive issues such as terrorism, racism and genocide?

A: As adults, how do we answer even our own questions about such horrors? Terrorism,

racism, genocide and other human atrocities have been around for centuries but how do we explain our inability to stem their intrusion into the 21st century? Teachers who believe in giving honest answers should let students know that there are many questions that adults struggle with as well.

There are some assurances we can give students: that for all the bad news that they hear, the majority of countries enjoy peace and the vast majority of people are good to each other. There is also comfort in knowing that there are attempts at practising justice, ranging from war crime tribunals at the international level to zero tolerance policies against aggression at school.

One of the most pressing questions that students tend to have is how they can protect themselves. That's an opportunity to reiterate the importance of taking Total Defence strategies very seriously. As a nation, we've resolved to take care of each other. Having tangible tasks to do in preparation can actually reduce children's anxiety considerably.

Beyond that, teachers can enable themselves to answer even the most difficult questions by turning to each other and to experts: like-minded professional peers and mentors at school, NIE faculty with the relevant expertise, publications such as SingTeach and other valuable resources.

Mary Cherian is a former faculty member of the National Institute of Education. She is currently the director of allied health professionals at the [Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore \(MINDS\)](#).

Cherian George is a former Straits Times journalist who is now acting head of the Division of Journalism and Publishing at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

> Click [here](#) to learn more about *What's Up*.

> Download a full version of the interview [here](#).

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