Equalities Through the Mass Media - What an Adventure

Our Comenius project has been an amazing adventure for all students, staff and schools taking part over the last two years. The planning with such detail helped to make the project run smoothly with clear expectations. In Belgium, Poland, Slovakia, Cyprus and the UK within our school communities we have grown in friendship and mutual understanding.

Our quest to enable all participants to have a wider understanding of equalities has brought us closer to understand the day to day issues of disability, religion and belief and the impact of economic factors.

We are proud that Spring Common our special school in the UK helped many students to rethink their attitudes to vulnerable young people and to understand that we all have human rights to be valued and to feel free to make our own decisions.

Empowerment for each individual is a powerful because opens up the world to so many possibilities hitherto thought unimaginable.

Every time we explain our ideas to others we are actually defining our own thoughts and allowing ourselves to share our world with others in a global society. During the project I smiled to listen to students and teachers learning from each other to decide overall that cultural and social differences can be overcome if we have the patience to just listen and observe.

The presentations were effective because students carried out detailed research and cared about the reaction of other students. The theme of understanding the mass media was explored to encourage enquiry and the seeking out of ideas free from bias and discriminatory attitudes.

In June I have been invited to be a guest by the British Council to attend the Annual TES teacher awards so of course I will promote the successful work of our EQMM project.

I take this opportunity to thank the school coordinators and Comenius teams for their hard work and hospitality. The project overall has been simply fantastic for everyone involved and for me a real privilege!!

“This has been and will continue to be an enriching experience” - Pieter De Geest

“Although all of the students came from different cultural backgrounds we became friends without any prejudices.” - Simona (Cyprus)
A Look Back in Wonder
Pieter De Geest

A little more than two years ago, this project was born during a meeting in Munich. A host of teachers from all over Europe had gathered there in order to find one or several suitable partners to embark on a journey – both a literal and a metaphorical one – that was going to take them all across the continent. It was quite a chaotic event, really, not in the least because everyone was equally anxious not to return home empty-handed. Yet, it was relatively quickly that some of the people who were eventually to form the core of what would become our project got together and found out they had a shared interest. (In)equalities and the mass media, that’s what we wanted to work on. And so we did!

And look where we are now! What we have experienced so far and will experience during the next couple of months is something to cherish. This has become an exchange project in the truest sense of the word: we visited and were visited, we give and we take, we teach and we learn. People of entirely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds assemble, get to know each other, have fun together, work together. For most pupils (and probably also teachers) at least some of other countries involved in the project were – perhaps really – still blank spots on the map. Hopefully, these spots have been given a really beautiful colour by now! I, for one, still very fondly remember the tragic, heart-warming stories I was told during my tour of Spring Common; the sports competition on a dreary Wednesday afternoon in Belgium when a few handfuls of international teams tried to outdo each other in various disciplines; the International Fair in Hlohovec, which gave us the opportunity to work with and talk to each other on a more personal level; and – overall – I remember the enthusiastic responses of my pupils involved in the project after each and every visit.
But I do not wish to sound overtly lyrical. Of course our project has had its problems. Communication has not always been optimal (small wonder, I suppose, with the wide array of participants), there was the occasional misunderstanding and the project in general kicked off a lot more ambitious than what it turned out to be. We were going to have policies changed, while all that will have changed after concluding this two-year journey will be the participants’ awareness of certain issues. But isn’t that sufficient in itself? I am sure that everybody taking part in this project at times has been touched the way I have been. And if that is the case, then leaving on this trip has been well worth the effort!

Because... Something like our project is anything but obvious. A random look at current world affairs proves this only too often. Even today, with twelve innocent people killed during a terrorist attack in Paris. Punished, so it seems, because somehow there was a lack of mutual understanding. Something, I believe, that increasingly disrupts our ever contracting world. More and more people of various backgrounds get in touch and very often do not get along. It is perhaps a rather utopian thought, but our cooperating can only serve to stimulate this respect across cultural and national boundaries, indeed maybe even do away with these boundaries altogether! And a better understanding of each other will hopefully result in more tolerance. I know it is way too easy to regard an insignificant little project like ours as a means to attain world peace, but if it leaves so much as a spark in a couple of people involved, then this project has been well worth the effort!

In short, this has been and will continue to be an enriching experience for Brits, Cypriots, Poles, Slovaks and Belgians alike, both young and old, both pupil and teacher!

Pieter De Geest
Poverty in Poland

Teachers and students from CK “Nauka” in Pila, Poland

Many families in Poland live at the poverty threshold. According to the report of the Polish Central Statistical Office, the number of people in our country living at the minimum level of existence is on the rise. Unemployment and the level of education are among the most important factors generating poverty in the Polish society.

More and more, not only older but also younger citizens are living in an extreme poverty. Most of them live in agricultural areas of Poland. Moreover, the highest level of poverty is encountered among the unemployed and their large families and among people without education.

On the other hand, we have to remember about the poverty among children. As far as different surveys are concerned, nowadays one in five children in Poland lives in poverty. There are numerous causes of this situation and the most important are: high unemployment level of their parents, natural disasters, accidents, pathology and life-ruining addictions.

In the past and now, media are talking about food collection, actions and programmes distributing extra meals for children run by the government, local authorities and different institutions. It is of course appropriate activity but sometimes it also cause physical discomfort or is a source of psychological problems because poverty and the result of it - hunger is closely related with a feeling of low dignity that influences the appropriate participation in social life. As a result, neglected children who do not eat enough are rejected by their peers, and very often also by the adults.

To sum up, it is worth mentioning that the issue of Polish poverty especially in the rural areas is largely recognized. Additionally, politicization of these problems in Poland is very strong, that gives us hope for the better future.
Poverty, a Worldwide Plague

Poverty, a worldwide plague having its roots deep into the centuries
Androula Christofi
Popi Andreou

We have come to a bitter realization, even though nowadays, we live in an affluent world where money defines "success". We live in the 21st century, and we everyday witness people who are still suffering from famine and live in misery and agony. It is a heavy burden falling on the shoulders of each one of us, separately and as a whole, especially today that globalization has invaded our homes. This is an issue which makes everybody worried about it, apparently due to the serious consequences on society in its wider sense. It is a problem which takes wide dimensions and concerns everyone but, luckily, it makes people active and urges them into forming groups or making them having solidarity as their target and combating the problem in the most effective way.

On the occasion of this meeting, in the context of the Comenius program, the five participating countries, Cyprus, England, Poland, Belgium and Slovakia, which took place in Cyprus from the 3rd to the 7th of November 2014, we, Cypriots have chosen the theme "The impact of poverty as a risk factor for social exclusion and securing employment in your country", and conducted a survey involving all five participants who presented their own findings related to their own school, according to the activity project program, during this meeting.

We have to confess that the reason which urged us chose this specific topic is the situation which now exists on our little island, and not only, as a result of the economic crisis. It is a fact that our country is experiencing hard times, which have not been aware of and have not experienced previously on such scale. The financial crisis has truly invaded our island, which had previously demonstrated a rigorous and dynamic rhythm in all areas, leading society and its people to an economic recession, depression, reflection and at the same time to uncertainty concerning their future but also the future of this country.

This contemporary phenomenon, a figment, in the context of an industrialized and globalized world, the result of a globalized society, as it is well-known, affects all states of the old continent, to a great extent, with all its implications and detrimental effects.

Poverty in Cyprus today, is much more serious than we can conclude from the figures if we take into consideration the social benefits granted, people's loans and the solidarity which exists between people. According to the results of a survey which were published recently, the percentage of the population that lived below poverty levels during 2013 rose to 15.3% and was higher than 2012.
The National Network, in an announcement it made regarding poverty, it underlines that "For the first time, the people of Cyprus, apart from the difficulties they went through during the 1974 Turkish invasion, they are confronted with very difficult financial and social situations. While, some years ago, everybody regarded unemployment, homeless and poor people as non-existing facts for Cyprus, today things have altered all together; these issues are now a bitter realization". It goes on to add "It is our responsibility to recognise the problems we are facing today, and respond to them where and in either way we can to restrict the consequences, especially those of the most affected groups of people in Cyprus".

The results of the survey conducted by the students of the participating countries of our project were very revealing; the conclusion was that poverty has affected, more or less, all the participating countries, UK, Belgium, Slovakia, Poland and Cyprus, and has marked our life extensively. This proves that we are all exposed to the same problem; it is as if we have been struck by a cyclone and we are trying to survive and come out alive.

Cypriots, being used to fighting hardships through the years, are now struggling to survive. Our main aim is to face the crisis without allowing it to leave us despondent and desolate. Our country, as a nation, has prepared a well-organised social welfare programme for those who have been struck severely by the crisis, and so have schools, teachers and students.

Considering volunteerism as the ultimate level of human act, our school has set as one of its primary objectives, as far as the organization of activities is concerned, and generally the enhancement of the creativity of the children of our school, their more active and substantial involvement in volunteering issues, contribution and compassion towards our fellow citizens, under the umbrella of the Social Welfare Committee, Red Cross and the Social Contribution of our school.

Our goal was, and still is, to raise awareness to our students on issues relating to love, solidarity and altruism which overwhelm each and every one of us with joy and delight and make us experience the pleasure of offering and helping as the greatest joy in the world, but also feeling more HUMAN, especially now that young people have to face the difficulties of our times and walk through the difficult and thorny paths, facing the challenges and alternating motives of globalization.

Activities and charity events are taking place throughout the year, especially during the Volunteerism Week aiming at the strengthening of the school funds in order to meets the needs of the poor students of our school and the confrontation of the economic crisis at the same time. In order to increase the school funds and also to comfort those people most influenced by the crisis feel better and at the same time help them financially, our school is organising a variety of activities.
Below are many of the school activities:

- Organizing charity events aiming at the collection of money for strengthening the school economic funds for the students in need.
- Seminar organization related to the crisis for informing students and teachers about it.
- Donations / contributions of different agencies in the area.
- Free breakfast and feeding poor students.
- Financial aid to poor students on a regular basis.
- Reduction of canteen prices.
- Flexibility regarding school uniform.
- Purchasing and distributing clothes and shoes to poor students.
- Tolerance and understanding towards students with apparent signs of the financial crisis.
- Forming special volunteer groups (teachers and students) to handle the action for combating the financial crisis at school.

Moreover, the school itself, the administrating stuff, teachers, students and everybody involved in the school environment, has taken measures in order to prevent racist phenomena related to the economic crisis. The promotion of equality rights, respect to what is different, promotion/strengthening of values and principles, organization of seminars, cultivation of dialogues, both in and out of the classroom are only a few of the measures taken to combat the economic crisis and the consequences which have been caused by this problem.

We all hope and struggle for a better future, even though we have a long distance to cover yet.

Androula Christofi
Popi Andreou
Evaluation of Our Comenius Project

Ivana Fáziková

All of us know that the main objective of our Comenius project "Understanding Equalities Through the Mass Media" is to raise awareness about rights and equalities of various national, religious, cultural and other European minorities. What is more, we all admit that John Amos Comenius’ ideas about learning through experience are inevitable in the education. As he said, we should “let the pupils learn to write by writing, to speak by speaking, to sing by singing ...”.

Now, being at the final phase of our project, it seems that these concepts were applied very carefully in every activity, in every mobility. Sometimes on purpose but many times even subconsciously and intuitively by all participants, both students and teachers. And in my view this could be appreciated as the most valuable and rewarding outcome.

We were allowed to undergo journeys to the specific and unique worlds of our five countries, to explore our cultural distinctions. While working on particular tasks our students turned to creative, cooperative and responsible explorers, photographers, writers, tour guides, presenters, web designers or even part-time teachers. Once we were overwhelmed by natural beauties or rich cultural heritage, the next time by loving and hospitable care of the hosts or at the other times by sincere interest and excitement of the guests. At some moments we were touched by unexpected mature opinions or behaviour of our students, at other moments we were fascinated by their work ethic or simply by the sparkling strength of the moment.

“We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood.”

Let’s remind at least some of them. For example when at the conference on the education in Huntington a 16-year-old boy Charalambous from Cyprus said: “Love is the most important. Neither the most advanced technologies nor perfect financial security can substitute the need of loving and caring human attitude of the real teachers.” Or when Daniel from Slovakia reported his feelings on the visit of Spring Common School in England: “When I was in the role of a history teacher and those children understood what I meant and I had the feeling that I am useful, it was amazing and for me this was the most meaningful 60 minutes in my life.” Or when Jessica and Stephanie from England started spontaneously and cheerfully singing in the bus returning from the trip to the Slovak town Piest'any. Or when Simona from Slovakia commented her visit in Cyprus: “I’ve learned that it doesn’t matter from which country I am because although all of the students came from different cultural backgrounds we became friends without any prejudices.”
Evaluation of Our Comenius Project

Which from the great amount of experiences and knowledge we gained is the most beneficial? Undoubtedly the human aspect of all of them. In our minds every obtained information is connected with a person who provided it, every particular memory is linked with a person we shared it with, ... This means we all can remember the people who became close to us, who made a great emotional or intellectual impact on us or who widened our horizons. The most important lesson we all learnt is that nevertheless the place we come from we all are very close to each other.

And this again reveals the timeless value of Comenius message on humanity: “We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood. To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or because he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly. .... Let us have but one end in view, the welfare of humanity; and let us put aside all selfishness in considerations of language, nationality, or religion.“

Ivana Fáziková

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