
Culture clashes



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How many times have you heard something like this? “Arab boys fight: that’s just the way they are!” Or how about, “Asians and blacks just don’t get on”. And how would you respond to this? “Why do I have to tick the box that says ‘African’? I’ve never been there!”

These are all remarks from Year 11 pupils taking part in a session aimed at getting young people to explore their understanding of equality and diversity. Run by brap, the project is called ‘One Birmingham: Your Future’ and over the course of three years it has engaged with over 800 young people across 25 different agencies.

As part of the project, brap ran a series of workshops exploring themes such as citizenship, stereotypes and discrimination, while also looking for more unconventional means of engagement such as holding a screening of the critically acclaimed film *Kidulthood* with a discussion event afterwards. Although these comments come from early participants, anyone who works with young people knows the casual and breezy racism displayed here was to be an indication of the statements to come.

In a 2005 survey conducted for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹, 24% of young people openly admitted to disliking certain community groups – mainly Muslims and newer migrant communities from Somalia and Poland. At the same time, the level of racist incidents in schools has steadily increased in many local authority areas.

Brap’s experiences through this project have shown that whilst many young people have a very sophisticated understanding of inter-ethnic conflicts and racism, many others unthinkingly assume the attitudes and prejudices of their families and peers. And this prejudice is not just limited to other ethnicities: young people also have strong negative opinions about women; lesbian, gay and bisexual people; asylum seekers; and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

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The One Birmingham: Your Future project has looked at the causes of these attitudes and, as you might expect, they are complex. They ranged from the media representation of certain ethnic groups to the aspirations and expectations of the poorest young people. Nevertheless, it is clear that a lot of prejudicial and discriminatory thinking goes unchallenged by many parents, teachers and youth workers because they lack the confidence to confront what they see as the norms of a particular culture.

What also stops these experienced public and third sector workers from challenging homophobic, racist and sexist comments is the fear that such interference will be labelled insensitive or authoritarian, or might itself be seen as discriminatory. Challenging racist or homophobic remarks can be a challenge in itself and many people fear that they will get things wrong.

Part of the problem is that for too long society has been encouraged to think that treating people equally means treating them differently; we’ve believed that in tackling prejudice against certain people, we should accommodate their own. For example, research from the NSPCC last year revealed that some police officers and social workers occasionally overlooked cases of domestic violence involving Asian families for fear of how they would be perceived. It is this misguided approach to respecting certain perceived cultural practices that has sent a mixed message to young people who have to draw their own lines between upholding and understanding equality and yet living by discriminatory practices in their own culture.

Whilst it is important that different cultural norms are recognised, it is equally important that we remove the uncertainty about how to explain to communities that the rights of individuals are not ‘trumped’ by tradition and cultural practices. In some cases, this will involve challenging certain prevailing attitudes – for example prejudices against particular ethnic groups or homosexuals, or beliefs about religious, as opposed to state, law.

Diane Rutherford, Co-ordinator for the One Birmingham: Your Future project, believes:

“It’s really important to think about what values and rights we want young people to live by. I know how refreshing it is for people to hear that religions and cultures aren’t just about absolutes; there is room for discussion, learning and choice. If we can help young people to develop the skills to do this then more will recognise and challenge discrimination.”

Undoubtedly helping young people to do this will require certain skills, including tact, an understanding of equalities issues and the facility to help young people face up to their own prejudices and preconceptions. At the moment no such support or training for youth workers exists in any systemic or comprehensive fashion. But if we are to ensure that young people are the creators, rather than the inheritors, of a fair and equitable society, this is something that needs urgent attention.

For more information about brap and the One Birmingham: Your Future project, please email: brap@brap.org.uk

¹ *Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005)