

## Working Together: a Race Equality Youth Summit

On 5 May 2006, in Belfast, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) and the Runnymede Trust, sponsored the first Youth Summit in Northern Ireland. This was followed up on June 2006 with a second Youth Summit – this time in Armagh. Both events were designed to catch the interest of students from minority ethnic communities across Northern Ireland, and to let them have their say on issues that affect them all.

Both Summits were planned to coincide with the launch of the Northern Ireland Race Equality Strategy Action Plan;<sup>1</sup> government proposals for setting an agenda for race equality up to 2010 and beyond. In order for young people from minority ethnic communities to participate in a national discussion that involves them all, the Youth Summits were coordinated in such a way as to open up and widen the debate, and produce comments on the Action Plan. The young people who attended had a great deal to say on their perceptions of problems in society, how they might be addressed, as well as possibilities for the future.

These Youth Summits aimed to

- Give young people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland the chance to influence action to promote race equality
- Increase these young people's understanding of the role of government and communities in Northern Ireland in tackling racism and building a shared future
- Allow young people from minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland to share their experiences, and together identify ways to respond to racism and contribute to building a successful multi-ethnic society

During the first Youth Summit, held in the impressive surroundings of Stormont, introductory speeches came from Billy Gamble (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister) and Runnymede's Dr Rob Berkeley. Jessica Sims from Runnymede then opened the day's proceedings with a talk on the current situation of race equality in Northern Ireland. These opening speeches were followed by a student-led debate on the proposition that 'this house believes that nothing can be done to stop racism in Northern Ireland'. After weighing the possibilities for changing the beliefs of prejudiced people and assessing the importance of education and raised awareness, this motion was reassuringly defeated.

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<sup>1</sup> OFMDFM (2005) *A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland: 2005-2010*. Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

Morning and afternoon workshop sessions, designed to explore the different objectives set by the Race Equality Strategy, took up the rest of the day at the Belfast Summit. Two workshop sessions, both relating to the aims of the Race Equality Strategy, began with a set of three workshops that dealt with the elimination of racial inequality, equal protection, and equality of service provision. The afternoon session of workshops focused on getting participants to think and talk about what was required from young people in the way of participation, dialogue and capacity-building. In each case, the students were given the opportunity to meet other young people, discuss their personal experiences and their hopes for the future. Doing this will have helped them develop skills and an understanding of how to handle the more complex stuff, such as discrimination and conflict resolution.

The Second Youth Summit, this time for the Southern Education and Library Board, was held at the Armagh Multi Media Access (AmmA) Centre with the support of Caitriona Hughes. Rob Berkeley from Runnymede along with Tansy Hutchinson and Terry Deehan from NICEM acted as facilitators for the day's proceedings. At the Armagh Summit the students participated in workshops that explored the key themes of the Race Equality Strategy. By using images, they were able to show their hopes for the future, and what they believed got in the way of bringing discrimination to an end. They also spent time discussing what Northern Ireland should do to develop its own ideas of how a more tolerant and equal society would work

At both summits, the workshops ended with everyone who'd taken part writing a letter to a person of their choice, and using this device to tell someone meaningful to them about what had come up during the day. Letters covering topics from school bullying to racist harassment were directed to family members at home, or addressed to friends, bullies, head teachers, the prime minister, and so on.

At the first Youth Summit NVTV were able to assist the organisers by recording the events of the day and interviewing representatives from the partner organisations – Billy Gamble from the OFMDFM, Robert Berkeley and Jessica Sims from Runnymede, Patrick Yu from NICEM, and some young people in a 'Diary Room' style format. These interviews were combined to make a short film of the day's proceedings, which offers an explanation of the NI Race Equality Strategy and the Youth Summit, as well as personal stories from some of the young people that recount their own experiences with racism, their perceptions of racism in Northern Ireland, and opportunities they can imagine for change and the elimination of racism.

## Young People's Views on Experiences of Discrimination

During the Youth Summit, participants would show their understanding of issues of racial equality through the expression of their own personal experiences of discrimination. In the letters the students wrote following the workshops, as well as through their video diaries, they often spoke of their experiences at school.

School bullying seems to be a major cause of concern for BME young people in Northern Ireland. Reports that two-thirds of minority ethnic children have experienced racial harassment do not seem exaggerated, since the majority of the participants at the Youth Summit were able to speak of their own experiences.<sup>2</sup> Ranging from problems within their neighbourhood to harassment at school, racism seemed to be a lived experience for most of them.

Students who don't have English as their first language also expressed frustration at not having a mastery of English, a factor that has caused them problems both with finding common ground with their classmates and keeping up with their schoolwork. Besides having to deal with racism in school, these students also cope with the standard teenage pressures of fitting in and making friends. One student explained: 'After people know you well, they won't name-call you or anything – they will treat you very nicely. But if they don't know you they will, and they will just bully you and name-call you.' Expressing difficulty in English, another student found it frustrating that, 'students who are national laugh at my English...I'm older than them so they think I'm stupid. I just don't good at English, but the subjects I learn I can understand very much.'

Experience at school varied among the students: some pupils did harass them; others had often come to their defence. Participants mentioned that they had found their teachers unhelpful in resolving conflict; others said how supportive their teachers were at helping newly arrived students settle into their new classroom environment. Although one student reported having had an easy time settling into her school in Northern Ireland, she admitted: 'I'm one of the lucky ones that has friends and supportive teachers but I think there are a lot of people who aren't as lucky as me.'

Looking to them as a source of authority and guidance, the students often cited the responsibility of their teachers in stopping harassment in schools, making a greater effort to help newly arrived pupils and

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<sup>2</sup> "Parental Advice on Racist Bullying" BBC News Online (19-05-03) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/2863387.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/2863387.stm)  
Date Accessed: 20-08-06

English as an additional language learners. They could also show more understanding of the stresses that occur in the students' lives. When talking about equalising opportunities, some non-native English-speaking students discussed their desire to take a GCSE or A-Level qualification in their home language, or even to have the benefit of interpretation resources to help foreign students settle into their new school.

**To promote better relations, schools could and should:**

- Adopt a clear anti-bullying/anti-racist bullying policy, make it widely known among the student body, staff and parents, and enforce it impartially
- Promote a greater cultural awareness, regardless of whether their student body has a significant mix of minority ethnic youngsters
- Raise cultural awareness amongst teachers of what might be the needs of newly arrived students

### **Young People's Views on Racism in Northern Ireland**

Racism is seen to be of a particular brand in Northern Ireland because of the existing sectarian tensions. In addition, because of the focus on Catholics and Protestants as the dominant communities of Northern Ireland, ethnic minorities tend to be sidelined, which effectively sidelines the issue of racism too. One student, however, saw the growing diversity of the population as initiating the cultural 'make-over' Northern Ireland needs. Emphasising their optimism for an end to the 'conflict', students cited the presence of integrated schools as a step forward, and that the end of the religious conflict might lead to the end of 'all kinds of discrimination'.

In a workshop focusing on participation, the students debated their opinions on questions of equality; participants had much to say on the topic of religion, particularly on Religious Education in schools. They felt the course title 'Religion' to be a misnomer, because Christianity dominates the RE curriculum and thereby marginalises other faiths. All students participating in the discussion decided that RE should only be taught in schools if it included an equal representation for all religions, with the aim of bringing, 'more knowledge to pupils about different cultures and religions'.

Exploring the perception of racism in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of the country, many cited Northern Ireland's relatively new experience of ethnic and cultural diversity. London, for example, was described as having a greater diversity of people, meaning it would experience less discrimination and violence. Because students felt that racism was a large problem in Northern Ireland, noting verbal harassment, physical attacks and racist graffiti, they wanted Members of Parliament, especially the Prime Minister, to have greater involvement in making Northern Ireland a more tolerant and safe society and erasing the prevalent image of immigrants as job-stealers.

**Working with schools, communities and the media, the government should:**

- Promote global understanding of citizenship and belonging
- Improve understanding of the different communities and the situations that cause them to immigrate to Northern Ireland

**To show respect for pupils and their heritage, schools could and should:**

- Explore the possibility of offering a greater variety of foreign language classes that can lead to GCSE and A-Level qualification
- Provide resources to help pupils with English as an additional language better understand significant concepts in English, e.g. bilingual science dictionaries
- Focus on other faiths as part of religious education studies, not just for the sake of pupils with those faiths but to encourage a wider understanding of religions in general

### **Young People's Views on Stopping Racism**

Amongst the students at the conference, there was a personal awareness and experience of discrimination and racism. Exploring the sources of racist behaviour, they discussed what could be done to stop racism by taking both top-down and grassroots approaches. Although many students found it difficult to think of specific strategies for stopping racism, they were able to discuss options for new beginnings that could then be developed into governmental strategies.

Widely mentioned was the responsibility of government, and even the royal family, to promote anti-racism through their leadership; elected government in particular was seen as a locus of authority and an influence on people's behaviour and values. As one student said in the diary room: 'If our

government starts to take it seriously than I don't see why things can't change...if they start taking it seriously with everyone else, everyone else will take it seriously with them.'

There is, nevertheless, a need for genuine commitment on the part of government. Students felt that past anti-racist campaigns were too easily ignored, and government propaganda that talked of social acceptance and tolerance could be almost insultingly unreal. Exploring the role of mass communication images and messages, one student wanted to make the BBC more accountable for including the consequences and the reality of racism in their programming, and thereby bring anti-racism campaigns to the wider public.

Many students spoke of the importance of education; not only the teaching of equal opportunities and non-discrimination within schools, but also the responsibility of parents in the home. Some of them believed it was important to teach children about different cultures at a young age. Because parents were cited as a source for the propagation of racist attitudes they were also seen as crucial to any effective anti-racism teaching strategy to be undertaken in collaboration with schools and government. It was felt that parents' values and beliefs needed to be changed, and as one student said in an interview, 'If the elders stop it, the youngsters will stop it'.

**For the sake of current and future generations the public should:**

- Call for a commitment by the political leaders of Northern Ireland to equal opportunity and non-discrimination, in response to the changes arising within their society
- Demand that anti-discrimination campaigns should be targeted at both children and families
- Challenge government to put pressure on the media to take a greater responsibility in representing the society in which it operates, as well as being more sensitive to the minority groups that are often marginalised in the public's conception and mentioned only in times of crisis

## **Conclusion**

The Youth Summits were held in order to provide BME youth with a forum in which they could share their experiences and discuss their opinions on discrimination in their lives, their society and the world in general. Their thoughts and ideas give us a new way of thinking about the content of the Race Equality

Strategy Action Plan and, ultimately, the future of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Youth Summits communicated to young people that government, schools and community organisations take their views seriously.

The Action Points listed in the text boxes above are a fair representation of the views of the young people who took part in the stimulating discussions that came out of these two workshops. We will be taking these viewpoints forward to the relevant policy makers and community groups in order to stimulate further discussion on the Action Plan. Additionally, we hope that these Summits will encourage discussion with young people, those who attended the Summits and those who have not, in order to shape the future of Northern Ireland.

We want to thank the representatives from OFMDFM, NICEM, Education and Library Boards and the Runnymede Trust for organising the Summits. Most of all, we want to thank all the youth facilitators and participants for sharing their opinions.