

# COMPASSION

## **Educating the Heart**

### **Engaging Educators in an Exploration of Compassion for teaching and learning in Northern Ireland**

#### **An Audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama**

## **An Introduction to the Work of Children in Crossfire**



Children in Crossfire is an international development non government organisation (NGO) based in Northern Ireland. We support partner organisations in the Gambia, Ethiopia and Tanzania, to help build their capacity to deliver interventions for children in relation to health care and education. We have developed a strategic focus on promoting services for young children aged 0-8, especially those with malnutrition, disabilities and cancer. Internationally, Children in Crossfire works to make a significant and lasting contribution to the fight against world poverty, and provide opportunities for children to reach their potential and make the world a better place.

Children in Crossfire is also committed to engaging the Irish/UK public in education that explores the injustice of poverty. We work with teachers, youth workers, young people and the wider community to promote the importance of active global citizenship for addressing the underlying causes of poverty, and bringing about a fairer world for everyone.

The director of Children in Crossfire is Dr Richard Moore. In 1972, at the start of a long period of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, he was blinded by a rubber bullet fired by a

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British soldier. He was then aged ten. However, Richard states, *“although I lost my sight, I had opportunities here to reach my full potential through the love and support from my family and a good education system. I believe that all children who are caught up in the crossfire of poverty should have the same opportunities as I had”*. Through such motivation, Richard decided to dedicate his life to trying to make a difference to the lives of people who live in poverty. Richard also met and befriended the soldier who shot him. He expressed to the soldier that he had never felt a moment’s bitterness towards him, but rather felt a spirit of forgiveness. Richard has recently been awarded a lifetime achievement award from The All Party Group on International Development, for his contribution to peace building and international development.

Richard has also developed a deep friendship with His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet, who is now the patron of Children in Crossfire, and who describes Richard as his *“hero”*. During the Dalai Lama’s 2011 dialogue with social activists from four continents, Richard was invited on-stage. *“I think Richard utilises basic human good nature and wisdom”*, the Dalai Lama said, *“His eyesight lost. Anger never bring back. Hatred never bring back. Instead of that, more compassion, with spirit of forgiveness. His mental state much happier. He is my hero”* (quoted in Dalai Lama and Chan, 2012, p2-3).

Children in Crossfire is delighted to host the Dalai Lama in Derry/Londonderry on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2013 for a number of events. One of these events will be a private audience with His Holiness, at which an invited group of educators, students, policy makers, politicians and researchers will explore the theme of ‘compassion’ in the hearts and minds ourselves, our young people and, specifically, within education. In closing his address to the ‘Possibilities’ conference, held in Dublin on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2011 during his last visit to Ireland, the Dalai Lama said *“better education leads to better vision. We must nurture a sense of global responsibility, global compassion.”*

## **A Background to the Education work of Children in Crossfire**

Overall, Children in Crossfire's education programme outcome is to mobilise the Irish/UK public to take informed action for global justice. Specifically, we use the term 'development education'. It is defined by Irish Aid as follows:

An educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection, and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect the lives of others at personal, community, national and international levels (quoted in Khoo, 2006, p28).

Development education is rooted in human rights and the practice of justice and fairness. It is a process which challenges attitudes towards poverty, moving beyond simple understanding and knowledge towards thinking critically and the development of active global citizenship. Development education is universally underpinned by Paulo Freire's vision of education as a process of liberation using methodologies of 'problem-based learning, dialogue and participation within a cooperative learning environment where the teacher engages in learning with the student, and the student engages with other students in addition to learning with the teacher' (quoted in Chaib, 2010, p42). 'Central to the philosophy of development education is a student centered pedagogy, which places the student at the heart of the educational experience and ultimately development education is about teaching differently rather than teaching more' (Haran and Tormey, 2002, quoted in McCormack and O'Flaherty, 2010, p1333). Development education draws on active learning methods to 'teach differently'. Through interactive and participatory learning, young people can take ownership of and become involved in shaping their own learning, whilst forming new attitudes, knowledge and skills, and develop confidence to take

actions they deem appropriate to tackle injustice.

Children in Crossfire has extensive experience of delivering development education to educators such as teachers and youth and community workers. We see educators as vital in shaping young people for the future, and helping them understand the role they can play in making the world a fairer place for everyone. We have devised a course called Teachers in Development and Learning (TIDAL) which has been delivered to over 400 educators, including teachers and youth and community workers. Within formal education, the focus of TIDAL is on the concepts relating to the Local and Global Citizenship strand of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum. These are;

1. Human Rights and Social Responsibility
2. Diversity and Inclusion
3. Equality and Social Justice
4. Democracy and Active Participation

Within the informal education sector, the focus is on the values and core principles identified in Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice. These are;

1. Equity
2. Diversity
3. Interdependence
4. Preparing Young People for Participation
5. Promoting Acceptance and Understanding of Others
6. Testing and Exploring Values and Beliefs

## **Introducing ‘Compassion’ to our Education Work**

Children in Crossfire’s development education work is rooted in critical thinking towards informed action for positive change. We also believe firmly in the importance of allowing people the space to explore their values. Values can be broadly defined as, attitudes, beliefs and principles. From an awareness of their personal, social and professional values, we seek to invite people to critique how these might impact on their practice. We also equip educators with tools for facilitating young people to explore,

understand and critique where they consider themselves to belong in the world. We consider this to be an important exercise in self-awareness and personal reflection, and often describe it as ‘starting where people are at’. For Children in Crossfire, this is foundational to our development education work in that it enables people to understand their own place in the world, reflect on this in relation to others, and subsequently understand their role as interconnected global citizens.

Recently, we have been reflecting on our practice, and looking at how the concept of ‘compassion’ and other basic human values might enhance our work. For Children in Crossfire, compassion is rooted in the teachings of our patron the Dalai Lama who sees it as a practice to be applied equally to everyone, whether or not they have wronged us. Although he acknowledges that many forms of compassionate feelings are mixed with our desire and love for friends and family, true compassion is more than an emotional response. Rather, true compassion, stems from accustoming our minds to a sense of universal altruism, which subsequently compels us to take actions for the good of all. For the Dalai Lama, those we consider our enemies are equal to us, and like us, they have a desire to overcome suffering and be happy. Therefore, if we cultivate our minds to develop true compassion, we will respond to our enemies more productively, and have a genuine desire to help them overcome their own suffering. The Dalai Lama acknowledges that practicing compassion at this level is not easy, but argues that given patience and time, we all have the ability to be universally altruistic towards everyone. Altruism, in this sense, means eliminating our tendencies to be self-centered, and overcoming negative feelings such as hatred and anger which serve to overwhelm our minds and stifle our ability to take compassionate action.

Self-centeredness is unquestionably a major cause of poverty and injustice in the world. In relation to development education, Children in Crossfire works to expose such self-centered motives which are tied up in complex issues surrounding aid, trade, debt and global corruption. Injustices inherent in these factors make it more difficult for

developing countries to work their way out of the cycle of poverty. In raising awareness of such injustices, we also explore with people how we all, however unintentionally, might be complicit in the reproduction of poverty and injustice. People can thus gain a wider understanding of their interconnectedness with the rest of the world. Our aim is to cultivate a global community where we are all accountable for/to each other and united in the common goal of bringing about positive change and justice for everyone.

In Children in Crossfire we ask: can the concept of compassion enhance our development education practice? Is it something we have already been touching upon without necessarily being aware of it? It seems that our emphasis on exploring values and interconnectedness is indeed compatible with compassion. In fact, the Dalai Lama's 'ideal is to make sure that our youth understand the interconnectedness of all things, and as they mature, begin to experience all of humanity as brothers and sisters' (Dalai Lama and Chan, 2012, p163). This is also an ideal for Children in Crossfire. Can embedding compassion to the heart of our work, really help young people learn to care more for the welfare of others?

Recently, neuroscience researchers have been exploring a similar question. A study carried out at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on the practice of 'compassion meditation' found that it can affect areas in our brain that are vital for creating a sense of well-being, happiness and concern for self and others. The study suggests that society in general could benefit from compassion meditation, from children who engage in bullying to adults affected by depression.

Moreover, developments in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), have led to the introduction of compassion and mindfulness as practices for promoting positive changes in our brains, and for encouraging a deeper understanding of taking care of ourselves and others. Mindfulness in this sense, might be described as becoming aware of and observing our thoughts, feelings and moods, and through this practice not being

overwhelmed by negativity, but rather modifying our behaviour to stimulate the mind to create positive thoughts and feelings. Combined with compassion training, mindfulness and CBT can help us to love ourselves, and extend this to others, especially those who are suffering. In meeting the psychiatrist, Dr Aaron Beck in 2005, the Dalai Lama was deeply interested in the parallels Beck drew between CBT and Compassion. “This therapy”, said the Dalai Lama, “is similar to what Buddhists call analytic. When emotion comes, use analytic meditation to not let it dominate or influence. But rather analyse its consequences, its benefits, its destructiveness” (quoted in Dalai Lama and Chan, 2012, p130). The Dalai Lama has a keen scientific mind, and ‘it was giving him great comfort to know that the age-old insights of Buddhist mind-training seem to have this parallel with Western psychology’ (Dalai Lama and Chan, 2012, p130).

Such advances in research are beginning to show the positive aspects of training for compassion. However, we acknowledge that we are novices in understanding and practicing compassion in our work. Training for compassion is a relatively new concept to us. Therefore, we wish to use this event as a platform for discussions with students, educators, researchers, policy makers and other decision makers to explore if and how we can all bring compassion to the heart of our practice in Northern Ireland, and through that promote it as an example worthy of replication elsewhere globally.

## **The Northern Ireland Context**

The education system in Northern Ireland is mostly segregated into Catholic maintained schools and State schools largely attended by Protestants. Communities in Northern Ireland are also largely divided. Such polarisation is tied up in political and religious conflict, and despite the ‘Peace Process’, sectarian tensions remain paramount.

Nevertheless, education in Northern Ireland has long sought to encourage cross-community contact, respect, tolerance, mutual understanding and the like. Under the 1989 Education Reform Order, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural

Heritage became compulsory as cross-curricular themes. The Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) defined EMU and Cultural Heritage ‘as helping pupils to develop positive values and mutually respectful relationships and to appreciate human differences of all kinds, including culture, disability, ethnicity, politics and religion’ (quoted in Rooney, 1997, p123). Current programmes, such as Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED), are intended to foster respect for human rights for all groups regardless of religion, sexuality, gender etc. In fact, the Northern Ireland curriculum advocates that young people should acquire an understanding of the values of equality, justice, and human rights. Young people should learn that diverse groups have the right to freedom of thought and political expression, and they should understand that all citizens are entitled to equality and justice both locally and globally. Overall, the education system in Northern Ireland strives to develop young people not only to become citizens of their local region, but to become citizens connected to citizens from other regions who are all interconnected on a global scale. However, despite such efforts, sectarian tensions remain paramount in Northern Ireland. Further, research evidence within the UK and Ireland, highlights that global citizenship is framed within an “us and them” narrative, which promotes a dichotomy between the global north and south, creating a barrier to understanding the complexities of our interconnectedness and interdependence (see Andreotti 2009, Bryan and Bracken 2011, Murphy 2011).

Children in Crossfire wishes to engage educators in exploring the possibility that compassion could be utilised in addressing both local contentious issues, and meeting curriculum demands for developing students as responsible global citizens with a deep sense of interdependence. Where are the opportunities in policy and practice for bringing compassion to the core of our education system? What resources already exist? Do we have training needs? What does ‘compassion education’ look like in practice? Are there any challenges, and if so, how might these be overcome?

For example, one possible challenge might be the notion of universal compassion as existing beyond religious beliefs. Although the Dalai Lama accepts that religions can help people develop morally, in his book *Beyond Religion*, he states:

In today's secular world, religion alone is no longer adequate as a basis for ethics...any religion-based answer to the problem of our neglect of inner values can never be universal, and so will be inadequate. What we need today is an approach to ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without: a secular ethics (quoted in Mind and Life Institute, 2012, p1)

Perhaps it might be argued that compassion rooted in secular ethics promotes universal respect for everyone despite their religious or cultural beliefs. In fact, 'the Dalai Lama employs the word spirituality to refer not to some other worldly experience or reality but to the domain of those basic human values that are shared across religious and non-religious traditions and that are therefore important for all human beings, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof. Spirituality thus becomes the domain of secular ethics and the cultivation of basic human values' (Ozawa-de Silva and Dodson-Lavelle, 2011, p8). In this respect, Children in Crossfire considers secular ethics as an opportunity, rather than a challenge, for engaging in compassion in the context of a religiously segregated society in Northern Ireland. We consider it a tool for creating common ground between our local political and religious divides to engage young people in practicing universal altruism, to make connections with each other and the rest of the world. Actually, Children in Crossfire are at one with Ozawa de-Silva and Dodson-Lavelle when they state, 'opening the door to what is common across religions does not undermine the importance of the effort to show the importance of religion as a field of study...In fact it may enhance our appreciation of the importance of religion in human life and supplement existing understandings of religion' (Ozawa-de Silva and Dodson-Lavelle, 2011, p8).

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In order for us to broaden our understanding of the concept of secular ethics, we wish to invite colleagues from Emory University, Atlanta USA, to share with us their knowledge surrounding this issue. In 1998 the Emory-Tibet Partnership was founded, and in 2007 the Dalai Lama was installed as Presidential Distinguished Professor of Emory University. The intention of the Emory-Tibet Partnership is to bring together the best of the Western and Tibetan intellectual traditions for their mutual enrichment and the discovery of new knowledge and practices for the benefit of humanity.

Our colleagues from Emory University are engaged in developing an age-appropriate pedagogy from early childhood to young adulthood, with the aim of applying a practice appropriate for all religions and non-religions, in order to promote positive universal values. The practice intends to develop 'emotional awareness and intelligence, emotion regulation, self-compassion, interdependence, appreciation, empathy, non-discrimination, equanimity (understood as impartiality), and compassion (understood as the wish to relieve others from suffering)' (Ozawa-de Silva and Dodson-Lavelle, 2011, p12). Children in Crossfire believes that the participation of our colleagues from Emory at this event will enhance our understanding of compassion and its role in education. Further, our Emory colleagues are keen to learn about the Northern Ireland education context, which, as mentioned earlier, has throughout the years been encouraging pupils to develop values such as respect, tolerance, cultural understanding, and the like. Curriculum changes, direct contact programmes, and various educational initiatives have all been introduced into the system in Northern Ireland, in order to help counter sectarian tensions, and promote peace and reconciliation. Our Emory colleagues are very interested in understanding the efforts we have been making in Northern Ireland to promote positive values amongst young people. Children in Crossfire see this event as an opportunity for us all to reflect on our progress to date, consider our strengths and weaknesses, and stimulate conversations on how we might implement compassion education to help us in our endeavours to educate the hearts of both ourselves and our young people.

## **Event Objectives**

- ❖ To contribute to the embedding of compassion in teaching and learning into education policy and practice in Northern Ireland, with the potential of creating a model worthy of replication elsewhere globally
- ❖ Through today's event, to create an active and growing community which shares knowledge and experience, with the intent of moving towards compassion in action

## **Event Aims**

1. To explore the thoughts and feelings of participants in relation to the concept of compassion
2. To explore challenges and opportunities for embedding compassion into education policy and practice
3. To identify next steps and commitments to follow-up actions in relation to education for compassion

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