

Peace Studies at Secondary School

Mark Dawes, Comberton Village College, October 2009.

How can you engage, educate and excite young people about the subject of 'peace'? Schools are required to teach about different aspects of citizenship and at Comberton Village College (a school in Cambridgeshire for students aged from 11 to 16) we do this in part by holding conference days on which usual lessons are cancelled and the students focus on a particular issue for a whole day, allowing them to explore issues in considerable depth. At the prompting of Janet Ganguli, a long-time campaigner for peace and justice whose younger children had attended the school, we now devote one of our conference days for the 16 year olds to Peace Studies. Janet provided her experience and, crucially, links to people who could be invited to join us for the day, while I dealt with logistical issues within school such as preparing lists of pupils, arranging appropriate rooms for the sessions and briefing other members of staff.

The Peace Studies Day is introduced to the three hundred students with a clip from the film *Gandhi*; the young people are shocked when they see Gandhi and some of his followers calmly walking forwards to be clubbed down by British soldiers. This session sometimes includes a quiz and serves to lay out some of the issues that will be discussed further during the day.

Three workshop sessions, run by of about an hour follow. These are led by visitors, including Pax Christi, Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Ecumenical Accompaniers in Palestine and Israel and are often interactive and can involve videos, pictures or practical activities. The workshops encourage the students to consider peace from many different angles and are not intended to teach a particular point of view but rather to create the conditions for discussion, engagement and involvement with the subject. Artistic workshop sessions have included a study of peace posters and then the opportunity to create a peace badge, listening to and talking about peace songs from the 1960s to the present day and a study of cartoons about war and peace. There is a strong reminder that peace begins close to home in the strand of workshops about mediation, conflict resolution and non-violent communication; these include role-plays and discussion about ways of diffusing tense situations at home, school and in the community. A further strand of workshops focuses on people who make peace, from the work of the UN to filmmakers who work in conflict zones and individuals who work for peace. In a mock trial of the women who damaged a Hawker jet to prevent a crime being committed the students watch video evidence and are then invited to pronounce sentence. They reluctantly find the accused guilty and are surprised but pleased to discover that the judge at the real trial found them innocent. The effect of violence is the subject of other workshops, including the plight of refugees in Africa, child soldiers and the situation in Israel/Palestine. The workshop leaders all have extensive experience in their field and while they are not all used to leading workshops, they communicate with the students with enthusiasm. There are often lively debates!

Each summer I take a dozen students to London to meet and talk to Brian Haw at his protest opposite the Houses of Parliament. Several years ago we took a video camera with us and the afternoon session, which is attended by all of the students, begins with some footage of Brian. The idea that some people are so committed to their ideals that they might spend nearly a decade of their lives camped on a pavement is an

extraordinary one and has a powerful impact on the students. This is followed by an opportunity to hear from and to ask questions of Bruce Kent. Even though the students were born during the 1990s (after the end of the cold war), they know a little about the issues involved and ask insightful questions, often quizzing Bruce about inconsistencies in governments' actions, about his role in CND and his current work with the Movement for the Abolition of War. Whenever I bump into former students they usually reminisce about their schooldays and often talk about the Peace Studies Day and hearing Bruce Kent speak. A band of musicians rehearses with Sue Gilmurray (composer, performer and activist) in advance of the day, and this part of the day ends with a performance of peace songs, some of which the students recognise (and join in with) and others of which have been written by Sue or by the pupils themselves. Finally, the students return to their tutor rooms to reflect on the day and to share with their friends the content of the different workshops they attended.

The day is an opportunity for the young people to be inspired by the visitors, to think about ideas that they don't usually have cause to consider and to provide a balance to the daily diet of violence that they all encounter in computer games, music, films and on television. The positive nature of the workshops means that the students are drawn into the issues and enjoy the day.

Without the support of the Principal and teachers at the school this day would not be able to happen, but the key people whose involvement is vital to the success of the venture are the visitors. Each year about 15 visitors are willing to spend a day at our school, and more time preparing in advance, to enable our students to hear about, and participate in, peace activities. We are extremely fortunate that they are willing to do this, and this reminds me of the quote from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Sadly, Janet Ganguli died in May 2009, but her vision of young people engaging with peace studies continues: January 2010 will see the seventh Peace Studies Day at Comberton Village College.