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Townshend International School

## The John Esslemont School Transforms Itself

THE JOHN ESSLEMONT SCHOOL was established back in 1987 by the Bahá'ís living in the Grampian region of North East Scotland. It was officially opened by the then Director of Education Mr James Michie. Since then, although not widely publicised, the school has been running consistently every week for each of the three, ten week terms per year for the last fifteen years.

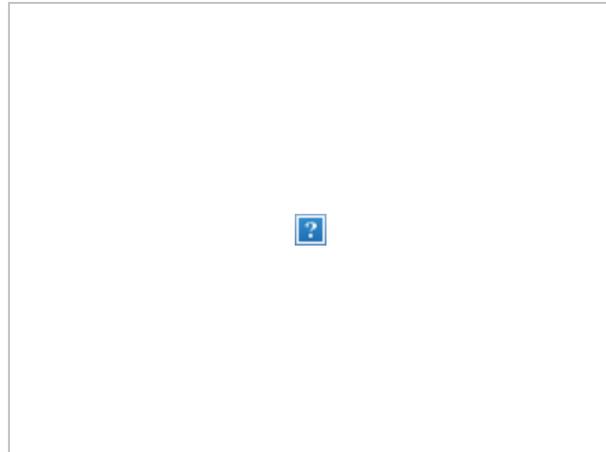
From the start the John Esslemont School wanted to include children who were not Bahá'ís, and although a number of non-Bahá'ís came along and joined in from time to time, none of them stayed for

very long. Following the start of the Five Year Plan and the clarity of the guidance from the Universal House of Justice, to have “children’s classes open to all”, even more thought was directed to the ways in which we could open the John Esslemont School to all children in the area. At the same time the Helmy family, who lived in Aberdeen for many years and who were a core part of the school, sadly had to move away to Houston in Texas. This resulted in a noticeable drop in the number of children attending the school. Something had to be done. The school could not continue as it had before.

The management committee decided to consult on how to run the school in a very different way, that would truly result in not only the school being open to all, but that all the participants would feel comfortable in inviting other children to help us in our activities. The consultation was truly wonderful. Every member participated in a way that built a result that none of us could have foreseen. Lessons were drawn in from successes in other parts of the British community as well as deeply thinking about the local situation and needs. The result was a completely new format and strategy for the school. Two fundamental changes were agreed.

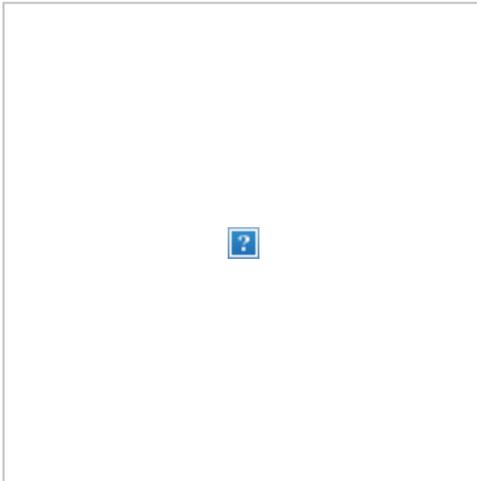
- Firstly, the focus of the school would change to be outward looking, trying to serve the community, rather than inward looking, and build separate classes for each age group of children.
- Secondly, the whole school would work together, adults, youth and children, and learning would be by doing rather than by just listening and talking.

To achieve this aim, the school has decided to undertake two service projects in each ten week term. The first four weeks of each five week project are used to prepare for and practice the activities of the project, and on the fifth week the project is performed or implemented. It was decided that the projects will all be arts based, because the arts have activities that enable all age groups to join in and participate together. The consultation revealed that within the community we already have the capacity to use drama, crafts, music and singing, painting and dancing – more than enough to start with. Another benefit of this new format and strategy, is that if more resources are required – whether children to participate, adults to provide a missing element or type of expertise, we all feel that it will be much easier, clearer and genuine to invite people to join in our outwardly looking



*Mai Goodwin shares a smile while preparing paper angels*

of much value, create and generate to invite people to join in our community learning service project, than it has been in the past to invite people to our more inwardly looking, classroom based sessions. This is the root to having our children's classes "open to all". As we gain experience from reflecting on how well each project goes, we will be able to identify who we need to invite to join us to improve the next project. Some projects will require more children; some will need extra youth or adults with specific skills, talents or knowledge to enable us to complete our project.



*One of the younger members of the school helps with the decorations*

As the change to the school was so great, it was decided that the first project should be fairly modest, as it would be important to have a high degree of success so that everyone would gain confidence as well as experience. A vote decided that we would begin our first project using crafts and specifically, being near to the Christmas period, the first project was chosen to be to learn how to make some simple Christmas decorations and take these to a local residential home to show them how they can make Christmas decorations for themselves. The two decorations that were chosen were a small angel, made from dry pasta and a colourful "pine cone". Both items are quite simple in construction and after two school sessions everyone had a part to play in the construction. As the project was to show people in an old folks

home unfamiliar with the items, how to construct them, a lot of preparation had to be done beforehand, folding the pieces of paper required for the "pine cone", and pre-assembling parts of the angel. In addition, we rehearsed the way in which the school would introduce itself to the people in the old folks home. All these activities gave many opportunities to discuss Bahá'í principles and virtues and how to put them into practice, such as courtesy, patience, friendliness and helpfulness. Whilst preparing for the project we were able to learn a few quotations from the Writings together and practised our introductions using role play.

The first project was undertaken at the Cowdray Club, an old folks home in Aberdeen on Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> December. One member of the school who had contacts with the Cowdray Club had made all the arrangements and all the school was welcomed into the warm and comfortable building at 2:00 pm. We were able to use the dining room and after arranging the tables the ladies who wanted to work with us arrived and we were able to introduce ourselves and explain the purpose of the John Esslemont School and how the children are learning about spiritual and moral principles by putting them into practice via service based projects in the community.

For two hours we all had great fun, making colourful pine cones and pasta angels. Many of the ladies loved singing and telling stories, so in addition to helping the ladies make effective Christmas decorations we all made new friends with both the ladies and the staff at the club. The afternoon closed with a song too, wishing everyone a very happy Christmas. A really great start to the new strategy and format that will give us much confidence to take the next step and involve more people in the next project.

This new strategy and format for children's classes that are "open to all" is a model that any community could use, no matter how few Bahá'í children they may have to start with. By looking outward in a spirit of service to the wider community, using the inclusive subject of the arts, is a sincere and focused way to invite others to join in. Participating in these sorts of projects will allow children, youth and adults to learn more about the Faith and become touched by the love of Bahá'u'lláh. In addition by implementing projects outside the school in the community, the children can learn about the application of the principles of the Faith by actually experiencing the implementation themselves. The people with whom the school interacts in carrying out the projects will also learn about the Faith as they meet the Bahá'ís and their colleagues taking part in the projects. They will hopefully see examples of the principles of the Faith in action and in the many conversations that inevitably take place during such projects, opportunities for real and effective teaching and the application of

many of the lessons and skills learnt in Study Circles will occur.

This is in many ways an experiment, we may make a few mistakes, but this work is being undertaken in a spirit of learning, and the school is confident that the processes that have led to this new approach are those of consultation and focus on the key elements of the Five Year Plan. It feels good and so far it is proving successful. Please keep the John Esslemont School in your thoughts and prayers.

Andrew Goodwin



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