

Report summary

Diversity and Dialogue: Building better understanding between young people living in a multi-faith society.

This report looks at how to build better understanding between young people from different faiths and backgrounds growing up in Britain today. It examines the experiences and attitudes of young people living in multi-faith environments, beginning with an analysis of interviews with 124 young people.

The report outlines the need to create more spaces where young people with different beliefs can come together and share their beliefs and points of view. It gives an overview of interfaith work already taking place in both school and youth work settings and sets out practical ideas and case studies to inspire and support the development of more dialogue projects. The report is informed by the Diversity and Dialogue project, which analysed over 100 UK initiatives already working to bring young people from different faiths and backgrounds together. Some of the most innovative examples are highlighted.

Diversity and Dialogue has worked directly with over 300 young people in the North West, South East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber. Practical projects involved young people from all of the major world faith traditions and developed different models of youth dialogue. Highlights included creating a multi-faith trail around the British Museum, linking schools to campaign on global issues and holding a youth conference to discuss multi-faith living.

Key findings: Young people's views

- The young people in our sample attended multi-faith schools and had opportunities to build friendships with people from a wide range of faiths and backgrounds. Almost all agreed that their experiences had led them to value diversity and get beyond stereotypes and prejudice. **They appreciated the chance to learn from people with different beliefs.**
- Most were in favour of multi-faith education because they feared that a lack of contact would lead to misunderstanding and fear between different groups. Similarly, most felt that **interfaith relations were far better in their schools than in the wider world**, because outside school people were more segregated and judgmental.
- In addition to personal interaction, some acknowledged the **importance of formal learning** about different faiths and values, for example through Religious Education.
- The (predominantly white) **non-religious young people were often least comfortable** discussing beliefs and values, both because they worried about causing offence to others and because they were unclear about their own beliefs and moral framework.
- The young people emphasised how integrated they were in comparison to their parents' generation. However, many still felt that **relations** between those from different faiths and backgrounds **would get worse in the future**.
- Many felt powerless to prevent the escalation of conflicts and prejudice, fuelled by global and political tensions. They emphasised issues such as the war in Iraq and their **negative impact on community relations**. The young people often mistrusted the media and government. They lacked information and space to consider complex issues.

'The only cause of conflict is not knowing. If you're completely oblivious to other religions then you won't understand. They are going to be alien to you and you won't like them.'

Non-religious female, aged 14

'If religion comes up then we debate it and talk, but then we say 'Ok, you think that and I think this' but we still respect each other.'

Sikh male, age 15

'There's no separation between the different religions in the school... You're not exactly a Muslim or a Christian or a Sikh child, you're just a child in the school.'

Muslim female, aged 15

The report has identified two key components in building a successful multi-faith society:

- a) Ensuring that young people have opportunities to meet and to form constructive relationships with people from other faiths and backgrounds.
- b) Developing young people's skills to share their own beliefs and values and to understand and respect those of other people.

Key findings: Building understanding in schools

- **Schools face different challenges** depending on their religious make-up and their location. Multi-faith schools automatically give opportunities for young people to build friendships across faith boundaries. However, they still need to ensure that young people understand and respect both their own and other people's beliefs.
- All schools should create **more spaces where students can discuss complex local, global, moral and political issues** and learn to understand different religious and secular viewpoints.
- **Religious education and Citizenship** offer the most obvious spaces for discussing faith and values. However, at present the level of dialogue is often dependent on the commitment of individual teachers.
- Single and majority faith schools may face challenges in providing their students with **first hand experience of different religions** and in dismantling stereotypes. There can be difficulties persuading less diverse schools of the relevance of interfaith work and consequently, teachers often lack support in setting up dialogue projects.
- School linking projects between schools with different religious and ethnic make-ups are still rare in England and are mainly at primary level. **Linking projects can be an important first step** in providing opportunities for young people from different faiths and backgrounds to meet.

Key findings: Building understanding outside in the community

- Youth interfaith work is still at an incipient stage, but it is attracting increasing interest and **rapidly gaining momentum**.
- **Increased government and other funding** is helping to finance a growing number of projects. The National Youth Agency and other youth organisations are also pressing for a greater emphasis on social cohesion and religious sensitivity within wider youth work.
- Projects that build understanding between young people from different faiths are being **initiated by adult interfaith bodies as well as by youth organisations**. They tend to fall into two categories:
 - Interfaith dialogue groups or one-off events which tend to involve articulate, motivated young people
 - social cohesion projects that often focus their work on skills-building in divided communities.

Both should be expanded and encouraged, but there is also a need for **more sustained interfaith youth projects**, involving a wider range of young people.

- A **wider range of youth organisations and public institutions should get involved** with promoting positive interfaith relations. These could include museums, theatres, town halls as well as youth and community groups.
- Diversity and Dialogue's practical projects have experimented with different dialogue models. They indicate that sustained youth projects need a focus. **Campaigns on global issues or local social action projects** can be an effective way to get young people working together. They engage young people and empower them to bring about positive change.
- It is important to **let young people lead** their own projects. However, it is also worth taking time to **build relationships with adult faith organisations**, as this will help to widen the impact of projects.

Diversity and Dialogue – background

Diversity and Dialogue is a partnership project between the following organisations:

CAFOD, Christian Aid, Citizenship Foundation, Islamic Relief, the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, Muslim Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Jewish Aid

The directors of these Christian, Jewish, Muslim and secular organisations came together in July 2002 to discuss the aftermath of September 11th and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. They were concerned about the impact that these events were having on local community relations. In response, they committed to working together on the Diversity and Dialogue project.

The premise of the project is that if young people have opportunities to form strong relationships and understand each other's beliefs, then events from elsewhere will be less likely to have a negative impact on their attitudes to one another. Therefore the project has worked in the UK to investigate ways to build better understanding among young people. It has brought young people with different beliefs together to work on constructive projects addressing local and global issues. Whilst it recognises that a wide range of factors can cause barriers to forming constructive relationships, it has focused particularly on the impact of global events and politics on local community relations.

Diversity and Dialogue has been set against a backdrop of increasing political, media and public interest in the role that religion plays in our society and our identities. This has run alongside escalating tensions between those with different beliefs at a global level. The need for dialogue and co-operation between young people from different backgrounds has become even more acute. Encouragingly, Diversity and Dialogue has found great commitment to building a successful multi-faith society among the schools, community groups, institutions and of course, young people, that we have worked with during the project.

For **more information** about the project, please visit www.diversityanddialogue.org.uk
The site contains free educational resources, an online directory of youth interfaith projects and much more.

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:

