

Are you saying I'm racist?

Zero-tolerance approaches to racism are the norm. But do they work? **Sioned Churchill** looks at the lessons learnt from a six year project across three London boroughs.

Racial violence and harassment continues to be a serious problem in Britain. The BBC recently reported that there were more than 87,000 racist incidents in Britain's schools and many more go unreported. Racial abuse can take various forms: bullying, name-calling and harassment to more extreme forms of violence. When this violence and abuse is motivated by hate and targets particular groups because of what they look like, their faith or where they come from, it can be a traumatic experience.



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But whose responsibility is it to undertake prevention work, and what works when trying to change deeply entrenched racist attitudes? In three areas of London work with young people was carried out to develop greater insights and new approaches to preventing racist violence in both schools and communities over a six-year period. Its conclusions challenge the prevailing practice of ‘zero tolerance’ as an adequate response to tackling racism in work with young people (e.g. by teachers excluding pupils for such behaviour from the class) as it fails to address the underlying causes of their attitudes and behaviour. There is little reason to believe that reactive and repressive responses will bring about the necessary change. A more proactive and preventative approach is needed.

Setting up the project

The Preventing Racist Violence Initiative was established in response to research published by the **Runnymede Trust: Preventing Racist Violence – Work with Actual and Potential Perpetrators (2005)** which identified that although young people (and especially young men) predominantly perpetrate racist violence, almost all work in this field over recent decades has concentrated on supporting victims and there has been virtually no work undertaken with young people specifically to prevent racist violence.

In response to the findings and recommendations of the Runnymede report, the **Trust for London**, an independent grant-making Trust, invested funds in a special initiative to pilot work on preventing racist violence. Work started in 2006 when three organisations - **Working With Men**, **Leap Confronting Conflict** and **Searchlight Educational Trust** - were funded, initially over a three-year period (which was subsequently extended), to develop projects in three areas of London: Thamesmead, Bexley and Barking & Dagenham.

These areas were by no means typical of London or of the country as a whole but they had all experienced economic and demographic change which had disturbed established social patterns resulting in changes in inter-ethnic relations. When this occurs ethnic differences often became more salient and sensitive with the risk that support for right-wing and other extremist groups may grow. These trends are taking place in many parts of Britain and are likely to become increasingly prominent in coming years. It is, therefore, essential to work with those young people whose attitudes and interactions will determine whether or not different social groups will integrate successfully in the decades ahead.

Each of the three organisations worked in different ways but met regularly to share their experience and learning. The work was evaluated by the Runnymede Trust which helped draw out the themes and challenges of this work. The individual projects also benefited greatly from the experience of the lead youth worker of the pioneering Bede Anti-Racist Youth Project, carried out over three years in Bermondsey in South London in the mid-1990s, which is still the only fully-documented example of a youth-work project aimed at preventing racist violence among young people in Britain.

The projects

Working With Men had extensive experience of working directly with young people on personal, conflict-resolution and identity issues, and drew on this in establishing a project for a full-time youth worker to undertake independent work (under the aegis of Greenwich Youth Service) in the Thamesmead area of South East London. **Working With Men** implemented this plan with a single experienced youth worker who engaged with young people either through clubs or on the street, and building relationships with them to explore issues, challenge attitudes, and bring them into contact with young people from other groups and neighbouring areas. He also undertook extensive work with young people on race and identity issues in the local secondary school and a nearby further education college.

The outcomes of this work included:

- Evidence of changing attitudes of young people engaged in the project – for example, groups of young people who had previously been hostile to each other formed a football team and exchanged mobile numbers

What young people at the project said....	
Before participation	After participation
<p>“They shouldn’t come here and act like they own the place.”</p> <p>“There are loads of fights and stabbings coz there are too many black people in this country, they’re taking over. They’re building new houses just for them.”</p> <p>“They shouldn’t come here and act like they own the place.”</p> <p>“There are loads of fights and stabbings coz there are too many black people in this country, they’re taking over. They’re building new houses just for them.”</p>	<p>“The discussions were good. I feel differently about other people (who I don’t know) now.”</p> <p>“You’ve made me want to be part of something positive, not negative.”</p> <p>“When people use violence they have lost the argument.”</p>

- 31 of the boys aged between 11 and 12, who participated in a programme designed to change boys’ views on identity (e.g., stereotypes, racism), showed a significant increase in their understanding of identity. This change was evident through both the participant questionnaire responses and the teacher’s observations.
- Sustaining the interest and involvement of young people in a range of activities related to self-awareness and identity, and giving them skills in anger management, conflict resolution and self-defence.
- The evaluation showed a significant change in attitude and reduced risk of exclusion. Attitudes were measured, pre-intervention, immediately after the intervention and then again, six weeks after completion; teachers also provided observations. So far 8 groups have attended the programmes and from those groups, 4 boys have received 1-1 support and none has been excluded due to racism.

Leap Confronting Conflict, is an established training and consultancy organisation working with young people, focused particularly on empowerment and participation especially by means of peer education and mentoring programmes. Leap adapted their youth-led approach in partnership with the Youth Service in the London Borough of Bexley and recruited and trained a group of young volunteers as peer educators from across the area. These groups have subsequently undertaken a variety of initiatives around racism and identity in their local areas. More recently, Leap has introduced their peer education approach to these issues into a local secondary school and a Pupil Referral Unit, where approaches and materials were adapted to the different strengths and needs of this client group.

The outcomes of this work included:

- Training to address racism by using ‘dangerous conversations in safe spaces’ to raise awareness and develop personal skills. Participants reported the following outcomes:
 - 93per cent improved their understanding of their own identity, with the average change an increase of 40 per cent
 - 87per cent reported an increased appreciation of others’ identities, with an average improvement of 30 per cent

- 93 per cent felt more able to challenge prejudice, with an average improvement of 38 per cent

“I have started to consider how things I say may affect other people. I understand more that individual people have different identities. I know things about myself that can cause conflict but that can also help to solve conflict” – Year 9 student

- Students at Bexleyheath Academy drew up a racism and identity awareness strategy and implemented. 14 Students from years 9 and 10 were trained to deliver workshops to their peers and engaged 300 students in their own and other local schools. They also hosted a community engagement event attended by 80 members of the local community, including local police, community groups and parents.
- Young people at a Pupil Referral Unit delivered identity and conflict workshops to 127 year 7 students in a local secondary school. The work is still being evaluated but it has received endorsements from parents. One said: “We’ve been over the moon that she [young person] has been able to complete something like this programme, especially with her Asperger’s syndrome. For her to go anywhere new, meet anyone new, do anything new and finish it is a huge achievement for her, and more difficult than for other people, but she’s really enjoyed it and she’s proud of herself. After the peer education sessions she came home and told me all about it – she was petrified but she said ‘I can’t believe I done it, Mum!’. It’s done her confidence the world of good, because now she can see that she can actually do things if she tries.”

Searchlight Educational Trust is the educational arm of the well-established monitoring and campaigning anti-racist organisation Searchlight. The trust extended its existing community-based work in the Barking & Dagenham area of East London to focus more directly on working with young people, and especially to prevent their becoming influenced by or involved with the BNP. **Searchlight Educational Trust** used sporting activities (including a borough-wide football tournament) as a foundation for educational work around racism with young people and bringing together those from different areas and groups. The trust’s development worker also undertook face-to-face work with groups of young people on local estates, as well as working with a local school. One of the main aims of the work was to combat the influence of the BNP and political extremism among young people in the run-up to the May 2010 elections.

The outcomes of this work included:

- Successful use of football and other sports to engage white youngsters in awareness-raising and anti-racist activities
- Demonstration that community-based, overtly anti-racist work with young people in established white communities can be viable and can impact attitudes and behavior
- Demonstration that sharing of personal experience of involvement in right-wing extremism can be a powerful tool for awareness raising and attitude change among young people.

key lessons for successful prevention strategies

Importance of community and local contexts

Racist violence does not take place in isolation. The most immediate influence on young people’s attitudes and behaviour is their families and peer groups. There may be considerable disjunction between these two, with young people growing up in ethnically mixed schools and with mixed friendship among their own age group, yet returning home daily to families expressing racism. So for prevention to be effective, projects must take account of the social context within which potential perpetrators live and operate and have a clear understanding of how attitudes in wider society

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may contribute to violence. Work on racism, identity and conflict prevention requires sensitivity to these factors and youth or community workers need the skills to handle personal development in these contexts.

Identifying 'at risk' individuals or groups

Schools and youth agencies provide the opportunity to reach a wide range of young people. Insofar as all young people are seen as 'at risk', programmes that address racism, identity and conflict-resolution with the full range of young people will be potentially beneficial. Both schools and youth agencies will also have information about young people who have been involved in conflict and anti-social behaviour and may be aware of the presence of a racial dimension in some cases. This provides an opportunity for more immediately 'at risk' young people to be identified, as well as a potential organisational context within which work with them may be developed.

The importance of identity

All the projects found that working around issues of identity has been productive, including exploring with them the roots of identity, how it is formed, how it influences their lives, how it is perceived and constructed, and its relations with issues such as territorialism, nationalism and racism. This allows young people to increase their awareness of their feelings around these issues, and how they may influence their behaviour.

Different youth work approaches

Both across and within the projects, a wide variety of methods have been used, partly reflecting the different approaches the projects tend to use in their work more generally, and partly reflecting the choices that have been made by project workers with regard to the character and size of the groups they are working with, their ages and circumstances, the contexts, and their specific objectives and the stage of development of their relations with them.

Examples of methods for awareness-raising and focusing on identity/conflict have included exercises, group discussions, specific projects, and one-to-one sessions. In one particular project examined, an experienced independent youth worker began by using two local youth clubs as a source for contacting and then building up relationships with groups of young people so that he could in due course work with them on issues around racism. To engage them he used a variety of methods, ranging from regular informal contact to formal projects focusing on activities such as football, music and graffiti art.

By building up their trust in him over time, he was able to direct discussions into sensitive areas such as racism and racist violence which some had been involved in. He also ran workshops with them on conflict-resolution and identity issues, sometimes using films and videos addressing the theme of racism. In addition, he used some of the projects to take them outside their own 'safe' local territories and to meet groups of young people elsewhere, thus breaking down both territorial and ethnic boundaries, and their associated stereotypes and defensive attitudes.

These experiences led many young people to question and reflect on their existing stereotyping of other groups, to overcome their fears and ignorance, and to develop a more positive and inclusive sense of personal identity.

Use of arts, sports and media

All projects made use of sporting and other cultural activities to create opportunities for awareness-raising and building cooperation and understanding within groups. This has been done both with members of specific ethnic groups on their own and with mixed groups. For instance, one project made very successful use of football as a vehicle for bringing young white people from one particular area together with young black people from neighbouring areas.



Building a multi-agency relationship

For prevention strategies to be successful, a range of agencies need to share ideas, techniques and intelligence. Effective networking and collaborative exchanges between agencies are crucial. Such multi-agency work must represent the full range of relevant sectors, such as schools, the voluntary sector, black and minority ethnic community organisations, along with law enforcement agencies and other statutory organisations. The role played by each of these agencies will vary depending on the nature of the work, so prevention projects need to be both strategic and pragmatic in their approach to forming and maintaining inter-agency alliances. While dialogue and information sharing is valuable, it is also important to turn dialogue into action by collaborating on projects, for example hosting a joint activity which has a tangible outcome or a product of value to all parties.

How to work with educational institutions

Practice has moved towards a zero-tolerance policy to racism which has resulted in a condemnatory or punitive response by teachers and youth workers. Workers have also avoided responding to less serious incidents as they felt that they lacked the necessary skills and could exacerbate the problem. The projects all highlight both the need for and the feasibility of an educational response to racism, cast within a preventive framework, which approaches racism among young people within the broader context of identity and personal development issues.

Winning support from mainstream institutions

One of the messages emerging from the three projects is the need to win explicit acknowledgment that the problem exists and needs to be addressed at senior levels of the organisation. Without this support attempts to secure partnership arrangements to address issues around racism will not be able to develop in a strategic manner. Agreements and alliances with lower-level staff may enable specific short-term initiatives to be set up but these are likely to be unsustainable. One worker said that were he to start the work again, he would have tried to be more strategic in his approach. In contrast, another project's work in a school provides a good example of the strength that can be gained from making an alliance with a senior manager who acknowledges the need and is in a position to lead on the development of appropriate organisational responses.

In order to build effective partnerships, it is also important to build up relations with key staff at middle management level. These staff can sponsor specific activities and make representations to senior management for them to become part of a

strategic response to racial violence. Most organisations are likely to have an explicit policy commitment to address racial issues and a senior manager designated with responsibility for it. However, the policy may not be active and a senior manager designated as champion in an effective way to get things moving. Regular contact, openness about agendas, mutual understanding and respect, and readiness to share concerns and to address problems jointly – all these are the essential ingredients for effectiveness in working externally with an agency, and for preventing an initially promising project from becoming marginalized or eventually excluded.

Taking the work forward

Building on the Runnymede Trust's previous research and in the light of the experience of the three projects in the initiative, the following are the key recommendations for taking this work forward:

- An explicit recognition by governmental and youth agencies (including schools) of the need for preventive work, and a commitment to ensure this is undertaken, is needed.
- The policy commitment to undertake such work needs to be embedded in wider policy agendas, e.g. the Government's Integration Strategy ***the strategy which is: Creating the Conditions for Integration*** community safety, and anti-social behaviour. There is a need to ensure a specific focus on race and identity issues, including the prevention of racist violence, within these agendas.
- Work in this field should be strategic, with clear aims and objectives, and action plans to achieve these, including specific targets and outcomes.
- Training for all staff working with young people should be provided around race and identity issues, including how to deal with incidents of racist violence and ethnic conflict, and job descriptions should include reference to responsibilities in this field.
- Specialist posts or responsibilities should be established in organisations working with young people, so that specialist advice and support can be obtained (including from outside, where necessary) and made available to staff, both on preventive work and in responding to incidents.
- Practical guidance based on experience should be made available, and opportunities created for exchange of experience.
- The importance of monitoring and evaluation in youth work needs to be emphasised, not only in policy and training, but also as an integral component of everyday professional practice.
- Resources need to be made available to support the above work.
- Progress and experience should be monitored & reviewed, and policy further developed as appropriate

The full evaluation report, by the Runnymede Trust, is available to download free

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Knowledge Trails

1. **Troubled and troublesome**

– If you are a Black Afro-Caribbean boy with special needs and eligible for free school meals you are 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded from a state funded school than a white girl, from a middle class family with no special needs. Susannah Strong looks at the findings of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry Report on Exclusion.

2. **Race equality** – This issue's Child File focuses on the Race Relations Act, where it all started, how it has been amended and developed. Article available in Every Child Update on the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription)