

The story of the evolution of EXPLORE from 1996 to the present*

** written a few years ago now but useful as background*

The Genesis of Explore: In 1996 I got a bee in my bonnet (or, the Lord tapped me on the shoulder?) The bee said “if as a society we think that family life is the basic building block of our society and if marriage is the cornerstone of family life, what are we doing to help our young people prepare for what would probably be the most important decision of their lives – whether or not to get married and if so to whom”?? and, as importantly, if getting married, how to make it last!!!

I started talking to people about this issue and very quickly came to the sad conclusion that the answer to the question posed by the bee was “little or nothing”! However, in carrying out my research I uncovered what to me were some horrific statistics:

- (1) the U.K. had the worst divorce rate of any country in Europe and the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe.
- (2) that 4 in 10 marriages were ending in divorce
- (3) that every week, on average, 3,000 children were experiencing the misery of their parents divorce, another 3,000 the separation of their common law parents.
- (4) that the cost of family breakdown was running in today’s figures (according to Ian Duncan Smith’s Social Justice Working Party) at £44 billion p.a. equivalent to the entire cost of our armed forces.

NOTE: At the Annual Explore Lecture given on 24th September 2009 by H.H. Judge Paul Coleridge Head of the Family Division on the Western Circuit, he said “my prediction would be... that the effects of family breakdown on the life of the nation and on ordinary people in this country will within the next 20 years, be as marked and as destructive as the effects of Global Warming.” He described what came before the courts as a never ending carnival of human misery; a ceaseless river of human distress.

Daunting as the prospect seemed at the time, I felt that I was being called to try to take some action in an attempt to address this situation which no-one else seemed to be making any effort to tackle, I received much encouragement to “have a go” from a number of people, not least from members of staff at the Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, a social science research organisation with which I had been involved for many years. I did however have one big idea. It was immediately obvious that there was no way in which you could teach marriage. But the Big Idea was that maybe, just maybe, married couples had experience of being married which they might be willing to share with young people in a way that young people would find helpful. The Director of the Grubb Institute, Bruce Reed advised that I should write a “Concept Note” which I duly did. This “Concept Note” was taken on board by the Institute and a potential methodology was devised based upon the Institute’s pioneering work on “experiential learning.”

The next step was to establish whether schools would actually be prepared to buy in to such an approach to “relationship education.” A number of schools were approached and positive responses received from Queen Elizabeth’s Grammar School at Faversham in Kent and from Banbury Comprehensive. The Head teacher at

Banbury said that there had been a growing realisation in the field of education that schools could no longer continue simply to impart facts; they had to start talking about values. As she saw it what was being proposed was totally congruent with that conviction. Both schools agreed to act as guinea pigs. A pilot scheme was duly launched. The feed-back from the students at both schools who took part in the trial workshops was encouraging as a result of which Students Exploring Marriage was launched as a Project of the Grubb Institute in 1997.

In 2000 it was decided that the time had come when SEM should cease being a "project" of the Grubb Institute and become a fully fledged entity in its own right. Hence was established the Students Exploring Marriage Trust Ltd., a Registered Charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Charity's AIM was defined as being "to enable young people to explore the realities of marriage in the context of today's society."

The basis on which Charitable Status was granted by the Commissioners was as an EDUCATIONAL CHARITY not as a religious one. Having said that SEMT has a strong Christian Ethos. More recently it was decided that as a name to operate under "Students Exploring Marriage" was too cumbersome, nor did it any longer express what we did in that we were involved with prisons and other institutions in which there were no students. After taking professional advice, the brand name of EXPLORE was adopted.

Since 2000: Since 2000 Explore has worked in some ²⁰⁰~~150~~ schools involving approximately ~~70,000~~ students as well as 15 prisons (mainly Young Offenders Institutions). Demand for Explore's methodology continues to grow and it is anticipated that around 6,000 students will be involved in the 2012/2013 Academic Year. Our aim is to raise this to 10,000 over the next 3 years.

Although most of the schools in which we work are State Secondaries we have very recently been successful in recruiting two "high fliers" from the Private Sector, Wellington College where the Master, Dr Anthony Seldon is one of the leading proponents of the need to teach "well being," and St. Swithuns, one of the Top 10 girl's schools in the country.

Students' Reactions: I wish I had a pound for every time I used to hear, a member of the Grubb Institute, say in an SEMT Trustees Meeting, "I am not hearing the voice of the young people." This section, perhaps the most important, is designed to make that voice be heard.

a) Reports and Evaluations:

After every Explore event students are invited to complete a simple form of Evaluation in which they are asked to rate their experience of the event. It would be normal for these ratings to range between 85% - 95% "Good" + "Very Good"

They are also asked to respond to a handful of simple questions about what they feel they have learned. Copies of two such "Reports & Evaluations" are attached.

Appx I for Bishop Challoner Roman Catholic School, Basingstoke
 Appx II for Wyvern Technology College, Fair Oak.

- b) Appx III a copy of a letter received from a VIth Form Student at Ranelagh School, Bracknell, 2 YEARS AFTER taking part in a workshop.
- c) Appx IV comments by 2 Upper VIth Students (a boy & girl) from Reading Bluecoat School at the Annual Explore Lecture on 11th November 2010.

In no other way could one convey the incredible impact that EXPLORE's methodology can have upon the thoughts and feelings of these young people about marriage and lasting relationships.

Independent Assessment: As Explore's work is essentially qualitative by nature Trustees felt there was a need for an independent assessment and so commissioned the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships to carry out such a survey. Their Report published in March 2006 concluded "that Explore did in fact discharge its mission of "enabling young people to explore the realities of marriage in the context of today's society" and – "that its methodology was greatly appreciated by teachers, students, and couples alike."

Change in the Context: Looking back over the past 17 years it is truly amazing how much the context in which Explore has to operate has shifted. The importance of "emotional literacy," of "well being" and of the R bit of S.R.E. (Sex and Relationship Education) has become increasingly recognised. Students have repeatedly said "we learnt about reproduction in biology, but where do we go to learn about love, trust, respect, forgiveness etc?" all those elements which are such vital ingredients of a lasting relationship.

At a meeting earlier last year at the Department for Education the Head of the National Curriculum expressed keen interest in Explore's methodology and accepted wholeheartedly that the S bit of SRE was comparatively easy to teach including reproduction, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases; it was the R bit which was so much more difficult. Yet it is the R bit which Explore's methodology is uniquely designed to address. In a recent survey 8 out of 10 teachers expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to teach S.R.E.

The Head of PSHE at the John Hanson Community School in Andover, who in his capacity as one of only 2 UNICEF representatives in the UK visits schools all over the Country assures me he has never come across anything comparable to Explore's methodology anywhere.

In Hampshire, Explore (Hampshire)'s methodology has been fully recognised by the County Council's Children's Service Department and the Hampshire Local Community Action Group has been recommended for Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

Explore's methodology and work with young people derived from the Grubb Institute's work on "experiential learning," represents an idea whose time has come – With its emphasis on LOCALNESS; local people taking responsibility for one element and a vital one at that, of the education of students in their area, Explore is

surely entirely the sort of initiative which would find enthusiastic support within David Cameron's idea of the BIG SOCIETY. The final paragraph of the COMMENT column of the December 29th edition of the Daily Telegraph could hardly make the case for Explore's methodology more clearly, and I quote:

"We also report today that the decline of the extended family means that children are searching for adult role models. That problem is not easily solved; but one place young people should certainly look is to the ranks of Britain's indefatigable charity volunteers."

There is a huge market out there. Everywhere Explore goes students welcome the opportunity to learn through the experience of our married couples the ups and downs of married life. **Nine out of ten young people tell us that they expect to have a family of their own one day and to do so in the context of a lasting relationship, probably marriage.** The problem is that they lack the skills and insights to assure themselves of success, especially the approximately 50% who are living in single parent families.

In his book of daily readings, entitled "Bread for the Journey" Henri Nouwen says "community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching each other's wounds." It is from our couples' willingness to share their vulnerability and weakness that students begin to be able to grasp the true values that underlie God's gift of marriage to all peoples for all of time.



Rex Chester
Co-Founder and Hon. President

List of Appendices

- I Record & Evaluation of Half Day Conference at Bishop Challoner School
- II Record & Evaluation of mini HDC at Wyvern Technology College
- III Letter from VIth Form Student at Ranelagh School
- IV Student comments from Reading Bluecoat School

Appendix 1

Record and Evaluation**Record of Event:**

School: Bishop Challoner Roman Catholic School, Basingstoke
 School Contact: Jill Kiddle, Chaplain and John Wright, Head of RE
 Date: Wednesday 7th July 2010

Event: Half Day Conference

Student Group: Year 10
 Pupils: About 130
 Mixed: Boys and Girls

Explore:

Leader:

- Simon Wainman

Co-ordinator:

- Gay Mallam

Adviser Coaches:

- Simon Wainman, Gay Mallam, Christine Smith,
- Steven Green and Tony Wolstenholme

Couples:

- John and Sue Roseblade, Crispin and Anne Drummond, Bruce and Judy Blow
- Martin and Brenda Waring, Hugo and Jean Thomas

Evaluation:

Number of Evaluation Forms Returned: 122

Ratings:

Very good:	65	54%
Good:	56	45%
Average	1	1%

6

Poor:	0	0
Very poor:	0	0
Very good and good totalled:		99%

Evaluation examples

Discoveries and surprises

- Tough times make you stronger
- The importance of words, and how to use them correctly when being open and truthful
- Even after fifty years people can be very much in love and learning more about each other
- Three pillars of a marriage: your friends, your love for each other, and finally sex
- The couples were old on the outside and young on the inside
- Marriage is about give and take and no marriage is perfect
- That religion helps many marriages
- Marriage isn't a walk in the park – you might have to give up material things
- That even if things do go really wrong you can work together to resolve them
- Age is no barrier to love and trust
- Even after divorce you can find someone who is right for you

Disappointments

- That it didn't last all day. I would have liked to meet more couples
- A younger couple in their thirties would have provided a contrast in the generation's view
- That we couldn't prepare questions beforehand
- One or two awkward silences

Differences

- To respect, love and be faithful to your partner
- Make me communicate more in my relationships
- I'm a lot more confident with the idea of marriage and spending my life with one person
- Make sure I don't rush into a relationship
- Hopefully I'll find a long-term relationship
- Made me re-evaluate marriage – they answered everything fully and honestly
- I was totally against marriage because of my parents. I didn't think I could be with one person for so long, but today my views changed
- Having God in the relationship will make it stronger
- The couples waited to have sex and were glad they did – this makes me think differently about sex before marriage
- Spend time together before having children
- Today taught me not to marry someone I don't want to spend the rest of my life with

Questions and issues remaining

- To help me get rid of my selfishness
- Is sex before marriage right?
- Should I follow the Bible or not?
- Can you fall out of love with your partner?
- Would your family and friends give you any financial aid when you started a family?
- How infertility can affect a marriage

Other comments

- It was really interesting. Adults are never open to people of our age and don't talk to us like these couples did
- There should be more sessions like this – it was really helpful
- Thank you to the married couples – it was great – would like another session like this
- A real eye-opener, made me really want to try and work on my relationship with my boyfriend
- Better asking questions than being taught
- It was a great help to have this Explore session because it gives you the chance to ask questions you might not feel comfortable with asking someone you know

Appendix II Record & Evaluation

A Record of event

School /Other ...Wyvern Tech. College, Fair Oak...Date ..18 November 2010...
 Student group Male Female Mixed

Learning event : Half D Conference(Mini)

Participants School Contact Mrs Catherine Hensby tel ...02380 692679.....

Young people: Year Group 10..... Total number participating ..104....

Couples:

1. Jeff & Rosie Pink
- 2...Chris & Jenny Bawtree.....
3. Matthew & Debbie Thomson...
- 4 Hugo & Jean Thomas.....
5. Mark & Jenny Stevens

Adviser-coaches:

- 1 Gay Mallam
- 2 ...Liz Percival.....
- 3 Fran Ross
- 4 ...Joanna Somerville.....
- 5 Stephen Green

Coordinator ...Gay Mallam..... Leader Steve Green.....

B Evaluation based on Evaluation forms

Number of evaluation forms returned ...104.....

Ratings

Very Good ...45...=	43.%	Poor	=	%
Good ...55.. =	53%	Very Poor =	...	%
Average ... 4.. =	4%			

Total V Good/Good= 96.%

Adults = 6

3 Very Good 2 Good

Specific examples

Discoveries and surprises

1. They had been through very tough times, but still have a strong marriage.
2. That the couples were very confident while speaking about their relationship.
3. Religion was a contributing factor. Kids made relationship stronger – was surprised at how many children each couple had.
4. That you have to think more about your partner than yourself. Marriage and kids is hard.
5. Marriage isn't always easy – you have to get through the problems – don't let them linger .
6. That not every relationship is plain sailing.
7. How deep a relationship could be and how they could still be in love after so long.
8. How even though lots of couples split up many stay together, how it doesn't always go smoothly.
9. I just cannot believe the first couple did not have sex before they were married.
10. I have discovered how family has an impact on relationships in how a successful marriage works
11. That both couples were together a fairly short (to me, anyway) time before getting married.
12. The faith and strength the two couples had to get through certain difficulties.
13. That no matter what you should always love and cherish your partner.
14. That people can be together for over 50 years but still feel so strong together.

2. Disappointments

1. Yes, I should have asked more questions.
2. No, only that I wasn't there to listen to the older couple answer questions.
3. No, they were all very open.
4. Would like to have talked to a younger couple.

[most answered No to this question]

3. Differences

1. Made me realise that you have to work at relationships. Marriage often works and the couples trust each other. Have to work through arguments – won't always be what you expect.
2. I won't completely think of myself.
3. I have a better impression on loving someone for so long.
4. To listen to their advice and to know to stick together during a relationship.

5. Although, before this session, I had already established I would never separate from my future partner, this conference has helped me to think about the problems that could occur and prepare myself for them.

6. Think more about things – know that you need to stay very close.

7. To not give up on everything and try your hardest.

8. Don't go to bed on an argument.

9. I have more opinions about marriage, not just my parents and grandparents.

10. I have a better and more confident view on marriage now .

11. How important it is to keep a good relationship/marriage. Not to get married too young.

12. It makes me appreciate life more

4. Questions and issues remaining

1. Is it sometimes difficult to 'love' your partner well into marriage? Is it awkward between the couple at the beginning of the relationship?

2. About divorced couples and how it feels to go through it?

3. How do overcome your fears on thinking the other person might go off with someone else?

4. Do you get along with each other's family?

5. Other comments of the young people

1. It was very interesting and surprising

2. Great fun. Amazing new experience to have at school.

3. I suggest that every student our age should undergo one of these lessons at least.

4. Marriage hasn't got any easier or harder. People just need to be more willing to resolve their differences, to avoid breakups .

5. Very enjoyable – good to hear from people who have had challenges in their marriages.

6. That marriage is not anything like I expected, there's a lot of work and it isn't a walkover

7. I am happy to have had the chance to ask questions.

8. It was a very good experience – I enjoyed it a lot

9. I liked how the couples expanded on their answers, not just Yes & No answers.

10. I love how the older couple are still kids at heart and how they have been through near death but are still happy together.

11. It was very useful and insightful.

12 They were all very nice people.

Appendix III

Letter from Laura Rae Sixth Form Student at Ranelagh School, Bracknell, 2 years after taking part in a Workshop

SEM - 2 Years On.

April 2005

When I think back to the days of Sixth Form at Ranelagh, I mostly sit there and smile - partly with happy memories and partly with bemusement that I actually managed to complete my A Levels.

I took on the role of SEM Coordinator for Ranelagh at the start of my final year. At first I had the impression that SEM was going to be something that would enable me to understand marriage a bit more, do something that was totally different to anything that had been previously offered to our year group and to have the chance to really get to grips with the questions that had been bugging me. How could people over the age of 30 have sex? How could two people who married at 20 know that they were going to be together until they were 90? What happens to a marriage after a couple have children? The list was seemingly endless, and I did feel sorry for some of our couples, who, after a few sessions were really getting bombarded with questions that we really wanted to know, rather than the politically correct questions that we felt we should ask. (Where did you meet?)

We had a group of about 10 students from years 11 and 12, and although we mostly hadn't spoken before, we became strangely connected after the sessions, as if we had been privy to some great secret. Looking back now, the thing that has struck me the most was our ignorance, how we thought we knew all about relationships when in reality we were dumbfounded to realise we knew next to nothing.

The best thing about SEM was the knowledge that it gave me; it was almost like a crash course for life in some ways. The fact that we could ask anything, face to face with real couples, was quite empowering. SEM had a huge impact on my life; I would wholeheartedly recommend it to any student who has ever wondered about how relationships work in reality.

Appendix IV

Student comments from Reading Bluecoat School

Annual Explore Lecture 11.11.2010

Two Upper 6th students spoke of their experiences of the Explore Workshops, the previous year:

- We had never had any comparable experience and were a little uncomfortable and awkward until the first question....
- Couples were really open and easy going, expanding their answers, which prompted us to ask more questions and conversation flowed
- We were able to say what we wanted and ask entirely from our own agenda, without feeling judged
- We discovered different family dynamics and how each family builds its own rules and morals
- We realised that arguments occur in healthy, loving marriages and overcoming difficulties was a normal part of getting on
- One couple talked about nearly splitting up but they kept at it and made it work, proving to us that we shouldn't just give up, but need to persevere
- It surprised us to meet couples who had been together for so long and were still madly in love, finishing each other's sentences!
- It helped to build bonds within our student group
- It was the right age for us (Lower 6th) as many were thinking about or were in relationships
- It gave us a good sense of how they met and how they knew when was the right time to get married or have children
- It opened up further discussion informally amongst students and gave us life experiences to learn from...

Lucy & George