

Renewing Communities through Forgiveness Education in Belfast, Northern Ireland:
Electronic “Pen-Pal” Activities Across the Divided Community

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Project context

The long-range aim of The Forgiveness Education Program is to promote the psychology and education of forgiveness with the aim of involving an entire generation of students (from the Primary 2 through Year 12 of Post-Primary School, children aged 4 to 16) within Belfast, Northern Ireland in Forgiveness Education in the classroom and also in their homes and communities.

It is our hope that such an intensive exposure to forgiveness will help these students use the skills of conflict resolution in their every day lives and into adulthood, so that they learn to handle their conflicts between and among one another with greater peace, based on the principles of forgiveness. Recent research (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, & Carins, 2010) continues to show psychological compromise for children and adolescents who live in Belfast. The closer a family lives to an interface area, the more psychological stress and insecurity the child feels.

As young as three-years-old, children in Belfast begin to develop a sense of “us” and “them”, or what Connolly, Kelly, & Smith (2009) call an “ethnic habitus.” This set of cognitions, the authors argue, is a foundation for future prejudice between Irish Catholic and British Protestant residents of the city. In other words, children already come to school with some ideas of differences between contentious groups in the divided community of Belfast. These prejudices are further supported as 95% of schools are segregated along sectarian lines. This is a rationale for the development of scientifically-tested programs that reduce anger and address the issue of prejudice between students in the different ethnic groups. It is our hope that forgiveness education with adolescents, along with safe dialogue, will be one means of reducing the anger and prejudice and promote friendlier relationships and peace.

Definition of forgiveness. Forgiveness takes place in the context of unjust treatment. The one who forgives deliberately struggles to reduce or eliminate resentment toward the one who acted unjustly and to offer benevolence or moral goodness as well. Forgiveness is an act of mercy that need not supersede justice and may or may not include reconciliation. To forgive is not to condone, excuse, or to forget the offense. Although scholars have subtle variations in describing forgiveness, wide-ranging essays such as those found in Worthington (2005) are in general agreement with the definition here.

Research on the psychology of forgiveness. Research on the Process Model of Forgiveness (described in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) using randomized experimental and control groups with adults has shown efficacy for elderly participants treated unjustly by family members (Hebl & Enright, 1993), college students of emotionally-distant parents (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995), incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996), men hurt by the abortion decision of a partner (Colye & Enright, 1997), people in drug rehabilitation (Lin, Enright, Mack, Krahn, and Baskin, 2004), emotionally-abused women (Reed & Enright, 2006), cardiac patients (Waltman, Russell, Coyle, Enright, Holter, & Swoboda, 2009), and elderly in Hospice care who needed to forgive family members (Hansen, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2009). Forgiveness therapy has been judged by the American Psychological Association to be an empirically-verified psychological treatment.

The Process Model encompasses four phases and 20 units, the gist of which is: a) to aid the participant in confronting anger and understanding the injustice against him or her; b) making a decision to forgive and committing to the process of change; c) understanding the other person, including his or her unconditional worth as a person, d) experiencing empathy and compassion toward the person, and e) experiencing emotional relief.

Research on the psychology of forgiveness with children and adolescents. Research at the University of Wisconsin (Enright, Knutson, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007) confirms that the children in Belfast have higher levels of anger than children in non-violent communities. Research has been done in six studies within school settings. Two of these studies have taken place in Belfast classrooms, Primary 3 and Primary 5 grade levels (Enright et al., 2007). The classroom teachers were trained by psychologists in the use of forgiveness teacher guides and then the teachers taught the students about forgiveness once a week for about one hour in one semester. The curriculum is based on stories. For example, in Primary 3 (first-grade in the United States), the teacher reads such Dr. Seuss stories as Horton Hears a Who, Horton Hatches the Egg, The Sneetches, and The Butter Battle Book. Questions regarding forgiveness are then asked of the children. For example, in Horton Hears a Who, in which a kind elephant protects a small world inhabited by the Whos, the children focus on the inherent worth of the small Who creatures. They focus on Horton's need to forgive the jungle animals who tie him up and hurl insults his way because of this need to protect.

Results showed that those children who were taught themes of forgiveness by their classroom teachers reduced more in anger than those students in the control group. Further, in Primary 5, the students in the forgiveness condition reduced more in psychological depression than those in the control group.

A similar set of studies in Milwaukee's central-city with grade 1, 3, and 5 teacher and student participants showed similar results in that those children in the forgiveness condition reduced significantly more in anger than the children in the control group (Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Knutson Enright, & Enright, 2008). A study in middle school in the Midwestern United States, done by the school counselor, showed that those students at-risk (for academic

failure), who were randomized to the forgiveness condition, improved more in emotional health and in academic achievement than those in the control group (Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2008). The researchers concluded that as the children became less angry through forgiveness, they were able to concentrate more on and put more energy into their academic studies.

The importance of dialogue in fostering forgiveness. The first philosopher in the Western world, Socrates, emphasized the importance of dialogue to deepen understanding between and among people (see, for example, Plato's *Republic* as translated by Grube and Reeve, 1992). Plato's student, Aristotle, extended the usefulness of dialogue by emphasizing its importance in community as a way of fostering deeper friendships among people (see, for example, Enright, Knutson Enright, & Holter, 2010). This ancient view of dialogue as a way of fostering friendship and peace has now become part of strategic peace-building, as scholars are calling for dialogue about forgiveness between people who represent contentious groups (see, for example, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, Tausch, Hughes, Tam, Voci, von Hecker, & Pinder, 2008; Tam, Hewstone, Cairns, Tausch, Maio, & Kenworthy, 2007). Staub (2005), focusing his attention on Rwanda, makes the challenging point that dialogue is prelude to the eventual creation of a shared history based on the truth which can be the foundation for genuine reconciliation.

Yet, few programs, including ours at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Corrymeela Community, have been able to bring students from the two highly divided communities (Irish Catholic and British Protestant) of Belfast into close and sustained contact as a way to promote forgiveness and reduce anger and prejudice.

Proposed new program and research study. The new program in Forgiveness Education which we propose for Year 10 students will allow the students to safely study forgiveness as part of their own school's offerings. Bearing in mind that 95% of schooling is segregated on sectarian lines, making contact with one other student from the other part of the divided community as part of this forgiveness curriculum is hugely significant. This will enable the young people to get to know a fellow-student from the "other side" so that prejudice can be significantly reduced. Students will participate in an on-line message board regarding the topic of forgiveness (as part of their classroom activities in forgiveness) for the purpose of seeing many students from the other side of this divided community as they all try to better understand and implement forgiveness in their lives.

Project Description

The aims of this project are not to force forgiveness but rather to make forgiveness an easily understandable and accessible option. It is a sad truth that every individual will have to deal with disappointment and hurt in his or her life, often in the context of close relationships. By helping students see forgiveness as a strong, viable option, this project aims to increase harmony in relationships as well as clarifying that forgiveness is not a weak option, and does not mean justification of a perpetration. Helping students to see that people who represent difference are

not a threat can also have valuable effects into the student's participation in the wider community.

Initially starting in P3 classes spread throughout three schools, the program now has over 1,300 pupils participating every year across 55 classrooms in Belfast, with specially written lesson plans for every class from P2 to Year 9. Research has shown the overall effect on class atmosphere and pupil performance and behavior to be very positive (academic performance improved, classroom environment became more harmonious, pupil anger was reduced). Teacher responses have also been overwhelmingly positive.

We will launch the Year 10 (adolescents aged 13 to 14) forgiveness curriculum soon by arrange for email "pen-pals" for certain randomly selected student. The students will be paired with a same-gender person from the other side of the divided Belfast community (an Irish Catholic student will be paired with a British Protestant student). The point of the pen-pal emailing will be to: 1) discuss what forgiveness is and is not in the context of the course each is taking at his or her own school by the school's own personnel; 2) discuss the experiences with forgiving people in one's own community, and 3) have a dialogue on how one might go about forgiving people from the other side of the divided Belfast community. We will also arrange for message-board postings so that all students can read each others' perspectives on forgiveness. The point is to increase depth of forgiveness (via the pen-pal exercises) and to increase breadth of forgiveness (by viewing all students' postings on the message board).

Safe-guards will be put in place so that students in the cross-community "pen-pal" activity will be kept safe: 1) no one will have access to others emails. (It is well known in Belfast that students sometimes communicate with each other to arrange for what they call "recreational rioting" which includes rock throwing and attacking the police); 2) all correspondence, before it is sent, will be monitored by an adult professional; 3) same-gender pairs will be created; and 4) only first names will be used. Similar safe-guards will be in place for the message board (no email addresses will be seen; all postings first will be monitored; and only first names will be allowed).

We will have up to four schools involved (two Maintained [Irish Catholic] and two Controlled [mainly British Protestant]). Within each school, we will ask for 35 students (and one or two classroom teachers) to take part in this work. Fifteen of the students (within each school) will be randomly assigned to the cross-community "pen-pal" activity (a total of 60 students across all four schools) and another fifteen from each school will be randomly assigned to the control group without the cross-community "pen-pal" activity (again, a total of 60 students). The other five students in each school will be assigned to a same-community "pen-pal" activity (a total of 20 students across all four schools). The reason for this subgroup of same-community "pen-pal" activity is to ascertain whether cross-community "pen-pal" work leads to better outcomes than "pen-pal" activity itself (without the cross-community component). Given the anticipated intense nature of the cross-community pen-pal work and given that each will see a supposed "enemy" working on forgiveness, we expect this to have a significant impact on

cognitive functioning, leading to deeper forgiveness. The research previously cited on the importance of cross-community dialogue supports this view.

This research design is a true, randomized experimental design which will allow us to measure the degree to which forgiveness is achieved through direct contact with a student from the other side of this divided community. The research design will help us ascertain the degree to which ethnic prejudice is reduced through forgiveness education plus cross-community "pen-pal" contact. Having forgiveness education as the backdrop for the "pen-pal" activity is necessary to have a safe and rational context for each student writing to the other about the issue of forgiveness.

Training the teachers and a description of the curriculum guide. Teachers will be trained, through a half-day workshop by Robert Enright, in the use of the forgiveness teacher guides. The classroom instruction will follow a professionally-written curriculum guide, *Healing through the Heroic Gift of Forgiveness* (Flesch & Enright, 2010), and each teacher will spend about one hour per week for 15 (or more) weeks teaching about forgiveness through story. The centerpiece novel used in Year 10 is by Kathryn Fitzmaurice, entitled, "The Year the Swallows Came Early" (2009).

Layout and Format of the Lessons within the Teacher Guide. The topic or title of each lesson will be the Big Idea (or main idea) which will frame the content of the entire lesson for both teachers and students. For example, Lesson 1 is entitled, "What Is Forgiveness?" and begins to lay the foundation for a basic understanding of the concept. The learning and behavioral objectives are the "meat" of each lesson and are all related to and support the Big Idea. The Big Idea is explained in the introduction at the beginning of each lesson. It provides an overview of the lesson and explains the content, including terms, ideas, concepts, and learning objectives to be presented and taught. The introductions are also provided to help the teacher describe and present the main ideas of the lesson to the students. Each lesson builds off of the previous lessons' concepts as the authors transition from one Big Idea to the next, building and deepening previous understanding of *Healing Through the Heroic Gift of Forgiveness*.

A list of the 15 lessons is as follows:

SECTION 1: FORGIVENESS ~ WHAT, WHY, and HOW

Lesson One: What is Forgiveness?

Lesson Two: The Virtues of Forgiveness

Lesson Three: Virtuous Heroes of Forgiveness

Lesson Four: All Are Worthy

Lesson Five: The Gift of Forgiveness For the Forgiver and the Forgiven

Lesson Six: The Gift of Forgiveness Within a Community

Lesson Seven: The Challenge of Forgiveness, One Step at a Time

SECTION 2: OFFERING FORGIVENESS

Lesson Eight: What Does Offering Forgiveness Feel Like? Healing

Lesson Nine: How to Think About Offering Forgiveness ~ Inherent Worth of All

Lesson Ten: What Does Offering Forgiveness Look and Sound Like? Mercy

SECTION 3: A BROADER VIEW OF FORGIVENESS

Lesson Eleven: Forgiving Beyond Understanding

Lesson Twelve: Seeking Forgiveness

Lesson Thirteen: Selfless Living

Lesson Fourteen: Forwarding Forgiveness to the Human Family

Lesson Fifteen: Do You Have What It Takes?

The teachers will have flexibility in the time frame of presenting each lesson. Some lessons will take less and others will take more time to finish, but most are approximately an hour long.

Instruments for Program Evaluation. Five instruments will serve as the dependent measures: 1) the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI), which is one of the most frequently used scales in social scientific investigations of forgiveness. It consists of 60 items focused on one person and one incident in which the respondent was treated deeply unfairly. The items are on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability is high (internal consistency is approximately .98 and it has excellent validity (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Reed & Enright, 2006); 2) The Willingness to Forgive Scale presents hypothetical scenarios in which the respondent rates the degree to which he or she would forgive the person (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995). We will alter the scenarios to focus on cross-community incidents (reported by the press) and ask the respondents to rate the degree to which they are likely to forgive. We will present 10 scenarios; 3) The Ethnic Prejudice Scale will focus on Belfast ethnicities in particular. The scale assesses thought about people cross-community and is based in part on the work of Pettigrew & Meertens (1995) and Akrami, Ekehammer, & Araya (2000). Both groups of researchers assess blatant or obvious forms of prejudice and subtle forms. Our scale will have 10 items for each subscale in a 5-point Likert format (strongly disagree to strongly agree); 4) The Ethnic Fear Scale, which we will create for this research is a 15 item scale intended to assess the degree of fear that a person has toward people in general in the other part of the divided community of Belfast. In contrast to the Ethnic Prejudice Scale, which assesses thoughts about those in a contentious group, this scale assesses affective responses; and 5) teacher ratings of student cooperation in the classroom. This will consist of eight questions on the degree of cooperation and friendliness in the classroom setting.

We also will do post-intervention evaluations with each teacher, asking about the quality of the work and the impact on his or her teaching, on the classroom, on the school, and on the community.

Testing times. Research assistants will administer the dependent variables at pre-test (one week prior to instruction), at post-test (one week after instruction), and at follow-up (one month after instruction). The research assistants will be blind to the experimental condition of each participant.

Project monitoring. This project will be monitored weekly by Becki Fulmer of The Corrymeela Community. She will be in email contact with each of the four teachers every other week for the 15 week program to answer questions, encourage, and see the progress each is making in teaching the forgiveness curriculum. She also will select two lessons from the forgiveness curriculum at random and observe the teacher as he or she delivers each lesson to the class (there will be a total of eight observations across the four teachers in the 15-week period). She will have face-to-face meetings with each teacher in weeks 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15 to determine progress based on the lessons in the teacher guide. Any deviation from the timeline of the guide will be discussed, along with strategies for staying on task. Student progress in emailing and in message board postings will be done on a daily basis by Becki, who will read each email and each message board post prior to her sending the emails or posting the messages.

Main Project Hypotheses

We hope to create the following changes by researching outcomes of forgiveness education and cross-community pen-pals experiences:

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- 1) Although we expect all students to increase in forgiveness because all will have forgiveness education in their schools, we expect greater growth in forgiveness for those students randomly assigned to the cross-community pen-pal activity. We expect this because of the intensive discussions on forgiveness that are likely to ensue. As Person A (from one side of the divided community) sees Person B (from the other side of the community) forgive, this will add motivation for Person A to persevere in forgiveness, resulting in greater gains in forgiveness from pre-test to post-test and from pre-test to follow-up.
- 2) Those students who have been randomly assigned to the "pen-pal" activity will increase more in their willingness to forgive people from the other side of the divided community than those who are in the control group. This will occur from pre-test to post-test and from pre-test to follow-up.
- 3) Those students who have been randomly assigned to the "pen-pal" activity will decrease more on the Ethnic Prejudice Scale (a cognitive activity) than the students who are in the control group. This will occur from pre-test to post-test and from pre-test to follow-up.

4) Those students have been randomly assigned to the "pen-pal" activity will decrease more on the Ethnic Fear Scale (an affective activity) than the students who are in the control group. Again, this will occur from pre-test to post-test and from pre-test to follow-up.

5) Those students who have been randomly assigned to the "pen-pal" activity will be rated by their teachers (at follow-up) as more cooperative and less angry in the classroom than the students who have been randomly assigned to not be part of this activity, which includes those student doing electronic "pen-pal" work within their own community. We will conduct this research in such a way that the teachers do not know which students are part of the "pen-pal" activity and which are not. Becki Fulmer of the Corrymeela Community will oversee the implementation of the "pen-pal" students so that the teacher need not be involved.

Corollary Hypotheses

Unless we have a subgroup of Irish-Catholic students engage in the electronic pen-pal activity with each other (and not with the British Protestant community) we will not be able to ascertain whether it is cross-community "pen-pal" activities that make the difference or whether it is "pen-pal" activities in general (even within one's own community) that make the difference. We will combine the five students in each school (20 total across the four schools) and compare their scores on all five dependent variables with the 15 students in each school (60 total) who have had cross-community "pen-pal" activities. We expect in each case that those in the cross-community "pen-pal" activity will do better on each dependent measure compared with this same-community "pen-pal" group.

Project Contribution

We hope to create a model for peace that can be implemented by teachers throughout Northern Ireland. Our website, which is currently being revised, will make available the curriculum guides, an audio recording of the teacher training workshop, and a message board for teachers to exchange ideas on the implementation of this program. We hope this will enhance cross-community understanding and eventually lead to more friendly relations between Irish Catholic and British Protestant members of the Belfast community.

Products

We will produce a Year 10 forgiveness education teacher guide with a full set of instructions on delivering a semester-long course on the psychology of forgiveness. This will include the strategies for implementing "pen-pal" activities across a divided community. This guide will be available via the world wide web to anyone in the world, along with instructions for translating materials and/or finding comparable novels in one's own culture for use within this forgiveness context.

We will write an article for peer-reviewed publication in an educational journal so that teachers can become aware of these efforts and so that professors can follow our steps in researching the effectiveness of forgiveness education which includes dialogues among contentious groups.

A description of the work will be written for the Corrymeela magazine so that peace workers and teachers can see the practicality of including this model in their own work.

We hope to then expand this offering throughout Belfast and Northern Ireland through the Corrymeela Community.

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