

The Swapping Cultures Initiative: valuing differences – learning to live together

Marcus Lau, Randle Lewis and Rosemin Najmudin describe a pilot initiative designed to develop and foster amongst young people a spirit of understanding, tolerance and respect in and between diverse communities and share learning from the project.

The Swapping Cultures Initiative was developed as a direct response to the Government's Community Cohesion Agenda in tackling issues relating to the segregation and polarization of communities and the disturbances which occurred in the north of England in the summer of 2001.

With the government's agenda in mind, Minorities of Europe, a small charity based in Coventry, organised a series of conferences to consult with young people on the reasons for racial tension and discord within communities. As a result of these conferences, young people raised key points as to why they thought such disturbances occurred:

- lack of understanding and awareness of others from a different culture or background
- lack of group interaction and opportunities for communication
- feeling of threat and uncertainty
- lack of respect towards a different community and/or culture
- feeling of intrusion and invasion of privacy
- unwillingness to accept a new community group, especially those who have come from other countries

Using these key points, numerous consultations were organised with youth workers, teachers and young people to look at what actions could be taken or if there were ideas available to counteract some of the issues stated above.

The consultation brought to light the idea of a simple model that encourages young people to talk and get to know each other, sharing their experiences, cultures and traditions, learning each other's similarities and differences and eventually working together on a common project. The idea would use non-formal and intercultural learning techniques based on the principles of communication, listening, negotiating and reflecting.

The 'Beyond Tolerance' model as it is now known, also enables young people to appreciate, respect and value their own cultures as well as others and to embrace difference and diversity as an asset to our society. How the model achieves this is explained as follows:

Stage One – face to face

Two people using a pre-designed questionnaire find out more about each other by following questions designed by teachers, practitioners or youth workers. The questions engage two people in a dialogue by asking simple, searching and challenging social and personal questions such as: 'What is your favourite colour and why?', 'What do you look for in

a friend?', 'What gives you inner peace?', 'Have you experienced discrimination?'

Stage Two – Same, similar, different

Time is allocated for the individuals to reflect on and absorb what they have heard or learnt about each other. This reinforces their understanding and knowledge of each other's personalities, their similarities and differences.

Stage Three – Swapping Cultures

This part of the exercise brings two pairs together and ensures that what is understood of the first partner is transferred accurately to the new partner from the other pair. In this exercise, the individual represents their first partner and not themselves.

Stage Four – Working Together

After learning about one partner and then learning about another through a third person, the two pairs are grouped and given a task which must be completed as a team. The group is encouraged to share their individual ideas, but must present one final idea agreed by all the members.

Following the success of a funding application, Minorities of Europe was commissioned to undertake an eighteen-month pilot to research the effectiveness of the Beyond Tolerance model. The project brought together key stakeholders from private, public and voluntary sectors to advise and oversee the project (April 03 – December 04), which involved over two thousand young people aged eight to twenty-four in twenty-five different settings such as schools, youth clubs and rural locations within Coventry and Warwickshire. The Beyond Tolerance model was also trialled with youth leaders from across Europe during our European activities in Budapest, Strasbourg, Romania and Poland.

The Swapping Cultures Project is a strategic initiative that provides a unique, flexible and secure approach to raising people's awareness, understanding, knowledge and value of diversity within communities. It aims to make informal education fun and enjoyable and at the same time, develop and foster amongst young people a spirit of understanding, tolerance and respect in and between diverse communities.

The results of the eighteen-month pilot exceeded all expectations. Findings (www.moe-online.com) indicated maturity and unexpectedly high levels of understanding of terms such as diversity, culture and discrimination amongst children as young as eight years old. Other findings include:

Common interests: Young people from diverse cultures and backgrounds will not necessarily talk to one another without

identifying a purpose or a common topic of interest. Therefore, the Swapping Cultures Initiative uses the 'Beyond Tolerance' model as its tool to give young people a common goal, a focus through which they soon became comfortable in each other's presence.

Self awareness: With increasing emphasis on immigration and the integration of cultures, British young people are more aware of the cultures in their society, but may not always fully understand or celebrate their own culture. Young people were encouraged to become more aware of this.

Safe environment: By providing 'ice-breakers', the model enabled young people to interview and interact with each other comfortably. Session facilitators were also present to act as a safety net by ensuring the well-being of all participants. Preparatory work such as 'circle time' before the main workshop added greatly to the value of the process.

Communication and interpersonal skills: The structure and composition of exercises allows young people to communicate in an informal and fun manner. With appropriate support and encouragement, young people felt comfortable even when discussing sensitive issues such as bullying and discrimination.

Barriers: Interactions between participants were facilitated by the use of questionnaires and through participation in focus groups. However, individuals differed in preferred approaches and in abilities (writing, public speaking, etc). Therefore, there is a need to provide other types of interactive media such as the use of multimedia debates and small group work

Level of understanding: The depth of understanding of the issues raised shown by even the youngest children surprised those running the workshops. Perhaps adults commonly underestimate the knowledge and abilities of children and young people, and as a result, we underestimate and undervalue their potential.

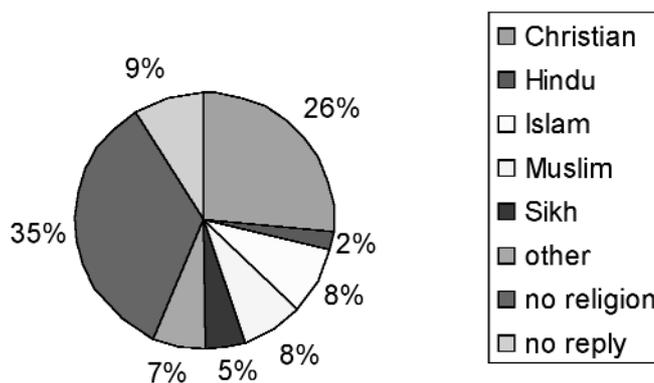
Support between young people: The Swapping Culture workshops were also delivered to community groups where English was not a first language. Integrating groups of differing abilities enabled some to report a sense of worth and appreciation through helping others in need. By allowing young people to engage with issues of direct relevance to them, we helped them to understand and respond to a variety of topics.

Of all the participants who took part in the pilot study, 35% stated that they had no religious beliefs, 26% were Christians and 8% Islam (with another 8% stating Muslim as their religion).

In terms of gender, 49% were male, 47% female and 4% did not complete this question

Further to the success of the pilot study, the Swapping Cultures initiative has now started its second phase after securing a three-year funding to develop Community Cohesion Champions. This will include boroughs in London (Waltham Forest, Lewisham), West Midlands (Coventry,

Percentage Distribution by religion amongst total participant



Warwickshire, Birmingham) and East Midlands (Leicester). The idea of the second phase is to utilise community youth leaders, teachers and youth workers by providing training on the delivery of Swapping Cultures workshops so that they are able to deliver training sessions to volunteers in all sectors of the community. This will allow the full potential of the Beyond Tolerance model to be realised and extended to as many young people as possible, securing its sustainability and simultaneously, working towards being mainstreamed into statutory, private and voluntary sectors.

Bibliography

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Marcus Lau is the National Co-ordinator for the Swapping Cultures initiative and the Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Officer within Minorities of Europe. marcus_kw_lau@yahoo.co.uk

Randle Lewis is currently a Personal Adviser with Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions Service and a member of the Chartered Management Institute, British Psychological Society and Institute of Careers Guidance. randle.lewis@btinternet.com

Dr. Rosemin Najmudin is an associate research fellow at London South Bank University. She freelances both in the UK and overseas in development education and international education, specialising in issues directly related the wider black and minority communities. She has been working with MoE as an independent project adviser. roseminnajmudin@onetel.com

The full report of the Swapping Cultures Pilot and further information about **Minorities of Europe** can be found on: www.moe-online.com.