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Forgiveness Education in Belfast, Northern Ireland An Executive Summary

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Historical Background

In 2002, with the help of Seeds of Hope in Belfast, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, the International Forgiveness Institute, and Mr. James McManus, we launched our most ambitious forgiveness education program to date: the implementation of a curriculum in first grade classrooms (Primary 3 in Northern Ireland) in Belfast. Since 1985, our research group has pioneered the social scientific study of forgiveness, showing that such groups as incest survivors, drug rehabilitation patients, prisoners in a mental health hospital, cardiac patients, terminally-ill cancer patients, middle school children, and others can improve emotional health through well-designed forgiveness education programs.

Forgiveness is not some kind of sentimental bosh (as Martin Luther King, Jr. said), but a courageous reduction in resentment and an outpouring of compassion and beneficence toward someone who acted unfairly. My humanity is intertwined with your humanity and when we forgive, we recognize this (as the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu said). When a person forgives, he or she does not condone, excuse, or forget the offense. Instead, the forgiver offers a second chance to the offender. Of course, some offenders spurn this gift, making reconciliation unlikely, but a goal of forgiveness is to extend love to make reconciliation possible.

Equipped with this understanding of forgiveness and encouraged by our successes with our programs in adult and adolescent populations, we wondered whether a forgiveness curriculum for young children might aid them in reducing anger and improving their emotional health. We reasoned that if we could implement such a curriculum in a society that has been war-torn for years, perhaps forgiveness education could be one missing piece to the peace puzzle in such a society. With this in mind, we chose Belfast, Northern Ireland because of its well-known struggle with The Troubles between British Protestants and Irish Catholics that dates back centuries.

Launching the Forgiveness Program

In September 2002, a group of us met with school principals and teachers to present our ideas to them. Anne Gallagher of the Seeds of Hope peace organization in Belfast arranged for these meetings. We were met with enthusiasm and encouragement. *Forgiveness is just what this society needs* was the consistent message to us. We all sat around at various meetings grappling with such questions as these: What is forgiveness? Is forgiveness ever a bad idea? How can we present the ideas of forgiveness to young children? What concerns do you have in trying such a curriculum? What excitements do you have in anticipation of implementing this curriculum? The point of our discussions was two-fold: to listen and learn from one another so that this became a joint venture and to gauge initial interest in this vision. We then asked 10 schools to try a pioneering experiment in which their teachers taught the forgiveness curriculum to their own students. We wanted to train the teachers to deliver the curriculum, rather than have people from our own group do the teaching, to assure that each child gets the subtle nuances of his and her own culture and religion within that curriculum.

In November 2003, we held our first Teacher Forgiveness Workshop in the Europa Hotel in Belfast (the most bombed hotel in the world....We were striving for symbolism here in our choice of venue). This one-day workshop allowed principals and teachers to explore in-depth the topic of forgiveness. *First forgive, then teach* is our motto. Thus, each teacher, using the book, Forgiveness Is a Choice, learned about the many facets of forgiveness and then took the step of forgiving someone who was personally unfair to him or her. Only after crawling inside the depths of forgiveness did each teacher then receive children's books, mostly Dr Seuss' wonderful and engaging stories, beanie babies, DVDs, and other curricular materials to take home and study. We handed out to each teacher a first draft of the curriculum, written after getting extensive feedback the September before. We asked for further feedback so we could revise the curriculum into a final version in time to launch the actual curriculum in early February 2003.

After our research group did some initial evaluations of the children's level of forgiveness and anger and observed their social interaction patterns in the classroom and on the playground, the day came in early February 2003 when 5 of our 10 classrooms launched the curriculum. (The other five classrooms were randomized into a control group, who were to receive the curriculum in October 2003 to allow us to examine the effects on children who had the curriculum and those who did not). Each week, the teachers filled out a short form to evaluate the quality of the curriculum. Staff from our group in Wisconsin emailed each teacher on a weekly basis to ascertain strengths and weakness of the program. All teachers completed the 16-lesson curriculum in May, at which time our group flew over from Wisconsin to do the final set of evaluations.

Demonstrated Success

We have now statistically analyzed the results by comparing those children who had the forgiveness education program with those who were waiting one year before starting. Based on the results to date, the program was a success. The findings at this point are summarized below:

- The children who had forgiveness education reduced in anger more than the children who did not yet have the curriculum;
- The angriest children in the forgiveness program reduced the most in anger;
- In fact, the results were very strong compared to other psychological interventions with adults in the United States;
- The angriest children in the forgiveness education program were not depressed at the end of the program, whereas the angriest children who did not yet have the program were moderately clinically depressed, according to Aaron Beck's well-established and highly respected depression scale and research on that scale;
- The children who had forgiveness education showed friendlier interactions with classmates than those children who did not have the program;
- This program to improve the emotional health of the children was not implemented by psychological professionals, but by the child's own classroom teacher.

Last Year, This Year, and Beyond

In the 2003-2004 academic year, we continued to work with the original schools on the Primary 3 level and we began a new Primary 4 curriculum in the same 10 schools.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, we expanded to new Primary 5 classrooms (third grade in the United States). Since then we have concentrated our efforts on middle school and next year we will expand into the high school level. Our ultimate goal is to develop a new curriculum each year, until we have a complete curriculum from kindergarten through the end of secondary school. The children are the beneficiaries of our 20 years of forgiveness work.

Our Vision for the Future

Carl Rogers, one of the 20th century's premiere psychologists, once said that angry people, whose emotional health is less than stellar, are usually the ones who start wars. I wholeheartedly agree. Forgiveness does appear to be one of those powerful tools that cut through anger, allowing the hatred to reduce and eventually cease. As the hatred and anger reduce, the forgiver, perhaps for the first time, is able to see a genuine human being across the peace table. Forgiveness makes civil interactions possible precisely because it strips away the anger that can cloud our insights. Children, of course, inherit our angers as well as all that makes a society civil and good. We can, if we choose, pass along to our children a legacy of confusion, ambivalence, prejudice and hatred, all of which take on a life of their own in some communities....or we can pass along a legacy of peace through forgiveness.