

Whole School Change in an Oxfordshire Primary School

THE SHOEBOX DILEMMA...

When we began working with RISC in 2004 we undertook an audit of Global Citizenship that encompassed every area of school life. From this starting point we were able to devise an action plan to further develop Global Citizenship in our school.

As a small village school, most of our charitable activities are organized by our P.T.A. to benefit our own pupils, but there are two occasions during the year when we fundraise for charities beyond our own community – Harvest Festival and Christmas. We thought about our reasons for fundraising and realized our chosen charities and activities often presented stereotypical, negative images of life in other countries.

For Harvest Festival it seemed straightforward to choose a theme related to food and interdependence, discuss our impact as consumers, explore fair trade and collect contributions for a local food bank. Introducing Global Citizenship into Christmas fundraising was altogether different.

At Christmas we had adopted “Operation Christmas Child” and their Shoebox Appeal as our charity of choice over many years. A local representative visited with a professionally made video demonstrating the work they do and its value. Christmas is often a time of massive over consumption in wealthy countries like the UK so creating a gift for somebody worse off than ourselves is a great salve to the conscience. The appeal was very well supported, with most families producing at least one shoebox and most staff joining in. We felt we had “done our bit” and could get on with our over indulgence with a clear conscience.



In 2006 we discussed as a staff whether we could continue to support Operation Christmas Child and made the decision to stop. The images of the recipient countries, presented by Operation Christmas Child, was entirely negative but despite recognizing the truth of this, we found the decision to abandon the charity agonizing. The passion and discussion that ensued raged on for a while but there were no shoebox gifts from our school for two years.



At the heart of Global Citizenship is an awareness of the wider world and our individual responsibilities as world citizens. Encouraging children to believe that this “sticking plaster” approach is of any real or lasting value would be abdicating our responsibility as teachers.

A SOLUTION TO THE SHOEBOX DILEMMA...

Homelessness is an issue raised by the Christmas story and we don't have to look far to recognise that it is very real and very local. The Oxford Night Shelter provides a wide range of services for homeless and vulnerable people in Oxford, including emergency accommodation and a day shelter. It provides ongoing support for people when they most need it.



In 2008 we invited a representative from the Night Shelter to visit our school and talk to the children about homelessness and the reasons why people find themselves in that situation. This challenged the negative images most of us have of homeless people gained from seeing them in shop doorways and in the media. Many of the children expressed surprise at what they had learned and much discussion followed. They started to question stereotypes of homelessness and keep their minds open to new ideas.

We approached the shelter manager and asked if shoebox gifts would be acceptable at Christmas. This was warmly welcomed and a list of suitable gift items was drawn up. Many shoeboxes were donated and delivered to the shelter for distribution to their regular residents. Problem solved? Yes and no!

The children who were keen to make a shoebox gift for another child were just as keen to make a gift for a homeless adult. Their motivation was generosity, social action and a general recognition that their lives are relatively privileged.

The number of shoebox gifts collected in 2008 was considerably fewer than when we had created them for children in Eastern Europe or Swaziland. Colleagues felt that support from a significant number of parents was low or non-existent.

Enabling children to make connections between local poverty and poverty in the wider world remains a focus, so we are repeating our local shoebox appeal each Christmas. Staff and clients from the Oxford Night Shelter address our oldest children to explain their work and we have opened this up, not just to parents, but to the community as a whole. We hope the school will become a positive voice to promote greater awareness of the causes of homelessness and thus begin to influence attitudes in a positive way. The journey continues!

