

Initiatives of Change. UK Schools Service

On several occasions I have had requests for a written insight to what our aims and approach has been with the IofC UK Schools Programme in the last 16 years. What lies below is aimed to answer that. Howard Grace. November 2011.

Beginnings and Background

Seeds are sown



Sunrise in India

Over forty years ago, as a young man, I spent two years in India doing voluntary work. Much of that time was spent with Indian university students. These were often intelligent, well educated young people. **What struck me though was whether, in the future, they would use their abilities and training primarily to just have a nice life for themselves or in some way to serve others and the community.** Some years later, as an Advanced-level mathematics teacher in a UK Comprehensive school, I also became responsible for Sixth Form (age 16–18) Current Affairs. Once again I became aware of the importance of motivation and purpose in the very able young people I was working with.

Stepping out

In 1995 this awareness led to my stopping formal teaching to be free to develop a programme visiting Sixth Forms all round Britain, doing interactive sessions to provoke thought about purpose in life. This is something that goes beyond good academic training and such things as careers advice. During the years since then the focus has been on small teams of younger people who spend the autumn and spring terms together. Countries represented in these teams have been Australia, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Honduras, India, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Sudan, UK, USA, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.



Danielly (Brazil), Bhav (UK), Alison (USA). 1999

Purpose

We used themes such as 'Moving Out Of Your Comfort Zone', 'Being My(better)self' and 'Freedom isn't Free' to focus the inner struggle which we all experience in one way or another. Rather than talking about specific subjects like 'drugs', our themes aimed to create a broader context from which all issues could get a perspective. Several teachers in schools where we did sessions commented on the value of themes which enabled "Lateral Thinking".

Approaching Schools

The initial approach to schools was made by letter about three months before we went to a particular area. We wrote to appropriate teachers in all the schools with Sixth Forms within reach of our hosts of an area who we will be staying with. This was followed up by numerous phone calls. We usually got a response of about 15%. So if we were going to an area for a week we usually found ourselves doing sessions in about eight schools.

By using this approach our teams have facilitated about 800 sessions in schools, often with groups of about 60 to 100 students for an hour. We have been to tough inner-city state schools and to privileged independent colleges, interacting with some 50,000 students. More recently, instead of letters in the post we have sent e-mails to teachers with the more detailed letter as an attached file. Apart from being how teachers normally tend to communicate now, it saves postage costs.

Focus of sessions



Sandra from Latvia, facilitating a school session.
"Would you recommend your society for us to aspire to?"

A few years ago two people aged 18 and 20, from Latvia and Russia joined us. They told the sixth formers, "We have had momentous changes in our countries since the fall of the Soviet Union and are now looking at what sort of society we would like to build. We are attracted by some things we see in the West, but are interested to see the impact of your society on you. Do young people here have a deep sense of purpose and fulfilment that we would like? Would you recommend your society in the UK for our countries to aspire to?" This prompted searching discussions.

We also often quoted someone as saying, "In the West, in the UK we have everything to live with but nothing to live for." After asking the students if they agreed with this statement (some did and some didn't) we then asked, "What do you live for if you basically have all you need? Is it 'more of the same'? Or is it something else?" And "Why is it that in our society, when many basically have what they need, there is so much depression, drug taking or even suicide?" Questions like these prompt deeper thought, and enable discussion on what the students feel is important to them.

Is 'Because I feel like it' the same as 'To be true to yourself'?

Our sessions were 'interactive', not prescriptive, in the spirit of enquiry which is needed to get a post-modernist generation involved. Teachers commented on the importance of questions like these which enabled 'lateral thinking'.

Same aim - Another approach

Young Australian, Chris Lancaster became the programme director for the year 2002/3. We conducted sessions in around 90 schools all over England. At different stages the schools team included people from Australia, Canada, Crimea (Ukraine), Mexico, New Zealand, South Korea, the UK and Zimbabwe.

The sessions were titled 'Initiatives of Change', and sought to explore "What changes would I like to see in the world? What changes might I need to discover in myself - my attitudes, motivation and vision - from which could emerge initiatives to address those wider needs?"



Chris Lancaster with Sixth Form students in London, 2003.

An activity would sometimes focus a discussion on whether 'Because I feel like it' is the same as 'To be true to yourself'. Students generally identified the former in terms of a superficial, selfish, impulsive motivation, and the latter as a deeper, more altruistic and considered motivation where morals and conscience were a factor. They frequently raised the value of things like integrity and self-respect. Statements like Mother Teresa's that 'There is more poverty in the West, in the UK, than in India.' often stimulated discussion about the deeper 'spiritual poverty' of our society.

In sharing experiences of dealing with these motives, one student described returning a mug stolen from a coffee shop, and another being generously rewarded for his honesty in handing in a lost wallet. Such experiences served as useful examples of how 'being true to myself' in apparently small decisions shapes the kind of people we are. (A half-hour DVD showing the lively interaction of a couple of these sessions is available from howard.grace@uk.iofc.org).

The sessions finished with a brief time of silence to reflect on these questions. Teachers often commented on the effectiveness of these, as much for themselves as for the students. One teacher said of the whole session, 'You were speaking directly to me.'

There is rarely any opportunity for further contact with the students encountered during the 'interactive' lessons. The work of the schools service is one of sowing seeds. But it is hoped that the ideas talked about will take root in some students and help them to think more deeply about what they can do with their lives.

From **January till March 2005**, Letlapa Mphahlele from South Africa joined the programme. He had spent 17 years in his people's liberation struggle during the time of Apartheid.



More recently he wrote a book, "Child of this soil. My life as a liberation fighter." At the launch of the book in Cape Town Ginn Fourie rose to confront Letlapa. Her daughter Lyndi had been killed in the Heidelberg Tavern Massacre in December 1993. Letlapa had been the Azanian Peoples Liberation Army Commander who authorised that massacre. What has happened since is a remarkable story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Their journey points us all to think more deeply about what is important to us in life and how to foster peace, justice and conciliation.

The sessions in Sixth Forms were done interactively, with students having the opportunity to explore with Letlapa whether there is an alternative to the spiral of "terror" and extreme response of "the war on terror" that seems to be the hallmark of present times. Sessions were done in 36 very varied schools.

Discussion became focussed on varying aspects of this theme on different occasions. Howard Grace wrote a reflection on the visit which explores the following six themes:

- (1) The price of the alternative.
- (2) Forgiveness.
- (3) Other motives.
- (4) The spiritual dimension.
- (5) Purpose for life, aged 17?
- (6) Perspective.

This reflection can be seen at web site:
<www.uk.iofc.org/node/27530>



2006/7



Chris James and Roshan Gul

In the five months starting in September 2006 the IofC Schools Programme team facilitated 45 Sixth Form sessions in many parts of England and Scotland.

I was joined by Chris James (Australia), Roshan Gul (New Zealand) and Vlad Oleatovschi (Moldova). Having spent nine months with the leadership training programme for young people *Action for Life* in Asia and developing a very good rapport with young people there, they came to the UK to compare thoughts on the sort of world their generation would like to see.

Much of the present atmosphere of society, such as advertising, appeals to self. But does this really satisfy? And does this limited purpose address the needs of our times? So the theme of discussion was: ***Beyond Satisfaction***.

The added dimension that year was the use of drama. Students became very engaged with the presentation, which set the scene for personal stories from the international team. A highlight of Roshan's sharing was her holding a candle which was lighted when positive experiences were shared and extinguished for negative ones. This also focussed the need to not be blown around by outside influences but to be true to the light from within. That gives a deeper sense of fulfilment.

There was genuine appreciation from students and staff at all schools visited. As the team left the first Reading school students in a corridor clapped as the team went by. Many were left with the thought that to live on the get may bring a certain short term satisfaction but to live on the give brings a deeper and longer lasting sense of fulfilment.

March 2009: Joint Muslim/Christian action. "Raising a generation of trustbuilders" in Liverpool schools

During the week March of 16-20th 2009 Musa Aliyu, Amina Khalid and I facilitated sessions in seven Liverpool Sixth Forms, under the auspices of The Desmond Tutu Centre of Liverpool Hope University. Our theme was "Raising a generation of trustbuilders".

Musa led the sessions and started by asking why two young African Muslims and a relatively old English Christian would want to work together to visit schools like this. It was to build trust across what is often perceived to be the divide of Muslim/Christian/Western relations.



Amina and Musa

We asked what they thought was a better background to come from if you wanted to be a trustbuilder. Is it a supportive, trusting, caring family and social background? Or is it someone from a dysfunctional, chaotic, untrusting family and social background that makes a better trustbuilder? Usually the immediate response was "The first". But then opinion became more evenly divided. It seemed that your experience of life, good or bad, could lead you to DECIDE to be a trustbuilder whatever your background.

Bearing in mind the variety of backgrounds that the students came from we were trying to encourage a positive vision in all the students. With this in mind I then read a passage from a book which described the author's first day in secondary school, aged about ten. He wrote:

We sat at a table with four other children, and Miss Hefty, an energetic middle-aged woman with short grey hair, took attendance. When she read my full name, I heard titters break across the room.a sandy-haired boy behind me repeated the word in a loud hoot, like the sound of a monkey. The children could no longer contain themselves, and it took a stern reprimand from Miss Hefty before the class would settle down and we could mercifully move on to the next person on the list. I spent the rest of the day in a daze. A redheaded girl asked to touch my hair and seemed hurt when I refused. A ruddy-faced boy asked if my father ate people. When I got home, Gramps was in the middle of preparing dinner. I went into my room and closed the door.

I asked who they thought might have written that. In some schools students correctly replied, "Barack Obama". But they quickly got the point that although Obama had many instances in his

life which could have radically disaffected him, Barack Obama eventually decided to rise above all this to his present position. He has become a person who is inclusive of everyone in his vision, not only in the USA, but in the whole world.

Then Amina was introduced. She shared something of her experiences as a young person in Somalia, growing up in a civil war zone. Her family had ended up as refugees in London, where she was sent to school at the age of 13, hardly speaking any English. She was bullied and racially abused, partly because of wearing a headscarf. She went to four different schools, and had a torrid time.



She asked the students for feedback on what she should have done in that situation, try to fight back or to walk away? In several schools large boys said, "Fight back" because you have to stand up for yourself. But other students felt that that lowers you to the level of those who are bullying you. Amina shared with us that she had fled from a terrible conflict in Somalia, and she didn't want to be part of conflict in her new home country. She feels that as a Muslim her faith does not permit violence and revenge, it is said that "Revenge is like a poison that flows through a diseased soul" Had she taken revenge on those who harmed her, she would never have found peace and happiness in her heart.

Musa then introduced a clip of the film, "The Imam and the Pastor" (see info@fltfilms.org.uk) and asked the students what struck them most about the DVD they had just seen. We did this in 60 schools. Often when we only have an hour with a group, we use a 10-minute clip starting at Chapter 2 on the Chapter Menu, (7 mins 30 secs), and ending at 17 mins where Pastor James says, "That is how I got into this work". Some of the questions we have found helpful are:

- ***What struck you most about what you have just seen?***

All sorts of things come up, but we draw out what is on the minds of the audience. They often mention the pillow.

- ***Do you think that James saying that he was tempted to suffocate Ashafa helped to build trust between them or to break it down?***

They will have differing responses. We try to bring out that it depends on the spirit in which James admits it - our motivation comes through in the way we say things. Do we say things out of love or anger, or some other emotion? We try to develop a conversation around this, which is just as relevant for young people who don't have a religious faith as for those who do.

- ***Does it takes more courage to do what those men were doing (leading armed militia to defend 'their people', and being prepared to die) or what they are doing now (crossing barriers to do peace building)?***

They usually say "What they are doing now". When we ask, "Why?", they say that it takes courage to break away from your own people; also, that it takes strength not to react in anger if someone has killed your relatives or chopped off your hand. This focuses the inner struggle with the destructive forces in our own natures, referred to in Islam as the 'jihad al-nufs', or the 'greater jihad'. This practical example helps them understand the deeper aspect of the word 'jihad', and to reflect on their own character.

- ***What were the key steps that led to Imam Ashafa's change of heart?***

Most answers focus on the challenge of the example in the Qur'an when the blessed Prophet Mohammed showed forgiveness towards those who attacked and stoned him. For many it is a surprise that this is the true message of Islam.

When they ask how the same religions that led these men to fight had also led them to forgive and reconcile, I quote Imam Ashafa's own answer to that question: "A candle can either be used to light up a house - or to burn it down. The same is true of religion."

They are also struck by the fact that both men had to radically move out of their 'comfort-zones' to begin their reconciling work together.

- ***How can a Muslim and a Christian to work together like this, despite believing different things?***

There are various answers. I sometimes say that people reach out to the Divine with the heart and with the mind. In our hearts we experience the struggle that contrasts emotions like hate and fear, with love, forgiveness and selflessness. We use our minds to try to understand where these things come from and how they operate. But it is on the heart level that people can work together for the common good whilst respecting each other's differences of belief.

Overall perspective

There have been many other teams and themes since the programme started. But what is described above will give an idea of the wide variety of engagements that can be had to help students think about what is important to them. As a young man in one school said, "Deep down we all long to make a difference." That statement also led to worthwhile discussions when we quoted it in subsequent sessions.

It is clear that schools greatly appreciate the contribution we make to the education of their students. However, to my mind, that is less than half the value in doing this programme. It has been a wonderful training vehicle, towards gaining experience, for those of us involved in teams giving the sessions. As well as fostering our presentation skills we are forced to think deeply about the topics we discuss. It also challenges us to live what we talk about. I know from my own training to be a teacher that the most valuable part of the course was when we trainee teachers were sent into schools to put into practice what we were supposed to have been learning. The Schools Programme fulfills that role for the life of IofC.

I am often asked whether we have a written synopsis of our sessions. It is probably clear from what is written above that we don't. We have some idea of what we want to focus and do in each session, but that often changes from day to day. We like to be flexible and, through discussion, activate the inner struggle that goes on in every heart. The sessions usually finish with a time of quiet reflection on issues raised.

The UK Schools Service came into being because I felt a sense of calling to it. I can think of many others who have far greater teaching skills, ability and educational understanding than I do. However, my parting comment to the reader is: **If you are thinking of taking on a schools programme appropriate for your own situation or country I would suggest that the number one requirement is a deep sense of conviction for it that is laid on your heart.**