

‘Should the Military be involved in Education?’

This was the question posed by Emma Sangster when she spoke to Faringdon Peace Group in April. She is a co-founder of ‘Forces Watch’, an organisation which monitors and challenges militarism in education and everyday life.

Emma defined militarism as: the extension of military culture and influence into everyday life; the normalisation of war and the military approach, and the prioritising of the needs and interests of military institutions. This is manifested in schools by the growth of cadet programmes, the ‘Troops to Teachers’ fast track teacher training programme, armed forces career days in colleges, participation in Armed Forces Day, defence industry sponsorship of apprenticeships, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) roadshows and school visits sponsored by major defence institutions and the armed forces.

On the surface these might sound like helpful additions to school life but Emma claimed that most school and family based activities organised by the armed forces and the defence industry are simply marketing and recruitment opportunities. They also help promote public support of the military but, as a protest banner at the Liverpool national Armed Forces Day event in 2017 said, ‘War is NOT Family Entertainment’. Sanitised TV forces recruitment adverts shamelessly manipulate young people with images of fun and adventure, family and belonging – things that might be lacking in their lives – without showing the darker side of forces life. The UK is the only country in the EU to recruit at 16, a very vulnerable and impressionable age. Many young recruits are unable to cope with the realities of military life and become alienated and traumatised.

In a fragmented education system with schools buying in activities and services, there is no oversight or regulation by the local authority and military interests are becoming embedded in the system. This is very rarely balanced by peace education, which the UN says should be a fundamental part of the curriculum.

‘Forces Watch’ lobbies UK parliaments to demand scrutiny and regulation of armed forces visits to schools. They conduct research and produce publications which challenge the military narrative and support peace education initiatives in schools such as ‘Science for Society Week’.

The theme of growing militarism in everyday life will be continued in next month’s meeting when Judith Heathcoat, our County Councillor, will talk about the ‘Armed Forces Covenant’ and why local councils have signed it. All are welcome: May 1st, 7.30, Friends Meeting House, Lechlade Road, Faringdon. See www.faringdonpeacegroup.org.uk