

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

Breaking Barriers

“The moment you think about it, it’s too late”

Many of us wonder how to make a difference in the face of our own and other people’s needs and we are often told we are failing when a crisis happens. We hear urgent calls for the need to mend our ‘broken society’ for ‘solidarity’ and ‘connection’ - but there are people who are responding to situations that could become crises everyday and preventing them from happening in the first place. There are and always have been individuals trying to make it easier for us all to live together, by reaching out, confronting fears, supporting the most vulnerable people and forcing us to think about conflicts over history, identity and belonging. Many young people have become agents of change. Who are they? And how successful do they feel are they?

Sometimes an individual’s decision to participate can make all the difference.

Jeremy Vine, BBC reporter:

“I was sitting on the tube next to an attractive young woman who was reading a magazine and the guy opposite had obviously taken an interest in her, ‘Hello darling give us a smile, it’s not that bad...’ Then he leaned forward and started tapping her knee and she shrank back in her seat. I tutted and lifted my magazine higher...all the passengers on the tube were aware...The train stops, the thug gets off, we’re all quite happy, another passenger flicks him a V sign then the disaster happens! The doors open again, the thug runs back on, he’s 6’ 3, his muscles are flexing against the window and he just starts beating seven bells out of the passenger, which when you see that sort of violence is very very nasty. His fist went into the side of the guy’s head, blood spurts out, another fist, the guy goes down and I did nothing. It was terrible...It was fight or sit there and watch and I chose to sit there and watch and I’ve replayed it many many times and I’m very unhappy I did that...and I’ve resolved that if I see a similar situation, I will react with unmitigated ferocity...The moment you think about it, it’s too late. I had an incident on the bus the other day when a passenger got on and he was causing the driver trouble by standing near the window and he refused to move back so the driver had to come out. In the end he moved to the back of the bus and he said, ‘as far as I’m concerned I can stand there.’ And I said, ‘The bus driver is a public servant and this is his bus...behave yourself’. As soon as I said that, everyone flew at the guy including an old woman who said, ‘Get off the bus! Now!’ Everyone was waiting for somebody to say something...so you’re looking for that moment that gives everyone permission.’ (*Broadcasting House, BBC Radio 4 19.08.07*)

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The Marcus Lipton Youth Centre is in Lambeth, south London, at the centre of a large number of council estates and clear territorial boundaries which create 'postcode warfare'. For years the youth centre was taken over by older men and it developed a reputation for violence and drugs. No-one could control it. In 2006 Renee was asked to manage the centre and since then she and her team (Myrtle, Johnathan, Kyle, Damien and Pedro) have transformed the aims and image of the club.

"We try to encourage young people excluded from school and other youth clubs to come here. We care about them and what they do and we say, 'We want you to come here and make a fresh start. We want to include you, we respect you but there are rules. We're giving you an opportunity to show yourself as you really want to be.' Often, their behaviour has never been challenged. I've been in court because someone threatened to shoot me, I've been punched. But I have such a strong sense of what's right, of knowing how wrong it is for young people to bully or be bullied. We get to know the leaders. Not to make friends with them, but to get their respect, so they see we're OK human beings."

The way Renee works is an outcome of her own experience and history:

'I've had years of being discriminated against as a black woman. I'm well travelled and very aware of the way I was brought up and the way I think I should have been brought up. I've made 101 mistakes on the way. It's been a long journey and I've learned to stand my ground. If you continue to exclude young people then how do you change anything? They are already struggling to fit in because they're young. This is what I believe. This is who I am and where I come from. I said to the team, 'Let's do this in a different way.' It's about showing genuine respect to all human beings.

In 2007 the Centre was awarded a significant grant by the Youth Opportunities Fund in order to run the Breaking Barriers project which supports young people who want to move away from gang life.

"When the young people first came to us, they still did postcode rivalry stuff, wearing different colour bandanas, T-shirts with SW2, SW9 etc. on them. That identity is strong. We stopped all that. They stuck to their groups though and found different areas in the centre to stand in. Staff had to disrupt that as well, the integration wasn't smooth, we had to work hard.

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We all went away for a residential weekend and our message was, 'You're going to need each other'. At first they were hesitant and tried to stick to their known groups but we split them up, mixed them in different bedrooms. They soon got to know each other as people, friends, working together in a neutral place. They could just be young people, have fun, play, talk to anyone, mix with anyone. They worked out they had the same interests - in weight-training, football. They surprised themselves, people from different postcodes started helping each other.

We discussed gangs head on. They talked about a lack of a family life. Some have parents but feel no love so the gang becomes a sort of family where they feel safe. They see a lot of rubbish from American gangster films...about living in a ghetto, having no hope, they want money but are not prepared to work for it. They want it **now!** In a gang they believe they can access all that, they feel strength in numbers, they feel more powerful in a gang of 12 and they think that no-one can trouble them. They don't care. They have their own morality. Young people are always looking over their shoulder. They can be on the street 17 hours a day and in the centre for 3 hours. The street is more powerful, more inviting.

But some feel comfortable at the Centre. We give them 'professional love' and it has become a really important part of their life. According to one young man, Conrad, 'I feel safe. The staff looks after us, give us stuff to do so we're not on the streets.'

They don't have a clear sense of who they are and what they can offer. They don't know where to start. They are children. They want to change their lives but they have no confidence to go into a shop, look for vacancies, fill in application forms, they don't have enough social skills. Here we listen and they can express themselves. It's the workers, not the facilities they come for. But we're just youth workers, our roles are limited. Other people are needed too. Welfare, probation services, social workers. We need to offer more positive alternatives, opportunities for young people to be trained and to work.'

Discussion:

This reading focuses on prevention as an act of participation. What does prevention mean to you? Identify it in one of the examples from above.

The first reading refers to the fact that too often we are waiting for that big moment, for someone else to act, for someone to "give permission." What were the opportunities for prevention in that story?

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Earlier readings have focused on identity and belonging. People have talked about the many identities they have and have provided examples of ways that they belong to groups, places, and organisations. In this piece, a youth worker reflects on the fact that the young people who come to the centre don't know who they are and how they are looking for a sense of belonging in gangs and on the streets. How are the youth workers trying to address these issues? What specific steps have they taken to create a sense of belonging? If you were advising the youth workers on how to assess their success, what would you tell them to look for and why?