

## “NO MAN IS AN ISLAND” – COMMUNICATION NOT ISOLATION

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### WE NEED OTHERS TO BE OURSELVES.

Can we develop as individuals without communication or contact with others?

What is the difference between communication and contact?

We live in an age of instant and incessant contact yet this can come at the cost of real human communication. Contact perhaps is more about informing someone about something impersonally, whereas communication suggests engaging someone about something personally. Communication essentially involves listening to, not just talking at, someone.

In pedagogical terms, contact can be achieved through monologue but communication is created through dialogue which is a 2 way process where there is more of a personal engagement in the learning process. In this way, we can develop educational programmes which are based not on the mere acquisition of knowledge but on the development of understanding.

As a teacher of nearly 40 years in schools and universities across Europe my emphasis has always been focussed on the individual and the realisation of the potential of each person, each pupil. This has been best achieved by real, positive, constructive and affirmative contact with students through active participation in the classroom and in the community. Such an approach is as valid for those in Special Schools as it is for those in Mainstream schools. Indeed my work has been based on linking together Special Schools and High Schools in a programme of educational development and social integration for all students and encourages and achieves communication between institutions and individuals.

For far too long, in all countries, children with special educational needs have been excluded, marginalised and unable fully to be included in the process of communication, dialogue and development which students in mainstream schools take for granted. I am aware of wonderful work being done in the newest country in Europe, Kosovo, where children with special needs and social problems are now engaged in a new programme of communication called Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship is a voluntary, certificated activity in the extended curriculum of High Schools which helps Kosovan students of today become informed, resourceful and committed students of tomorrow. The Programme links High Schools with Special Schools/Residential Institutions, Day Centres and Attached Classes and creates new Partnerships of Learning.

Active Citizenship involves students committing themselves to weekly visits with children and young people with special needs, engaging them in a programme of activities which facilitates the process of educational development and social integration between everyone involved. In this way, a real Bridge of Communication and Understanding is established.

In October 2012 the Kosovo Youth Education Trust ( KYET) , with the full support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology ( MEST) , launched the first Active Citizenship programme in Kosovo, with a 3 month ‘Active Citizenship Pilot Schools’ Scheme’, linking 3 High Schools in Pristina with 2 Day Centres for children and young adults with Downs Syndrome and Autism, one Attached Class for children with hearing and speech difficulties and one Special School for 160 pupils with a range of

special needs, including mental and physical disabilities.

The programme was a great success. Over the nine week period, 135 students volunteered on a weekly basis at the 2 Day Centres, Attached Class and Special School. Despite initial apprehension about working with children with disabilities, the students soon realised that their misgivings were totally unfounded. Through their participation in the ACPSS, the students have changed the way they perceive disability, discrimination and prejudice. By becoming 'Active Citizens' they have gained new appreciation, insight and understanding about the vital issues facing the development of their society now and in the future.

**Quote from student volunteer: 'I know now that my purpose in life is to help others by communicating with them and drawing them out of their isolation. I didn't think about this before becoming an Active Citizen'**

**Quote from parents of AC volunteer: 'Thank you for starting to build a society with no discrimination or prejudice and with communication, equality and understanding'.**

The programme was also hugely beneficial for the children and young people with special needs as they gained in skills, confidence and self-esteem throughout their AC sessions with the volunteers.

Following the success of the ACPSS in Pristina, the KYET have planned to introduce the programme to High Schools and residential schools for deaf and blind students in Peje and Prizren with the 'Active Citizenship Pilot Schools Study' from 25 February to 26 April. The programme will also be developed in and around Pristina to include more High Schools students and further vulnerable groups in the extended local community, including the elderly and families with children with special needs who currently have no regular support.

The Active Citizenship programme is unique in that it provides maximum benefits for minimum costs. As the programme develops, these benefits increase as the costs diminish. Following the ACPSS in February to April this year, the aim is to launch 'Active Citizenship' as a National Strategy in High Schools throughout Kosovo from September 2013. This National

Strategy will enable all senior students to have the opportunity to volunteer as 'Active Citizens', leading to a transformation of individuals, groups and communities for the benefit of all society in Kosovo, now and in the future.

The first ACPSS in Pristina in the Autumn of 2012 was organised by Jane Swayne from the Kosovo Youth Education Trust (KYET). Jane has worked on community programmes in the UK and Rajasthan since 1997. In 2003 she founded the Kosovo Youth Education Project running International Summer Schools and community programmes for children and young people from all ethnic groups in the towns Gjakova and Rahovec. In 2011 Jane founded the Kosovo Youth Education Trust with the aim of introducing a National Strategy for 'Active Citizenship', supported by, and eventually run by, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.



The whole thrust of the Active Citizenship programme in Kosovo is about communication as the photograph above illustrates perfectly. A volunteer from the local High School is engaged in direct, natural, personal communication with an adult who has Down's Syndrome. The concentration of both reveals the depth of communication involved and clearly demonstrates how the Aims and Objectives of the programme are achieved:

## **AIMS**

- To improve the life chances and experience of young people with special needs through direct communication;

- To improve delivery of communication skills and practices for all participants;
  - To overcome barriers to learning and achievement for young people with special needs;
  - To achieve inclusion through a programme of activities designed to promote social cohesion;
  - To introduce student volunteers to a Programme supporting the social, cultural, moral and educational development of all participants;
  - To encourage students to commit themselves to working with people with special needs beyond their initial involvement, to sustain the process of social integration and educational development.
- benefit from the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and feelings with understanding partners,
  - become more fully involved in the community through organised events,
  - experience improved behaviour at home and at school,
  - acquire greater levels of concentration and perseverance when faced with new challenges,
  - realise unexplored potential over a wide range of activities,
  - engage in a process of inclusion and integration,
  - are better equipped to communicate and make a positive contribution.

## **OBJECTIVES**

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- Student volunteers from Secondary Schools and young people in linked Special Schools and centres come together during and beyond extended school hours in a locally targeted programme of activity;
  - Young people with special needs are stimulated mentally, challenged physically, integrated socially, and develop more fully their ability to communicate through creative, imaginative and therapeutic activities (e.g. Art, Drama, Dance, Sport, I.T., Music, Craft);
  - Volunteer students acquire or enhance their qualities of initiative, commitment, communication and resourcefulness through their participation in Active Citizenship.
- set and achieve high standards of responsibility,
  - overcome barriers and build bridges by communicating in new and different ways within the community,
  - learn the value of communicating directly with individuals,
  - gain a practical understanding of human rights and how to communicate these to others.

The Active Citizenship programme enables communication to take place between volunteers and those with special and social needs in new and different ways, all within an educational context of personal development within their local community. It prevents isolation and promotes communication.

Observational data also shows clearly that the Outcomes **for young people with special needs are that they:**

- feel valued and appreciated as individuals,
- feel safer and become more confident and outgoing and communicative,

Further articles will follow as the National Strategy for Active Citizenship unfolds in late 2013.

**I wholeheartedly commend it to all involved in education, communication and research.**