

## **Educating for Solidarity through Dialogue Education for the Dialogue among Civilisations**

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Within Australian educational circles there is an increasing awareness of the need to educate young people not just to be able to thrive within the global context, but also to be able to respectfully collaborate to build a global community characterised by a commitment to justice and peace. Due to the increasing inequalities present in our world, educators are seeing the need for formal schooling to be at the forefront of forming young people who have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to vision and act for a better world. Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) over the last decade has begun a process of visioning what such an education could look like and implementing programs, whole school approaches and system initiatives to make it a reality. Educating for a “Dialogue among Civilisations” is seen as one of the underlying values of this new vision. This article will explore how systematic change has been undertaken, present a framework for teaching and learning and highlight some of the programs that have been implemented in the EREA community.

### *The Context*

Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) is the educational system of the Christian Brothers in the Australian setting. The

Christian Brothers first set up schools in Australia in the mid 1800's and have educated both young men and women for almost 150 years. For many years the Christian Brothers' schools were characterised by academic success, strict discipline and providing opportunities for young people who were on the margins of Australian society. In 2008, EREA now comprises of over 40 schools, ranging from all boys boarding schools to Flexible Learning Centres that provide educational opportunities for young people who have disengaged from mainstream education. The system, drawing inspiration from the Irish educational liberator, Edmund Rice, has recently re-visioned its educational endeavour to focus on the "transformation of the minds and hearts of young Australians to build a more just, tolerant and inclusive community." This vision has been influenced by a new understanding of the educational philosophy of Edmund Rice and his focus on liberation through education, particularly the breaking down of unjust social structures through relationship building across faith and class divides.

### *Edmund Rice: Educational Liberator*

Edmund Rice was an Irish businessman who was born into the strongly nationalistic and religious society of poverty stricken 18th century Ireland. The cultural and ecclesial mores of his day could have propelled Edmund into an "us – them" modality that interpreted the events of daily life in terms of blame, rejection and fear of difference and denial of any semblance of shared humanity. However, Edmund overcame this pervading culture and began a number of schools for the marginalised youth of Waterford.

The educational approach that Edmund Rice initiated deliberately challenged much of the divisive prejudice of his day. He sought to set up schools of the highest quality but welcomed into them both poor and rich, Protestant and Catholic, and established a curriculum that promoted liberation – not only from the effects of physical poverty but from the mindsets that impoverished people. Edmund's strong commitment to the education of all youth at the margins of society and to dialogue

between Catholics and Protestants was counter cultural for that time (McLaughlin, 2006). This subversive approach meant that he sought not merely to liberate individuals through education, but also to change the social structures that kept people poor and marginalised. His deep belief in the dignity of all people led him to create an education system that lifted people out of poverty while educating them towards critically engaging in and recreating the world. Edmund Rice Schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have sought to draw from this inspiration and develop an educational approach that continues this founding mission while responding to the unique needs of our time.

### *Reading the Signs of the Times: Interfaith Dialogue*

The leaders of Edmund Rice Education have realised that a commitment to interfaith dialogue is essential to educating in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To facilitate this development, educational leaders gathered in India recently to vision the future directions of ministries over the next six years. Prior to this gathering, participants were invited into an interfaith immersion and dialogue experience with people of a variety of faith traditions. Through this relational engagement a deep commitment to interfaith dialogue emerged:

*As we entered their sacred stories, temples, places of worship and rituals, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'i, Jains and Muslims invited us into their lives. With growing awareness, we pondered the common search for the Divine in these other religious traditions. We became aware also of their many ministries to the disadvantaged. Our experiences deepened our understanding of the powerful presence of the Spirit within these religions. Searching questions surfaced for some of us. The mystery of God is deeper and more inclusive than we had ever imagined. It is indeed a revelation to discover how our concepts of God had been constrained within the horizons of our own tradition. (Christian Brothers Congregational Gathering, 2008)*

This immersion and dialogue set the scene for a gathering of passionate people who sought to offer the powerful possibility that Edmund Rice's educational endeavour could truly embrace the practice of "dialogue among civilisations," leading to social transformation that builds a better world for all people. This has led to a renewed commitment to a pedagogy of justice and peace across Edmund Rice Schools.

### *Transformational Education: A Framework*

At the heart of EREA's current approach to education in the Australian setting is the value of relational solidarity leading to transformational action for a better world. A focus on an education for justice and peace is seen as fundamentally crucial if we are to prepare young people to engage positively and passionately with their communities and the world to build a culture of right relationships. A pedagogical methodology has been developed that consists of the raising of awareness, the nurturing of compassion and the engagement with action. This draws its inspiration from the peace education movement:

*Raising awareness or knowledge formation entails the research and study of violent situations, their causes and consequences. Building concern is about nurturing feelings of compassion for and solidarity with victims of violence. This step aims to transform feelings of helplessness by giving the learners a chance to imagine an alternative or a preferred situation. The final step is invitation to action. The development of genuine concern prompts learners to do something about situations of violence be it on a personal level, like personal change, or on a social level, like political advocacy or actions of direct service. (Castro, Galace & Lesaca, 2005: pg 73)*

This methodology has been infused into three main pedagogical practices over the last decade: service and solidarity learning opportunities; immersion and twinning relationships with the majority world; and the engagement of teachers and young people in cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue that leads to

action for justice. These pedagogical practices are placed within the context of adolescent development with its emphasis on identity formation and recognising the importance of a value based, outward looking and global ideology for young adults to feel a part of, so they too can take their place in society as future and present “makers of history” (Flacks, 1988). Some of these initiatives are briefly described.

### *Inter-faith Formation of Educators for a Culture of Peace*

Through 2006/2007 the Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University, organised for key educators from EREA to participate in a series of in-service workshops on “Interfaith Dialogue for Building a Culture of Peace.” These workshops facilitated the exploration and dialogue of the participants on issues and questions within and across faiths that pose challenges for building a culture of peace; raise their awareness on complex issues, problems, and conflicts of interfaith relationships and their impact on societal peace; deepen their knowledge and skills in integrating themes and principles of interfaith dialogue in their curricula and teaching learning strategies (Toh, 2005). Twenty EREA educators participated in a number of workshops with Dr Virginia Cawagas and Professor Toh Swee Hin from the Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University with the support of Edmund Rice Education staff. A number of Aboriginal teachers and faith leaders were invited to share their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences on selected workshop themes and issues.

The final outcome of the workshops was a resource book for schools (Cawagas, Toh & Garrone, 2007). Included in this resource book were a number of modules for teachers that aim to promote justice and peace from an interfaith perspective. Each of the modules has a focus on one of the particular themes of “Educating for a Culture of Peace.” These modules were written by teachers who participated in the workshops and the ideas presented have been used with students in their schools.

### *Global Twinning and Immersion Programs*

Increasingly schools have seen the need to engage young people with youth from the Global South so together they can explore some of the pressing issues facing the global community. Solidarity immersion programs have been organised between youth from Australia and South Africa, Timor Leste and the Philippines. These programs enable young people from these countries to come together for an extended period of time and share cultures, explore the themes of justice and peace and collaboratively work out strategies for raising awareness about our common humanity. The impact of these experiences on the lives of young people can have lasting significance in their life's choices as shared in the following reflections:

*Throughout our epic journey in the African culture, our group was continually immersed in the strength and resilience shown by the South African people. Their courage was a true example of human spirit. Each moment in their presence, was an opportunity to learn. Not only to learn, but to be inspired. The people of SA, through their personal struggles, rich experiences and powerful sense of faith taught us so many lessons. They taught us forgiveness and happiness, as well as the importance of a profound spirituality. For me, my spiritual journey began here at Regina Mundi, the infamous church of Soweto. However, it did not end there, nor did it end when I left South Africa. You see, during my experience my eyes were opened to breathtaking beauty in the face of adversity. It made me realise how important their faith is to them, and how important it is to me. - Caitlin (St James College)*

*As we travelled through South Africa, we were captivated by the beauty of the country and the warmth of the people within it, and yet I felt a twinge of unease in the pit of my stomach which only seemed to grow as it became closer to the date we had to leave. I kept asking myself, "What can we do? How can we witness so much inequality and pain and just walk away?"*

*Since I've been back in Australia I've realized something. You can't walk away; you can leave a country like South Africa but it never leaves you. That feeling of unease still sits in my stomach, but it's not a feeling of despair or hopelessness. It's a*

*feeling of injustice, and it motivates every one of us that was involved in the immersion to continue to work for peace and global solidarity in our own communities. It's a cliché that actions speak louder than words, but the truth is that it doesn't matter how compassionate you are, if you talk endlessly about social justice but do not put your beliefs into practice. We learnt this from the passionate and dedicated young people of South Africa who work to sustain and promote a better quality of life for their communities. We learnt this from Nelson Mandela, a man who gave 27 years of his life in prison because he believed in humanity.*

*Don't fool yourself into being desensitised to the oppression of others. It's easy to turn off the news and forget there is a world beyond our own, but it doesn't matter if you can't see people suffering right in front of you, because those people continue to exist. It is only when we step outside ourselves that we realize we're part of a global family and we are all in this together.*

*You have a choice. Open your eyes. Change your heart. Live and act for justice. - Adriane (Mount Alvernia College)*

*Before we left the vibrant land of South Africa, I made a promise to myself. I promised that I, Mark Atkinson, would be an instrument and leader of peace. I would bring about change in my life and others' lives. Back in Australia, through small acts of kindness, I hope I have accomplished one small aspect of my promise. The next step is to inspire others to be brave and follow their own dreams, which, ultimately, will be brightening the future of our world. - Mark (St Joseph's Nudgee College)*

*The topic of social justice is often thrown around in conversation as a theoretical concept to be acted upon by other people, or as an institution you can throw money at and sleep better at night thinking you have contributed to the welfare of humanity.*

*Money can feed people. It can clothe them and buy them the necessities of life, but it is charity and it does not provide for a sustainable way to live. That doesn't mean you should sit on your hands and accept the inequality of the world, on the*

*contrary; compassion without action is sentimental humbug. Society requires us to contribute to humanity in different ways. Sometimes we assume that people will be so oppressed that they cannot help themselves, but building relationships in which human beings can relate to each other in global solidarity can empower them, and is at the heart of social justice. - Adriane (Mount Alvernia College)*

### *Local Service and Solidarity Learning Programs*

Each of our schools has endeavoured to initiate programs that allow for relationships between students with those on the margins of society in their local communities. These programs, usually based around a service activity, have seen our students develop long term relationships built upon reciprocity and respect with people that previously they would never have associated with. Examples have included hospitality vans with the homeless and tutoring for newly arrived refugees. The overwhelming sense from both the students and partners has been that the service activity is just the avenue for a deeper understanding, empathy and respect between each of the participants and those who they are partnering with. Each of these programs is developed with extensive preparation and debriefing of the students leading to social analysis of the causes of oppression and solutions to these uncovered injustices.

### *Challenges and Possibilities*

Our involvement with these and similar programs have led us to recognise that the educational journey towards values development that embraces a deep commitment to justice and peace and prepares young people to have the knowledge and skills to “dialogue across civilisations” requires enormous time and energy from the entire EREA community. There is a need for an extended, ongoing period of time where students can explore social issues within a peace building framework. A direct – “hands on” and “hearts open” approach is important to bring students into direct contact with those classed as “different” to



them [economically, culturally, etc] so that a respectful and reciprocal relationship can develop that leads to an understanding and appreciation of personal and communal “story.” The presence of mentors to continually encourage the students to ask critical questions and to develop frameworks built upon justice and peace is also crucial. Finally, the EREA community needs to engage in a continual reflection upon experience in the light of a philosophy that espouses a dialogue between civilisations, between cultures, the breaking down of barriers and a belief in the dignity of all as brothers and sisters of a global family.

As educators in Edmund Rice schools we have learnt that this is indeed a journey and that we have not arrived yet – much work needs to continue to be done. The great challenge for us as educators and for Edmund Rice schools in general is not to see justice and peace education, the initiatives named above and the whole global approach towards dialogue across boundaries as “one off” events or as “feel good” pedagogical tools that are distant from real life and academic achievement. There is a real danger of either/or; that we can be schools of academic excellence or schools that promote justice and dialogue leading to a better world.

Our vision is that ultimately Edmund Rice schools will be places where justice and peace initiatives are not seen as added extras but as core to the curriculum and culture of the school. This would enable our graduates to be young men and women who are willing and skilled to take their places in society as agents of change, able to critique injustice within society and motivated to initiate and participate in interfaith dialogue and social action. The respectful engagement with others, both locally and globally, through story, relationships and combined action can go much of the way to making this vision a reality.

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