

Incontro pedagogico europeo – Cadine (TN - Italia) 9-10 ottobre 2010

## **An EXPERIENCE OF THREE SCHOOLS**

Kevin McKeague, David McConkey and Declan O'Brien (Headmasters of schools)

The background to this experience is the troubled story of Northern Ireland bringing much conflict over many years and leaving the situation still quite fragile even today. It is complicated - but put very simply: within Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, there has been a deep division between the mainly Protestant community – often identified as unionists/loyalists because they want to remain loyal to and part of the UK - and the mainly Roman Catholic community many of whom want a united Ireland.

Then across the border is the Republic of Ireland - sometimes seen by one side as enemy and by the other as friend or ally.

Kevin McKeague, David McConkey and Declan O'Brien are headmasters of schools, which represent these three communities.

### **Kevin McKeague**

In Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant children are usually educated in separate schools. Traditionally the two communities have been segregated into separate areas of towns; separate housing estates, recreational facilities, etc.

David and I, with our two schools have been building friendship and fraternity over many years. This would have been most unusual and even dangerous during troubled times. We began to link with many peace initiatives in NI, and with schools in the United Kingdom through the Warrington Project after that English city was bombed in 1992 by Northern Ireland terrorists killing two children. Our two schools were then joined by another school from the neighbouring Republic of Ireland, to form a partnership. This also is ground breaking as there are normally very few links between the Protestant community in Northern Ireland and the Catholic community in the Republic (some would even have been fearful to cross the border.)

I once heard Chiara Lubich say that of the three aspirations of the French Revolution, the least developed was Fraternity. So my journey led me to see in my meeting with David an opportunity to build bridges and to bring into our communities an injection of love and fraternity.

### **David McConkey**

I had and have a strong conviction that Education has a huge role to play in building peace in initiatives where children from different traditions meet face to face. I was keen to find a Roman Catholic school, to link with my own Protestant school when I met Kevin who displayed a most welcoming and willing disposition to help me realise what I was aspiring for our school,"

## **Declan O'Brien**

I had seen at first-hand how united the two schools from Northern Ireland were, what a witness Kevin and David were to building unity and I too wanted to share in this. I saw a real opportunity to live the art of loving with other schools.

And we have lived a very strong experience of this in the past year.

## **David McConkey**

A year ago, our school, Whitehouse Primary School, was completely destroyed in an arson attack. This was a huge suffering for the staff, for myself, and for the whole school community. The other two schools felt our suffering and a solidarity concert, entitled "All for All", was organised, with the support of the young people of the Focolare. Pupils from the three schools performed, and parents from all schools attended. This was a unique occasion, which was reflected by the presence of the local unionist mayor and the parish priest, who represent both sides of the divided community and would not usually be invited to share the same platform.

The Mayor told us: "You are giving a strong witness in the community". The Parish Priest was delighted that both communities were for the first time using the beautiful Parish Hall. A local newspaper spoke of children "showing us the way forward".

At first, everyone thought a new school would be built to replace our fire-damaged school, but because of the recession, the Government seemed unlikely to grant permission for a new school.

As the Minister for Education comes from the Catholic community, some people began to imagine that it was discrimination.

The school community began to organise themselves. A dignified protest took place at Stormont, the parliament building. Parents, pupils, and staff gathered on the steps of parliament and felt very much supported by the presence of Kevin, Declan and Lia who joined us to represent their schools. Again, it was a demonstration of the unity between the three schools. The Parliament's Education Committee, made up of politicians from all sides, met with the delegation and was very impressed with this sign of solidarity.

Next evening, the Minister for Education phoned me to arrange a meeting. She asked about the relationship between the three schools. She was presented with a book of Peace Poems written by the children of the 3 schools and a DVD of a recent shared activity.

The minister announced that our school was to be rebuilt immediately. In fact, it is the only school in Northern Ireland to receive funding this year.

## **Declan O'Brien**

Much has been lived together by our three schools. Over the years, we linked with other schools from around Europe through the Comenius Project, which provides support and funding for worthwhile initiatives. We have many common educational projects in literacy, environment, health and peace education - Our three schools have introduced the Art of Loving. By rolling the Cube of Love in our classrooms or at Assembly, our children learn to be peacemakers in the school playground, in the classroom and at home. It has also proved to be very effective in bullying situations.

A boy in my school was being bullied by another child and he started to take revenge. I realized that they were beginning to hate each other. During a moment of dialogue we threw the Cube of Love. It landed on "Love your enemy", the two children decided to start again and found the strength to move forward.

Every year our schools gather together for an event called "Drums for Peace". The pupils read aloud their own poems about peace; sing songs on peace, display their artwork, and beat drums!

Drums have traditionally been beaten for war and, in Northern Ireland, people used to march down streets beating drums to antagonise the other side of the divide. We beat drums for peace. Parents and families are invited to join in the event, which this year was held at the Focolare Centre in Ireland and was attended also by representatives of two other schools from Germany and Slovenia through the Comenius Project. The echo of the peace drums is spreading!

### **Kevin McKeague**

Every year a winning poem is chosen. Last year the winning poem was written by an 8yr old boy from Belfast (Aiden Doyle). There had been peace in NI for a few years and suddenly in 2009 there seemed to be a return to the past. A policeman was shot dead by dissident republicans and two soldiers were killed. Aidan begged in his poem not to go back to those days, when there was violence in our communities.

With his spontaneity and positive certainty that peace is possible, if we don't look back, Aiden writes, "the policeman who died was somebody's dad".

He read his poem at the "All for All" concert. The mayor was very impressed and now he has a copy hanging in his office.

When the widow of the policeman heard it, was very moved by the poem and invited Aiden and his mother to the memorial service for her husband. These simple and convincing words of Aiden made news and reached the national TV channel and highlighted that a circle of schools in Northern Ireland and Europe are actively promoting Peace Education.

An observer had this impression of our experience: "It is an educational experience, but also an experience of citizenship that goes beyond not only the border between communities, and borders between North and South, but also the little borders of creed, language and culture. It is a pebble thrown in the water and, the waves we hope will magnify."