

Meeting to discuss Character Education

Birmingham, UK, June 2014



Earlier this year, in June 2014, we held a joint WFWP/UPF meeting to discuss Character Education (CE) in schools and communities, a follow-up meeting from an earlier occasion towards the end of 2013 for people interested in developing some kind of curriculum/programme which would be of value for young people in our modern-day world.

Almost 100 of us came together for the day, representing all our major and minor faith traditions, churches, mosques and temples, and as teachers from several schools and colleges, people involved in adult education, lawyers, magistrates, doctors, social workers, counsellors, a representative of the police, and - of course - as concerned parents. As well as formal sharing, there was a lot of passion expressed from the floor, and informally during the break time and following the end of the meeting.

People had travelled from various parts of the Midlands to attend, representing a very wide variety of experience and perspectives. Mr Jack Corley had travelled up from London to share from his many years of experience, working with schools, universities and the Ministry of Education in the former Soviet Union and China, and explaining in more detail about the CE curriculum which was developed there. He emphasised again the importance of education of heart, character and

norms of behaviour, on the foundation of which the academic education of young people should ideally be built, and that this should be more broadly developed to help adolescents become good citizens who can be of benefit to society.

Following Mr Corley's morning presentation, four speakers gave a brief overview of their own involvement in related areas of work, after which the floor was open for other contributions. Ms Anita Shervington spoke about her own upbringing, and things she felt were both present and missing as she was growing up. Raising 2 daughters of her own, in difficult circumstances, caused her to reflect on the kind of values she wanted to impart to them, and then the challenge of them going out into a society which did not necessarily support those same values. She involved herself in several things, including the Jubilee Centre at Birmingham University which is doing some substantial research into values in society. There she was able to attend a seminar at which she heard the American development psychologist, Howard Gardner, speak and she was impressed with his 'multiple intelligence' approach to the different ways in which we learn.

Next, Ms Ann Ullathorne, a Quaker, explained to us about the West Midlands Quaker Peace and Education Project which began over 25 years ago,

much of it being funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Foundation. She said that the Quakers have often tried to explore 'small ways' in which to create a more peaceful world of caring, compassionate communities. This particular project has tried to help young people develop peace-making behaviour, with 4 different programmes on offer. It is carried out in Primary schools, where there is an invitation, for 30 to 60 minutes, and once a week for 10 weeks. The first programme helps children think about conflict, and how to deal with it. The second helps children, who have responded positively to the first programme, to do Peer Mediation Training. Then, for example, they can be available to solve disputes and problems in the school playground. Both of these programmes have been running for quite a long time. The third, more recent, programme looks at the whole school, working with teachers, parents, governors, dinner ladies, etc, as well as students to create a whole-school peaceful environment for learning. The fourth programme involves going into schools on Inset days, and working with teachers to help them develop good techniques in the classroom. Finally, Ann mentioned the Peace Education Network UK, and a series of 6 school assemblies which have been developed, and which are available from their website.



Ellie Tobin, Principal of Joseph Chamberlain College



Participants speak from the floor

Ms Ellie Tobin was our fourth speaker, Principal of Joseph Chamberlain 6th Form College in Birmingham for the last 6 years. She said she could resonate with Mr Corley's time overseas, having spent 29 years herself in Germany, Australia, Malaysia and Japan, in

the latter country as Director of an International School. She had also consistently immersed herself in the area of values in education, as a result of which she was invited back to the UK in 2002, by Birmingham's Chief of Education, Prof Tim Brighouse. Partly as a response to the previous September's 9/11 tragedy, and partly due to the unique multicultural environment of the city of Birmingham, the idea was to create a College of International Citizenship (CIC) where national and global issues, affecting all of us, can be openly discussed. Underpinned by a sense of peace and social justice, questions are asked such as "Why would people carry out the acts of 9/11 when there is so much goodness in the world?" Ellie was to become the Director of the course which CIC would offer, a course consisting of 9 modules ranging in subject matter from 'Peace, Violence and Conflict' to 'Environment' and 'International Human Rights'. The modules are 1 week long, very 'intense', and with tutors flying in from all over the world to conduct them, with the aim of looking at the world through a variety of 'lenses' rather than a purely UK or European point of view. Ellie claimed that most, if not all, participants leave the course having had a life-changing experience, looking at things with very different eyes, and going back to their jobs, responsibilities, organisations and communities with the desire to have an even greater impact for good in the world. She concluded by saying, in her opinion, that Birmingham has the unique potential to lead Europe and even the world in citizenship and character education.

Finally our fourth speaker, Jessica Cruse, spoke about her personal passion for, and impending trip to, east Africa. She described the poverty she had seen there on previous visits, particularly that of orphaned children, many with HIV/AIDS, and her desire to do something to help street children and others get out of the poverty trap. She believes the latter to be 'man-made' and therefore we can also work to eradicate it. Not simply through practical projects, important though these are, but also through education, including spiritual and character education, hence her being present at this meeting. The words 'Education', 'Empowerment' and 'Entrepreneurism' are very much part of Jessica's dynamic vocabulary!

In keeping with her passion for Africa, she had us take a group photograph before lunch, to be sent out as part of the international expression of concern for the 276 schoolgirls kidnapped recently in northern Nigeria.

After lunch, we continued on with one more session from Jack Corley, emphasising the centrality and

value of the family as the place where so much initial 'education' and formation of character takes place, some of the difficulties faced in holding a family together in modern-day society, and the need to try and develop CE materials relevant to the schools and faith communities of our western society. Considerable interest was expressed in the latter, and we will try to pursue this in the coming months. It will take time to develop, and pilot, relevant and

meaningful presentations but there is a core group of people who would like to take the time, in order to turn our concern and ideas into something of practical value, to help guide our young people to become valuable citizens and peacemakers, developing a purity of heart and motivation, thinking about themselves in relation to the bigger picture, and working to improve society for the benefit of all.

