

Connecting Young People – Healing the Social Divides In Society (Conference 17th October 2016, Windsor, London)

Paper 1 - Summary Paper

Three broad themes emerged from the consultation:

- The difficulties facing young people how we can help them to make sense of their world in order to shape a better future.
- Making the case for the possibility of positive change.
- Creating a safe, permissive environment in which young people can lead change through creative engagement and connection.

1.1 Making sense of the world

As young people grow and mature they naturally try to make sense of the world in which they live: their sense of identity, their relationship with others and their sense of purpose. The world today presents both difficulties and opportunities for young people in this regard. On the one hand, the world is increasingly connected, yet it continues to fracture along ethnic, religious, ethnic, linguistic and national lines. It is also a world richer in knowledge than ever before, yet consequently revealed to be more complex and interdependent than we imagined. Furthermore, it is a world which yields its secrets to ever deeper scientific analysis, yet still appears in large part to be chaotic and uncontrollable.

In this context we discussed how identity appears, and perhaps is, more fluid than it has ever been, which makes understanding your place and finding a sense of purpose within it more difficult to achieve, a point made by all the young people present. This is often a particular problem for young people who are the second and third generations of immigrant minorities. One delegate reflected on a sense of not belonging to British/English society in the wake of Brexit and there is evidence in the Muslim and Sikh communities of greater conservatism among the younger generation, alongside divisions between different Muslim communities. This highlights the danger that the vacuum in terms of understanding one's place and belonging is filled by the extremes of fundamentalist faith, nationalist identities or idealistic celebrity lifestyles.

There was also a belief that safeguarding and creating safe spaces for different groups and communities, while important, could also become steps along the road to isolation and ghettoization, where paradoxically we would all be less safe. The experience of Northern Ireland suggests that isolation is a breeding ground for the escalation of fear between divided communities. As one delegate observed, there is a danger that "the UK is trying to safeguard itself from complexity," when the more appropriate response is to work out how we build trust across divides and the question should be "How can we stop fear spreading and get people talking again?" Others agreed and pointed out the danger of creating "safe, neutral, non-political worlds in schools."

What was missing, it was felt, was a powerful voice in favour of individual and collective human flourishing within the context of a diverse yet interconnected world, one that thrives on engagement and connection, and the synergies that can be found when people recognise and cherish their interdependence. One delegate expressed a concern as to how young people conduct themselves so that they are not instrumentalised and become part of someone else's agenda. There was a sense therefore that we need to change the way diversity is talked about, acknowledging that we know ourselves in the context of others and that through interaction with, and understanding of, the other we learn to truly understand ourselves.

As one of younger delegates suggested, in practical terms this will mean linking words to the practical reality of young people's lives, perhaps by grounding discussion in the lived reality of personal relationships between friends and groups within school. Another young person suggested the exploration of identity through the performing arts and another described how successful this had been in her school in starting debates around such issues. Fundamentally, there was a belief that debate should be stimulated by the use of appropriate metaphors, analogies, drama, music and stories, which appeal to the emotional as well as the rational. The key will be to challenge narratives of resignation, rejection or resistance with positive narratives of change.

1.2 The Possibility of Change

We reflected on the comments of one young person, which were made during the visit of pupils from Wyedean School to Forest Gate Community School. She observed that we were perhaps over-estimating young people's capacity to make change happen. In part, this reflects experience in Northern Ireland, in the context of integrated (Catholic and Protestant) schools, in which there was a danger that the emphasis for change shifted to young people, because the adults were not prepared to address the issue themselves. In short, we cannot simply push young people forward and step back, we need to provide support, both personal and structural, without, however, imposing our views. Not least because we know there are powerful objections to an open society.

The Brexit vote revealed that those who voted to leave were generally poorer, less well educated, and were more likely to have felt the brunt of fast paced change. Essentially, they were more likely to feel the negative effects of globalisation and open borders, and not appreciate the more indirect benefits. It was suggested that they felt the negative impacts most acutely because they were more likely to lose 'bonded social capital', gained through strong links within close communities, and least likely to garner the benefits of 'bridging social capital' gained through links to national and international networks.

Confronting and challenging these objections will therefore involve an element of leadership education and training. As a number of delegates observed, we need to enable and empower young people to "make a difference within their sphere of influence", helping them to confront negative behaviour when they see it, and supporting them in setting the right tone for fruitful conversation and engagement. It will be necessary to support a change in mind-set from "If only..." to "If I/we..." It will also require identifying and highlighting suitable role models, who young people can identify with and building a credible vision of what Britain 2.0 will look like. The example of the 2012 Olympics is a possible template.

1.3 Creating a Safe, Permissive Environment

Our support to young people will therefore need to be both personal and structural. We will need to provide them with the tools, the space, the opportunities and the contacts to empower them. The young people were particularly keen to point out the importance of having the space and time to debate these issues. We will also need to prepare the broader environment in terms of influencing the influencers: from support to parents and teachers, to pressure on the media and politicians to support their efforts. In both cases, it will be important to enable and support a digital platform. This has already begun with 'tweets' throughout the session and a search for the availability of names for the project.

There was a strong feeling that we should share our learning, in the sense that we could become a hub of knowledge and good practice, or what could be described as an 'audit of what works'. There was also a sense that progress should be iterative and build upward from local initiatives between neighbouring schools, while also injecting difference through, at first, small scale collaborations between schools in different locations.

Finally, we tried to bring our ideas together in a clear statement of intent, which we decided should be to # reclaim radical, with 'RADICAL' being an acronym for:

Role Models

Accepting Leadership

Digital Platform

Interdependence

Connect and Celebrate


A Safe Place

Love (in terms of positive connection and shared human flourishing).

Paper 2 - A Re-Position Paper





This paper draws together the key strands from the recent consultation at St. George's House 'Connecting Young People – Healing the Social Divides in Society' and updates the initial paper (17th Oct 16) to provide a re-positioning of how we can help young people to make sense of their world in order to shape a better future.

Definition of *radical* in English:

radical 

ADJECTIVE

1 (especially of change or action) relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough.

2.1 The Context

In the last century global life expectancy has increased, whilst infant mortality and extreme poverty levels have decreased and yet, as a result of conflicts in the Middle East, the number of forcibly displaced people is greater than at any point since World War II. The shift to global markets and production, whilst driving down costs, has displaced jobs in former manufacturing areas and disassembled communities. The vote in the EU Referendum (June 2016) to leave has been seen by many as a protest vote by those who feel 'economically' left behind and should serve as a wake-up call to politicians.

The world feels chaotic, uncertain and complex. The rise of conservatism, fundamentalism and the need to reclaim religious identity are all potential reactions that attempt to provide order amidst the chaos; without which we risk a slide into further chaos, fear and possibly violence. We are at an important political and historical inflexion point. Part of growing up is the struggle to develop one's own identity, a task that is additionally hard amidst a chaotic and uncertain world. If we are to help young people to flourish we need to create a safe place for them to make sense of the world. Young people told us that they wanted adults to help them to be the person they wanted to be; to open doors and not close them; to remove the stereotypes and to provide freedom to learn.

The Windsor debate has shifted from working with young people at risk of being radicalised towards an acknowledgment that we need to face a wider issue of how to influence the society that young people grow up in.

Regardless of personal politics, in the UK (and arguably the USA) it is difficult to recognise a distinct political movement that represents the full needs of society. As a young person this is exacerbated by the feeling that the democracy isn't really for them but solely for adults.

In some ways we need to create a 'Britain 2.0'. This includes identifying what connects us, rather than what separates us; identifying and propagating the new 'stories we tell ourselves' about our identities; creating the safe places to be able to both agree and disagree; and bridging the social divides between the tribal based 'social echo chambers'

2.2 Moving forward – ideas for action

If the rise in conservatism is a response to chaos, in its extreme form radicalisation is an extreme response to perceived extreme chaos. This is the inflexion point in history, unless we take action both the chaos and the response will be magnified.

We touched on the idea of a movement that sets out to 'reclaim radical' as a positive term and identified what this could mean as being:

- **Role Models** – identifying a network of 'attainable role models' for young people to look up to; people who are net contributors to society and not just 'takers'
- **Accepting Leadership** – helping young people to take on leadership roles for their movement
- **Digital Platform** – creating a safe online space that can be used to help young people to make sense of the world, through a media that is second nature to them
- **Interdependence** – helping young people to recognise what connects us more than what separates us
- **Connect and Celebrate** – working across the social divide and celebrating differences
- **A Safe Place** – creating both an online and offline safe place for young people to both agree and disagree
- **Love** – providing a positive connection to enable human flourishing

The above list has the potential to both define the agenda and provide a list of possible activities. Other possible actions could include:

- a) Engaging young people – creating a young people’s conference to launch a ‘Reclaim Radical’ movement
- b) Schools – working with teachers to equip them with the resources, skills and space to have better conversations
- c) Parents – creating an equally valid safe space to have conversations
- d) Government – campaign for the voting age to be lowered to 16 years of age
- e) Influencing the influencers to be able to change the narrative

Supporting young people could also include leadership development, providing access to the role models, negotiating with teachers and head teachers and providing the enabling structures to bring young people together.

2.3 The next steps

Whilst we must be guided by the young people we seek to support, we can’t overlook our responsibility as adults. We need to confirm our generation’s responsibility to create the climate for healing and progress; taking responsibility alongside the young – without ever imply that this is a problem (of history’s making) for them to resolve.

Broadly, the challenge is to create a framework that supports wider participation and belonging in a complex and interdependent world. The outcome we believe should be a young people’s movement for secondary age students between 13 –and 18 years of age. However, before we get there, we need to identify our role and develop the framework that will help young people to feel safe to share their views and be able to recognise and value differences. How do we create those emotional, intellectual and political safe places for young people to engage?

As a young adult (post 18 years) we can signpost to a number of existing agencies, the challenge is to work with those under that age. That movement could be to ‘reclaim radical’.

It is interesting to note the definitions of radical. As an adjective it is described as *‘especially of change or action relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough’*, with synonyms including: thoroughgoing, thorough, complete, total, entire, absolute, utter, comprehensive, exhaustive, root-and-branch, sweeping, far-reaching, wide-ranging, extensive, profound, drastic, severe, serious, major, desperate, stringent, violent, forceful, rigorous and draconian. It is also described as *‘characterized by departure from tradition; innovative or progressive’*.

As a noun it describes a *‘person who advocates thorough or complete political or social reform; a member of a political party or part of a party pursuing such aims’*, with synonyms including: revolutionary, progressive, reformer, and revisionist. But perhaps most interesting is that in chemistry it describes *‘a group of atoms behaving as a unit in a number of compounds’*. I will leave you to think through the analogies!

I know that for many at the conference the richness of thinking happens after the event. Please can I ask you to share your thinking or call me to share what you believe this movement could become.

As the journey unfolds we will keep you informed; please feel free to contribute as much as you feel able.

Regards

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