

Changing Communities: recognising schools as sites of transformation

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The Tale o' the Glasgow Girls

- by Euan Girvan, former teacher at Drumchapel High School in Glasgow

When Ah went tae the bilingual unit at Drumchapel High
Ah hid been teachin English but keen tae gie this joab a try
Teachin' the weans o' asylum seekers and o'refugees
Tae learn the English language and it's qs and ps!
Weil they came from war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan
Fae Rwanda, Algeria, Sri Lanka and the Sudan
A' different nationalities, languages and regions
An' first they hid tae learn tae understaun' Glaswegian!

Noo the background tae this speil is that the Labour government
Needed easing public pressure doon south so they sent
Asylum seekers roun' the country but maist up tae Glasga fair
Cos we hid empty public housing needing renting and repair.
But the locals living here hidnae any wind o' this
Maist gied a great welcome but some thought things were amiss
That those jist arrived got the whale jing-bang for free
So sittin' doon the gether for a blether wiz the key.

Information, get it oot there
Education, no less-mair,
Inspiration, get yer community
Tae unite and fight against
racism and poverty.

The schule wiz challenged by those kiddie-on performance tables
Wi teachers workin' to dispel stereotypes an' labels
The empathetic wans, who werenae hell-bent on promotion
Had been nurturing city weans with duty and devotion.
Yet it wiz a challenge tae take oan kids who had suffered fear
Distressed by family separation, war and danger getting here.
But in the base, protected, they slowly slowly came around
Then got intae mainstream classes wi' the new hope that they'd found.

Amal's first day, gret her heart oot
When Ah asked her, 'What's this about?
She turned tae me, her een a' tearful
An' said 'Ah am just so happy
tae be back learning in a school'.

Oh, we needed experts in tae deal wi' the trauma in the weans
Art therapy, music, drama, dance were keys to affect change
Richard Morran wi' Save the Children and other charities
Got the kids making plays and films and composing melodies
Aileen Ritchie, Paragon Ensemble, the Carnival group

Got kids a' together, they were friends afore they knew it.
And for both the girls and boys, doin' sport was jist the ticket
We staired winnin' trophies for athletics, fitba' and cricket.

And Drumchapel weans learned of other cultures, stories, songs
And staired djembe drummin' and dressin' in sarongs
We learnt what to ca' oot in Somali when your goats are running wild
And the song you sing with sadness when you are burying a child
And although at lunchtime kids, stood in their race and gender pack
And we teachers thought we couldnae find the integration knack
The school wiz slowly changing, it'd had gone so very far
Wi' friendly first years chirpin' ' How's it gawin' Mohammed Omar?!!'

Older weans, great fur teachin'
Older weans, don't do preachin'
Older weans, reaching oot
Tae the younger weans on
Whit prejudice is about.

But crash! Just like the plough into the mouse's cell
Asylum-seeking families were tae suffer a new hell
Dawn-raided, separated and forced into detention
Ripped from their family home, deportation the intention
The Home Office wiz duty-bound to assess every single case
But ran a racket cuttin' numbers in the numbers race
Illegally, they targetted national family groups
And charted planes for 'removal', of these the 'low hanging fruits.'

At schule, asylum-seeking children just fell down tae the ground
They feared that they, their families, would be next to be detention bound
The Drumchapel children were appalled this was happening to their friends
The staff were shocked that these children were being traumatised again.
The Heidie wiz on the phone tae find where they had been taken
Staff and pupils signed petitions on behalf of those forsaken
And seven lassies came together with wan united aim
To dae anything they could tae get their dear friends back again.

Home Office, inhumane
Home Office, causing pain
Home Office, a racist institution
Still 'not fit for purpose'
Needin' dissolution.

Noo this wiz well afore the social media malarkey
And wiz real social history - despised by David Starkey
Locked up weans in Dungavel was beyond our comprehension
So we visited families there who had been forced in tae detention
And the girls faxed and emailed cooncillors and oor MSPs
And wi' hand-held cameras we made two documentaries
We contacted the media gettin' features in the press
We found ourselves engaged in the democratic process.

Martin Coyle and Kingsway Centre wiz central to our cause
We started patrolling the estate wi'oot breakin' any laws
Jean Donnachie and Noreen Real stood shoulder tae shoulder
They became Glasgow Girls but as Grans -just a wee bit aulder
They would make sure that families would get some decent sleep

If the Home Office vans appeared then their mobiles would go beep
And tae the centre the families dashed safe and less afraid
And the Home Office were thwarted- another failed dawn raid.

Naw, the Home Office didnae always have the upper hand
By tracking flight paths and aeroplanes coming in tae land
Wi' Frank McMaster on the website wi' a fine tooth-comb
We knew which nationality they were trying tae send back home.
And the girls used the footage that they'd shot wi' Lindsay Hill
Whose BBC films told oor story and gave us hope until
Driven by Jassim Johe to the capital we'd been sent
To take oor campaign and testimony tae the Scottish Parliament.

Gie weans a voice, they'll use it
Gie weans a choice, they'll choose it
Gie weans a good cause, they can be trusted
Tae campaign for fairness equality and justice.

So what did we achieve? well some detainees were set free
After campaigning for years, there was a Scottish amnesty
Following a school meeting wi' a Home Office high heid yin
Kids sitting exams would not be subjected tae detention
Some families got leave to remain, free tae tell their stories
We got all-party support in Holyrood even fae the Tories
By challenging the system, wi' oot raising any fists
Seven Drumchapel High School girls became political activists.

Wi' the help o' NGOs and religious organisations
Community and campaign groups opposed tae deportation
Health service and education workers - all civil society
We a' worked the gether tae set oor pals and their families free.
Here they are-strong lassies now independent women
Jennifer McCarron, Ewelina Siwak, Amal Azzudin
Agnesa Murselaj, Roza Salih, Toni-Lee Henderson
And Emma Clifford all fought to free children from detention.

Nearly finished, Ah'll soon be gone
The campaign though, keeps going on
So when tackling society's ills
Dae it wi' the inspiration
O' the Glasgow Girls!

That's me done, Ah'll finish there
And introduce Amal and Claire
Wi their great subject matter
So thanks fur puttin' up wi'
my singing and ma patter.