

**Development Education and Social Justice in schools**  
**A personal testimony from a teacher**  
**Shona Cahill**

On 19 March 2015 at 14:36, Shona Cahill <[shonamcahill@gmail.com](mailto:shonamcahill@gmail.com)> wrote:

Hi Gearoid,

Great to hear from you. Beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig ort freisin! Well, well, well....you have hit me with a topic so close to my heart and one on which I could talk all day! I am massively passionate about Development Education and Social Justice in schools in Ireland and I am delighted to hear that you are working in this area.

So I suppose I will just tell you what I did, how and why and I imagine it will give you some answers and an essence of what I was trying to achieve.

I approached my principal in 2005 and told him I wanted to start a Development Education program in the school with the students which would involve taking the kids overseas to India for at least two weeks as part of the program. My fear was that I was only 24 at the time and he may consider me too young but he was hugely supportive and encouraging and told me to take my time with the project and he would back me 100 per cent. I was lucky as his brother works for the UN so its something he too is passionate about. The first bit of advice I will give, is that these projects have to be utterly supported by staff and management if they are going to work well. With his support, I started to plan and scheme!

I chose fourth and fifth year students to take part in the project as they are old enough to become engaged but not in Leaving Cert year so they have time to give and are at an impressionable age. I presented the project to the entire year group in assembly and gave out application forms. From the beginning, I made it very clear that while this is deeply linked with International Development issues and a social justice project, at its very core, it is a spiritual journey. Faith is what inspired it and faith is what will drive it. Students must be willing and open to participate in prayer and the Gospels will be our rule book. Atheists and non Christians are welcome to apply but they must be willing to participate in this core faith experience. I never made any apology for this, or accepted views that I was being exclusive.....I was not, I was merely running a project from my own personal journey and was not willing to compromise on that. People of all faiths and none applied and I chose them on their application and interview performance and not on their beliefs....this was also important to me. I took Muslim and atheists onto the program and it made it all the more powerful.

After applications and interviews were done, I chose the students I wanted. On the first program I took 12 students and on the final program, it was 18.

The project ran for ten months. In this time, we met every Thursday evening after school for an hour and a half. Students had to attend ALL meetings and illness or unavoidable family circumstances were the only excuses allowed for missing meetings. (I had a guy walk away from playing for the Clare hurling team for the year to take part in the program....it was a huge sacrifice for him but he did it....his name is Paul Flanagan, look him up, he is one of our finest Clare hurlers now). Meetings are crucial firstly to allow the group to bond deeply with each other and with me but also so they learn about poverty, development, Christ and the dire situation they were going

into in Calcutta. At meetings, we began with prayer....Scripture passages, reflections, silence, prayers of intercession and personal sharing. The students themselves eventually became responsible for leading the prayer sessions. We played games and lots of ice breakers to get to know each other and to start opening up to each other (have lots of these if you need them). After this we had a discussion about a particular theme....it included types of poverty, causes of poverty, impact of education, impact of globalisation, international trading laws, agricultural development, democratisation, tropical diseases, travel safety, culture and cultural differences, Hinduism, patriarchal societies etc etc....we looked at a huge range of topics and meeting generally lasted a lot longer than expected what with question and answer sessions at the end etc. We looked deeply at the context of Jesus' life, the political system of injustice he was born into and the implications of his teachings at the time. I linked Jesus to Old Testament writings, mainly using Amos and what he had to say about an unjust and unfair society and God's place in it all. The meetings were all about lighting a fire within them, an unquenchable fire for justice.

Our weekends were taken up giving talks. We talked in a lot of Churches and did retiring collections. We did a retiring collection in Ennis in 2007 and in the weekend we raised 23,000 euro, not bad. We organised race nights, copper races, dances,concerts, bands nights, bake offs, Golf competitions and charity football games....we raised 75,000 euro that year in 2007 but I scaled down after that and capped our fundraising at 50,000. We talked a lot about foreign aid and giving money to the 'poor' but my argument was always that giving money firstly does not make you superior and secondly solves very little but there were small projects on the ground that I knew very well that students visited and could hand over money to support and ensure continuation.

We went on two weekend retreats throughout the program, visited many primary schools preparing for confirmation and Holy Communion to tell them about the program, visited the Poor Clares and the students also had to participate in a social justice project at home too. This was visiting the elderly, volunteering in a charity shop or volunteering with St Vincent de Paul, to remind them that social justice begins at home.

I met the parents twice formally throughout the program in the initial stages to explain the program and ensure their support in making their children available and assisting them to get to places at weekend and obviously to discuss health concerns about travelling to a tropical region. I met them prior to departure to give them an update and finalise departure details and give them contact details in case of emergency while in India. I did not allow the students to bring mobile phones and did not allow use of internet except on a time tabled rota when they could email parents every three days if they wanted. In most cases they emailed once but were otherwise too pre occupied and busy. I sent a group email to all parents every night to reassure the parents that everyone was well and there had been no issues for them to worry about.The contact things was to make sure students were not distracted by trivial stuff with friends at home and to keep them focussed on where they were. I never had issues with this as once they were in India, Ireland was long forgotten. If homesick, I rang home with them whenever it was needed but keeping them busy distracted them from missing their parents.

The ground work was all done at home so in India it was pretty straight forward. I know Calcutta like the back of my hand and I am very confident there. Calcutta was really about living their faith experience, serving the poor and seeing the things they had learned about first hand.

We spent 17 days in India. We went during our Easter Holidays. Our day started at 5 am when I hauled them out of bed and we went to Mother House (the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa) for 6 am mass every morning. After mass, we had breakfast with the Sisters and other volunteers and split into two groups for work. Half the group worked in an orphanage for physically and mentally disabled kids and the other half worked in a hospice for adults who were severely ill. The morning shift was from 8-1. After work we came home for lunch. We stayed in a Christian Brothers school in an area called Bow Bazar. It is a large compound and walled so it was very safe. The boys were on one floor and the girls on another. They had common areas where they hung out and I never had problems with the boy/girl teenage stuff. They were too dirty, sweaty and tired to feel even remotely attracted to each other!!!! After lunch they rested for half an hour and we headed out again. Half the group went to teach English in a very poor area called Howrah and the other half came out into the city with me. We visited local sights, slums, temples, market places and I brought them to the railway stations to meet my beloved homeless railway kids to play football and just chat with young kids their own age who had no education, no home, no parents no nothing. The next day, the group who came out with me would go teaching and the other half did the sights and so on. We visited rural villages also to see rural poverty and its implications and visited many small local charities to see the work that was being done. We took in a couple of cricket matches and visited a very western huge shopping centre to show wealth contrasts and funny enough, I never had a student buy an item in these western stores, they were sickened by the poverty gap. After the second shift we came back home for supper, followed by evening prayer in the house chapel and sharing of the day. We were lucky to be there for Easter and so we celebrated the Triduum with the Missionaries of Charity. On Good Friday, I had a private service with them where they spent much of the day in silence reflecting on questions I gave them. They had to write about topics like where they recognised the crucified Christ in Calcutta, what does it mean to be a Christian for a young person today etc....some of the feedback was inspiring. After prayer and reflection, we had recreation, followed by journal writing (they all kept a daily journal) and then it was lights out by 10.30 to start again at 5 next morning.

After the trip, we came back to Ireland and meetings and debriefing continued into the summer holidays. June end we had our final mass and each young person had to find an audience with which they could share the experience. Most chose churches but some chose their local GAA club and others organised music nights where they displayed photos and spoke in between songs about their experiences. They again visited schools. Before we left, we had a mass of commissioning with the bishop and he had their final mass with them too in summer before he took them out for a meal and a break up party.

They then face their final year of school and make decisions around careers. They have counselling available to them should they need it too. I am still in touch with the majority of them and write references regularly. They were kids before we left for India but came back as adults. Many are my friends now and a couple who I took as students

returned with me on later trips as leaders. The majority have gone on to study medicine, nursing, teaching, politics and law, international development and social work.

We teach religion in schools in Ireland in a very drab way.....its not massively inspiring. Jesus was a phenomenal character and I wanted to show them that....I wanted to show them who He really was and let them develop their faith out of the Gospels so as to come to understand the Catholic faith more. The overseas experience was to allow them the opportunity to really see what it is to live your Christian faith and the challenge is to continue to do that at home. Being Christian in India is pretty easy....being Christian in Ireland is a bigger challenge. The experience opens their minds to our world and opens their hearts to God. I guess all we can do is bring the horse to the water and hope that they will continue drinking on into their lives.After the Program, I introduce the kids to Taize. Taize prayer for young people is on Thursdays in Ennis and they can travel to Taize in summer with a youth group. In 2014, after our 2013 India trip 8 out of 18 who travelled with me went to Taize and three others went to Lourdes as helpers. Ten took part in the John Paul II awards and got their medals.

As a young wild teenager, I was exposed to God in a very real way by my school chaplain who was a priest, he saved my life really.....we have to make their faith experience deeply personal and very real. Otherwise it just becomes a faith handed down by my parents that I really know nothing about.

Twinning with schools is not something that I did simply because I knew I was going to ultimately leave the school and look at religious life so I couldn't commit but it is a great idea. Many schools do it with schools of the same founder....so Christian Brothers here with Christian Brothers there etc.....and they do exchange programs. There is funding available from Irish Aid for all these things too. If you were to twin a school, the program could remain similar to mine but with interaction throughout the year with the school you are to visit. the school in Ireland could obviously do lots of fundraising for the school over and you could even fundraise to bring some of the kids from there over to Ireland.

If you need contacts in India particularly, I have plenty. Needless to say to you but to the staff you work with....keep the core spiritual....kids are very open to it if you present it in the right way. Bring the whole faith experience right down to teenage level and use adoration and letter writing to get them to encounter God.....music too, there are great bands out there nowadays who write good worship music.....Hillsong comes to mind but there are lots of others.

This was the approach I took to it all....please be in touch again if you need anymore info.....i may have answered none of your questions in this so ask again if not. I am all for what you are doing...not only does it raise awareness of social justice issues but can brings our youth into the heart of the Gospels....and that's always a good thing....

Take care,  
Love Shona