

Create Equality in Education Project *Draft Report*

*National Union of Teachers
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Executive Summary

- George Green's is a multi-cultural school situated in a socially and economically deprived area in East London.
- The school is affected by the racist and prejudiced views held by some people in the community and by some parents of children in the school. The school's local council ward elected a BNP Councillor in 1993.
- The school has previously suffered a problem with racial violence. Pupils and school employees at George Green's view racism as a relevant and ongoing problem.
- The school has an active equal opportunities policy that is implemented in every facet of school life. George Green's has mainstreamed equality and promotes the importance of equal opportunities in posters throughout the school.
- Due to racial violence that occurred in George Green's the school took those pupils at the centre of the racial conflict in the school away to Northern Ireland for a week to learn about discrimination and its consequences. On the pupils' return to George Green's the school established a young adult peers network called the 'Unity Cru' which has the task of resolving conflict in the school.
- The investigation found that the trip to Northern Ireland and the subsequent development of the 'Unity Cru' has had a positive impact on George Green's. The activity has reduced levels of conflict, had a positive effect on the culture of the school, promoted integration and had a positive effect on the behaviour and attitude of the students. The report also found that the students' awareness of racism and its consequences had changed.
- The report identifies the whole school approach to equality by George Green's as a significant factor in the success of the school in stopping a negative cycle of violence from emerging. Other factors important to the success of the activity is the investment placed in pupils by the school which pupils recognise and appreciate, the emphasis on learning through experience with the pupils working together in multi-cultural teams and the sense of ownership that the pupils have towards the project.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The NUT is currently involved in a research project with three European partners. The project is funded by the European Commission and will run until August 2004. The aim of the Create Equality in Education project (CREE) is to identify the factors that make a school's equal opportunities activity successful and to raise awareness for anti-discrimination initiatives in schools. As part of the project each partner will investigate equal opportunity activities in four schools - the first school investigation will be completed by June 2003 with three further studies completed by December 2003. This report represents the findings of the first school investigation.

The school

The first study was carried out in George Green's School. The NUT approached the school in February 2003 and the Principal was enthusiastic about the school taking part in the project. The project received full co-operation and support from the school.

George Green's secondary school is a co-educational 11-18 comprehensive located in Millwall, on the Isle of Dogs. The school is situated in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The Isle of Dogs is an area of high social and economic need. The majority of pupils at the school come from local housing estates which have a high population density and few social amenities. Unemployment is high in the area and among parents and carers of pupils in the school. There are currently around 1000 pupils at the school. The ethnic composition of the students is 50% white, 30% Bangladeshi with the remaining 20% being Somali, Indo-Chinese, Chinese, Afro-Caribbean and Nigerian.

George Green's is an improving school with steady academic progress being made. The number of pupils achieving five GCSE passes has increased from 24% in 1999 to 31% in 2002.

The Isle of Dogs is an area that suffers from racism. Derek Beacon was elected on a 'rights for whites' platform in a by-election in September 1993. He was the first British National Party Councillor in the UK. The BNP lost the seat in the main Council elections in 1994 but the party continues to have some residual support in the area. In the 2002 local government elections they polled over 200 votes in the ward while in 1998 (on different ward boundaries) they polled over 600. Some of the white population feel marginalised and, as with other immigrant groups before them, Bengalis are largely the focus of racism and resentment.

The activity under investigation

The racial problems in the school are unusual in the sense that it is not white pupils against non-white pupils. Allegiances at the school are often divided along race lines with white, black and other racial groups versus the Bangladeshi pupils.

In November 2001 the school was the subject of national media attention after a fight between a black and Bengali pupil erupted into wider violence leading to the injury of a black girl. The racial problems continued with a small group of white parents using the opportunity to attack the school and its equal opportunities focus. The small group of parents were particularly angry about perceived preferential treatment of Bengali pupils by the Principal who was accused of being a “Paki lover” and a number of other baseless allegations were levelled against the school and its staff. ¹

It was in light of these problems that the school decided to put in place a programme to take some pupils to Belfast to learn about conflict resolution and the effects of segregation, with the aim of reducing the level of conflict within the school.

In January 2002 the school took forty year 10 and 11 pupils on a teambuilding week to Northern Ireland to explore the differences and similarities between the pupils and the people of Northern Ireland.

The school sought to choose those pupils who it was thought had the capacity to change and who were identified as having influence in the school. The pupils who were selected were those who were either directly or indirectly involved with the conflict that was occurring in the school at that time. The school believed that if it could positively impact upon the behaviour of these students then it would reduce the level of conflict in the school.

The trip to Northern Ireland was designed so that the pupils would integrate and work with one another. The pupils were divided into different houses with each house having a gender and racial balance. This became known as the ‘Coca-Cola’ groupings policy i.e. mixed in terms of gender and ethnicity to resemble the old Coca-Cola adverts.

The pupils lived with one another, cooked food for people with different dietary needs and worked together in teams. The houses were competitive with points being deducted if the house was not cleaned properly etc. During the trip the issue of racism was discussed and pupils were encouraged to talk openly about their experiences and views. The students were also taken to Belfast to talk to pupils affected by the religious divide in the city.

After the pupils returned from Northern Ireland the school set up a project called the Young Adult Peers also known as the ‘Unity Cru’ where pupils were trained to be positive role models for the school. The Young Adult Peers help supervise during break and lunchtimes and wear T-shirts with their names printed on the back.

The trip was repeated in January 2003 with 60 pupils taking part.

After discussion with the Principal it was agreed that the NUT would look at the trip to Northern Ireland and the development of the ‘Unity Cru’ to effectiveness by seeking the views of students, teachers and support staff.

¹ The Guardian,

Methodology

The investigation in the school took place between February and May 2003. During the investigations interviews with carried out with the Principal, Assistant Head, Assistant Principal (Social Inclusion), the Youth and Community Worker, the Team Leader of the School Supervisors ² and informal conversations were held with classroom teachers. Observation work was also undertaken to understand the work of the School Supervisors and their role in promoting the equal opportunities policy of the school.

In order to understand the views of students a questionnaire of all those who had been to Northern Ireland was undertaken and a discussion group with eight members of the 'Unity Cru' was carried out. The views of students were sought after the interviews with the school staff.

The questionnaire had a response rate of 72%. Six of the ten questions asked in the questionnaire were open questions. Nearly all of the returned questionnaires had full responses to the open questions.

The participants in the discussion group were selected by the school and reflected the gender and ethnic makeup of the school and those involved in the 'Unity Cru'. The discussion group was externally facilitated and a thorough discussion guide was produced. The discussion group was organised to give pupils an opportunity to talk about racism and equal opportunities, the equal opportunities policies of the school, the trip to Northern Ireland and the development of the 'Unity Cru'. Given that all of the members of the discussion group were members of the 'Unity Cru' the group was not representative of the school community as a whole. However, it was organised as a way of getting in depth information from the students who participated in the activity.

Due to the time constrains, further work with pupils who did not form part of the 'Unity Cru' could not be undertaken. This is an area which would have provided a further perspective to the research and its overall perception the school.

² George Green's school has a team of supervisors who patrol the school grounds during break and lunch-time and who stop and question pupils who are out of class during lessons. They also make calls home to parents whose children are absent from school and check up on classes that have supply teachers.

Chapter 2

Equal Opportunities in George Green's

It is important to state at the outset that equal opportunities are central to the ethos of George Green's school. The school has a raft of policies in place and these policies don't sit on shelves gathering dust: the policies are implemented and promoted in every aspect of school life. Equalities work has been successfully mainstreamed in George Green's and thus the activities the school has developed in order to reduce racial conflict through the trip to Northern Ireland and the development of the 'Unity Cru' cannot be seen in isolation from the central ethos and policies of the school.

Equal Opportunities policies

The school has an excellent reputation for combating racism and discrimination. George Green's has beacon status as a result of its work on social inclusion. The school has a strong equal opportunities policy and seeks to enforce the policy in every aspect of school life. The equal opportunities policy states:

"George Green's School is a multi-cultural, multi-racial community of nearly 1200 people: adults and pupils. We believe that everyone in the school is of equal value and should have equal opportunities in school and in life.

We know that many people in our society are discriminated against and treated as if they are worth less than others because of their race, religion or language, because of their gender or sexuality, because of their class or because of a disability. We will not allow this to happen in our school.

People are individuals and therefore different. They have different needs and different contributions to make to the life of our school.

Equal Opportunities is not about treating everybody the same. It is about meeting people's individual needs and celebrating/ appreciating their individual strengths/ gifts."

The equal opportunities policy covers staff, pupils and parents. The importance of the equal opportunities policies of the school is advertised throughout the corridors and classrooms of George Green's with posters displaying the diversity of students at the school all with the slogan "all different, all equal". The 'Message from the Principal' in the beginning of the School Prospectus and Governors' Report to Parents stated that: "Our Equal Opportunities Policy informs everything that goes on in the school."

The school has a Code of Conduct and an Anti-Bullying Code. The aim of the Code of Conduct is to "create a school atmosphere where everyone feels valued and is encouraged to achieve their full potential" and says that everyone in the school must "show consideration and respect for all members of the school community" and support the school policies on equal opportunities and anti-bullying. The Anti-Bullying code stressed that "everyone is of equal value" and that "all members of the school should support our policy by reporting bullying".

The school also has a Home - School Agreement for prospective Year 7 pupils which is signed by the pupil and parent/carer. The Home - School agreement asks the parent/carer to “support the school’s Code of Conduct, its Equal Opportunities and Anti Bullying policies”.

The school also seeks to promote integration between different racial groups by having seating plans in place for every lesson and for buses used in school trips and visits. The seating plan ensures that students are mixed by gender and ethnicity. The discussion group with students revealed that there was a high awareness of teachers’ intolerance of racism and the efforts made to promote greater tolerance and integration.

Leadership and staff involvement

The equal opportunities focus of George Green’s School is a result of the leadership shown by the Principal and the support of the Senior Management Team and the teachers and support staff in the school.

The Principal clearly believes that equal opportunities work can only be successful if fully supported by the staff, and if everyone is involved in upholding and implementing the policy. In discussions the Principal said that she saw the involvement of non teaching staff as crucial to the success of the school in tackling discrimination and promoting the policies of the school. The Principal had worked with the Caretakers and School Supervisors in order to ensure that everyone was aware of their role and importance to the equal opportunities focus of George Green’s.

George Green’s has one staff room that is used by everyone employed in the school. The Assistant Head for Social Inclusion said that “everyone mixes together” and that the school has “one Christmas do where the cooks, cleaners - everybody comes to it”. This approach to inclusion in terms of employees is not universal in schools in the UK.

The development of the School Supervisors reflects both the innovative approach that the senior management team has taken in terms of behaviour and also the importance that has been attached to identifying and developing the potential of staff. The development of the School Supervisors sprang from the fact that the Principal recognised that the actual roles carried out by the canteen staff wasn’t reflected in their job descriptions. The Principal said that she noticed that the dinner ladies were involved in tackling bullying, dealing with racism and looking after children. The Principal then set in place a scheme in order to use and acknowledge the skills and abilities of these employees. The School Supervisors have for instance, received training in behaviour management and play an explicit role in tackling discrimination and promoting equality.

The project worker spent time with the Team Leader of the School Supervisors in order to better understand their role and look at how they view the equal opportunities focus of George Green’s. It was clear that the School Supervisors performed an important role in terms of maintaining good behaviour during break and lunch and ensuring that no pupils were wandering around the school missing lessons or being disruptive. The

School Supervisors are not afraid of tackling serious issues in the school and command respect from pupils. There is also the sense of genuine partnership working between the School Supervisors and the teachers in the school, with the supervisors helping new and supply teachers, ensuring that pupils get to lessons on time and informing teachers about students who may be the victims of bullying. The sense that there is not a hierarchical structure in terms of staff was also mentioned in discussions with the Team Leader noting that her team used the staffroom, were treated equally and that they get support from everyone in the school.

In terms of equal opportunities the Team Leader saw the role of the School Supervisors as crucial. She was fully aware of the equal opportunities policy of the school, its importance to the ethos of the school and their role in ensuring that the policy is upheld. The Team Leader clearly believed that she had a role to play in tackling racism and promoting the values of the school. There was a genuine commitment to tackling issues and this was reflected both in the discussion and in the observation work that was undertaken. For instance, during the second interview with the Principal the meeting was interrupted by a member of the supervisor team reporting an instance of a pupil being bullied during the lunch break and bringing this pupil to speak to the Principal. The Team Leader said in discussions that: "You have to deal with everything that happens. No matter how small it is."

This comment reflects the zero tolerance approach to bullying and discrimination that was mentioned in interviews with the Principal, members of the senior management team and non-teaching staff in the school. The Team Leader also said that it was impossible for anyone to forget about equal opportunities because of the posters and publicity that were everywhere in the school.

Chapter 3

General findings about equal opportunities in George Green's

The interviews with members of the Senior Management Team showed that the school was realistic about what it could achieve in terms of equal opportunities. The Principal, Assistant Head (Social Inclusion), Youth and Community Worker, the Team Leader of the School Supervisors and other teachers all mentioned the fact that events which take place in the local community have a major impact upon the school. The Youth and Community Worker said that:

“Ninety percent of what happens in the community ends up back in school.”

It is previously been noted that George Green's is situated in area of East London with a record for poor race relations and with residual support for the BNP. There are parents of pupils at the school who hold racist views and this potentially creates a difficulty for the school. There are allegations that teachers show favouritism to the Bengali pupils.

The impact of parental and community attitudes on the school was mentioned by pupils in the discussion group and by teachers in interviews. The majority of the pupils in the discussion group believed that racism was more extensive and deeply entrenched in the older generation. It was also mentioned that older people were less willing to change their opinions and that older people had not grown up in a multi-cultural environment and consequently may find it more difficult to adjust. Comments made by pupils included:

“They've got one set of opinions and we change our opinions every now and then so young people are more tolerant.”

“I know that if my Mum comes up to me and said I don't want you near the Bengal's, I would say to her why? And I can see where my Mum's coming from because she used to live in the world where there were no Bengali's. She might have thought it better.”

The pupils in the discussion group, whilst recognising that there is a degree of pessimism about racism being an ongoing problem, also believed that young people can take action to help prevent racism in the future. The pupils mentioned that young people should be vigilant and work to change the perceptions of older people and should in turn pass on more enlightened views to future generations. One pupil said:

“What we're going to do to our kids, we are gonna teach them that it is OK and that it has changed and that you have got to try and make it, you've got to try and work for yourself if you want anything to work for you.”

Interviews with staff members revealed that the school believed that the pro-active and highly publicised equal opportunities policies and the home school contract was useful in dealings with parents. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) stated that:

“But it’s easier once you’ve got a really good policy and you brandish it about and you can tell everyone that this is what your school is - because if anyone starts to be ‘racist’ you say ‘but you wanted to come to this school’. And everywhere in this school you will see anti-racist things, you’ll see equal opportunities posters, so why have you chosen to come to this school? So I don’t find it difficult to be open about it.”

There was a clear sense that the equal opportunities policy, bullying policy and home school contract put in place by the school ensure that the staff feel confident in dealing with issues of racism and discrimination. The policies ensure consistency in approach and clarity for everyone in the school community in terms of their obligations towards upholding the equal opportunities policy of George Green’s. The policies of the school and its pro-active approach to publicising them increased the confidence of teachers when dealing with issues related to equal opportunities and also displayed to pupils the importance of the policies to the school.

School integration

The policies of the school in terms of seating plans for lessons are aimed at promoting integration between different ethnic groups. The pupils in the discussion groups recognised that racial tensions within the school are an ongoing issue and that integration between different ethnic groups is still a problem. There was some scepticism in the discussion group about the success of attempts at fostering more integration between different ethnic groups and whether the classroom integration transfers from the classroom to the playground. One pupil said:

“Lunch is when you go and socialise or whatever, you do what you want at lunch and break, and then when it comes to class you just do work. So when you’re in the classroom you’re just with who you’re working with and at lunch time you are with your friends.”

“The teachers don’t know really do they because ... say I’m in the class and ... we’ve had a fight before and they put us two together, they don’t know.”

Students noted advantages and disadvantages in terms of the school having a seating plan. The pupils say they are grateful for the opportunity to sit and talk with new people or people from a different ethnic background. Another pupil noted:

“I think it does help because you tend to mix more. The person sitting next to you, sometimes you have to work together and when you have to work together you have to obviously talk to each other so it helps you to talk to them.”

Discussions with the senior management team and teaching staff showed that the school was aware of the limitations of the seating plans in terms of ensuring greater integration within the school. However, the teachers noted that things had moved forward in the school. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) said:

“We have to force it [integration]. We have to force all of it.”

It is clear that although there is not full integration between different groups of pupils that the seating plan promotes a degree of co-operation and working that would not exist without the classroom-seating plan being in operation.

One important factor that was seen as important by pupils in terms of integration was the representative workforce in the school. Pupils noted:

“All the teachers go mixed and everything, so we should be.”

“Yeah because the teachers, they don’t really want racism in the school because they’re not all just like whites.”

The pupils recognised that the school ensured diversity and equality in its treatment of its employees and that this element of the school’s behaviour was clearly visible to them. The mixed workforce helped to promote integration because the school was setting an example for the students. This was a point that was recognised in interviews with the Principal and Assistant Head (Social Inclusion). The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) said:

“I think that when Jabba [the Youth and Community Worker] started he was the only Bengali member of staff, apart from a couple of very old Bengali gentlemen who were teaching here for years and they received no respect at all. Students were really horrible to them. Whereas now we’ve actually got staff from different backgrounds working in the school - it’s much more multi-cultural.”

Gender

In terms of gender there were differences identified by both teachers and pupils. It was felt that boys were more likely to turn to violence than girls were but that when problems between boys arose that they could more easily resolved. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) and the Youth and Community Worker said that sport was used in the school to promote integration. In the discussion group, pupils felt that girls held fewer “grudges” and are friendlier towards different ethnic groups than boys. Although disputes between girls do not turn to violence they were reported as being more protracted and potentially upsetting. One pupil commented:

“They [the girls] would not be able to sort it out, they would more like shout at each other then ... argue forever”

Chapter 4

The equal opportunities activity

The interviews with the staff involved in the project and the discussion group with students tried to get an understanding of the factors that led to the first trip to Northern Ireland and the subsequent development of the 'Unity Cru'. The interview with the Youth and Community Worker, who is primarily responsible for organising the trip to Northern Ireland and the management of the 'Unity Cru', said when asked about the development of the activity:

"The activity was initiated because there had been fights in the school. There are strong racial tensions on the island which have a lot of influence on the school. The school takes kids with influence in the school and aims to give them experience of conflict and problem resolution. We try to get them thinking about things and show them that things on the Isle of Dogs could end up like Belfast."

Both the school and pupils saw the selection of the pupils who go on the trip to Northern Ireland as crucial to the success of the activity. The Youth and Community Worker explained how the selection procedure worked:

"We look out for kids we think have influence in the school. Recommendations come from tutors and Heads of Year. We want kinds that will make an impact and we take kids who are both positive and negative role models in the school. We currently take pupils from year 10 and 11 but we are looking to involve pupils from year 9 in the future."

The pupils who went on the trip to Northern Ireland were those pupils who are popular, engender respect in others, have had a close involvement in racial conflicts or who have been particularly vocal about their views on race. The pupils said that because of the kind of individuals who are chosen to go to Northern Ireland the trip is viewed positively in the school community and that there is a certain kudos about being selected to go. Pupils have quite a high awareness of why they were chosen; some said they were asked because they were the 'trouble-makers' and others thought that the ones who were asked were the 'popular ones'. Pupils in the discussion group made the following comments:

"I think it's all to do with the people who are in it, because the people that are in it are the people that you know, might have been seen as trouble-makers or whatever before so no one thinks it's teachers pet, or... a geek kind of thing. No one thinks that because of the people that are in it, that's the way it works"

The issue of how friends of those pupils who were chosen to go on the trip viewed the activity was examined in the questionnaire. Students were asked 'what did your friends say when you were chosen to go to Belfast?'. This question was asked as a way of gathering information about how other pupils in the school viewed the project. The most common responses to this question were:

"Said I was lucky. They wanted to come."

“They were jealous.”

“That I was really lucky.”

“My friends were disappointed that they never got chosen.”

The comments made by pupils in the discussion group and questionnaire support the views of the teachers and support staff who said that students wanted to take part in the activity and that the students who were chosen were proud of this fact. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) said that:

“Because the people that were taken away, aren’t wanting to be goody two shoes or anything like that but they are not the absolutely uncontrollable ones either, they’re people that have a bit of kudos in the school and are seen as somebody with influence.”

In Northern Ireland the students take part in a number of outdoor activities such as canoeing and rock climbing and also meet students from both sides of the religious divide in Northern Ireland. The students also spend time discussing racism and its impact on the school with all students being encouraged to be honest about their experiences and beliefs.

The activity is extremely popular amongst the students who have taken part in it. In the questionnaire students were asked to say on a scale of 1 to 10 whether they enjoyed the activity, with 1 being “had a brilliant time” and 10 being “didn’t enjoy it at all”. The average score was 2 with 58% of pupils giving rating the activity one 92% of pupils giving the activity a 1, 2 or 3.

Chapter 5

The success of the activity

The overwhelming evidence from the data gathered from pupils in both the questionnaire and the discussion group showed that the pupils viewed the activity as successful. The discussions with the members of the Senior Management Team, classroom teachers, the Youth and Community Worker and the Team Leader of the School Supervisors also showed that the activity was seen as beneficial to the school and the pupils who took part in it. This chapter will look at the different ways that the activity has been successful.

It is clear from the evidence collected that the activity was successful in several different ways. These successful effects of the activity included:

1. reduction in racial conflict and fighting in the school;
2. positive effect on the culture of the school;
3. greater integration between pupils who went to Northern Ireland;
4. positive effects on the behaviour of students who were chosen to take part in the activity; and
5. a change in the attitudes of students towards racism.

The next part of the report will examine the five factors above and present the evidence that shows how the activity has been successful. Chapter ** will outline why the activity has been successful.

Reducing conflict

The development of the trip to Northern Ireland and the establishment of the 'Unity Cru' began after a high level of racial conflict within the school. In the discussion group pupils noted that racial conflict had manifested itself in general hostility between pupils of different ethnic groups, fighting and verbal abuse. Pupils of different racial groups were said to 'barge' each other in the corridors and fights between rival gangs and individuals had broken out. Reducing the level of violence in the school was a key aim of the activity.

The Youth and Community Worker stated in the interview that he believed the activity had led to reduced levels of conflict within the school. He noted that while pupils "still hang about in their original groups when problems arise they are able to sort them out themselves. They stop the younger kids from fighting.

The data and information collected through the pupil questionnaire revealed that the pupils who had attended the trip to Northern Ireland felt that the activity had helped to reduce racial conflict in the school. Comments from the questionnaire included:

"well every thing's calm now days so its had a good impact"

"conflict get out of hand when at the start they could have been sorted"

“Not as many racial fights as there was”

“stopped a lot of racial conflict”

“It has stopped a lot of racial fighting in the school”

Pupils in the discussion group made similar points as the ones above. The pupils said that they had noticed a palpable change in the atmosphere around the school and said that there was less fighting and racial tension in and around the school. The relationships developed between pupils during the trip have meant that some old enemies are now friends or that people who once were fighting each other have a degree of understanding and respect between them. These statements from the students fully support the comments by the Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) and the Youth and Community Worker.

Changing the culture of the school

The atmosphere and culture within the school is said to be changing for the better. Both teachers and pupils observed that there are fewer racial incidents and lower levels of hostility and violence between groups. On the basis of the evidence collected from all members of the school community there is little doubt that the culture of the school in terms of equal opportunities has improved.

The fact that pupils who were once at the centre of the racial conflict are now speaking to teachers and playing a role in trying to resolve conflict is one of the positive changes in culture and behaviour that has occurred as a result of the trip to Northern Ireland. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) stated in the interview that:

“We’ve moved the culture on so that it is good to be a person who can help people resolve conflict. So there’s kudos in that now. You get respect, don’t you.”

In the discussion group pupils said that they will make an effort to pacify racial tensions in the school and that consequently large-scale fights between rival gangs are less likely. The students said that they are more vocal in promoting tolerance and are actively involved in preventing conflict.

The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) when asked about the benefits of the activity, gave the following example, which supports the points made by the students themselves:

“there has been a massive difference. Nobody sat together, talked together or anything like that. Now, before they fight, they come to tell us there’s going to be a fight. Generally, somebody will come shooting down when there’s trouble and then we’ll pull them in. And it’s only if somebody is in a bad mood and they barge at the wrong time, that’s when it goes. But if it’s been brewing, we usually know. A came to me two days ago and said can I talk to you. He said it’s brewing with B. Then A went to see D who’s

one of the leaders in the room next door, and said can you help me sort it out. It's unheard of before."

There is a developing culture of intervention whereby 'Unity Cru' members use their unofficial position of authority to diffuse racial tension before it gets out of hand. The activity has not stopped tensions between different individuals but it has ensured that when problems arise that they get resolved without the students resorting to violence.

The positive effect that the activity has had on the culture of the school is linked to the selection process used in identifying which pupils to take to Northern Ireland. As a result of selecting pupils who were identified as having influence and a degree of kudos within the school the idea of it being good for pupils to resolve conflict has credibility. The behaviour and attitude of the selected students has filtered through to the wider school community. Pupils who didn't go on the trip have been made aware of the message promoted during the trip largely due to the unofficial influence of the selected pupils and the more official activities of the 'Unity Cru'.

Another reason that clearly came out of the discussion group and questionnaire was that the school had been successful in developing the confidence and ability of the pupils to be positive role models in the school. It was clear in the discussion group that many of the young people saw themselves as role models and did not want to let themselves, the teachers and the fellow members of the 'Unity Cru' down by behaving badly. Comments included:

"Yeah some of them can go back and become a role model for the younger generation"

"Everyone else now looks up to you and then you've got to be a good example to everyone else"

Also in the questionnaire a number of comments on being role models for the school were made:

"The effect 'Unity Cru' has on George Green's is all different faces tackling racism"

"Younger ones look up to us and the example that we have set."

"younger ones look up to the 'Unity Cru'"

"We teach young pupils how to sort out their problems"

"Many people who went to Belfast are strong minded people who are role models for the school"

Integration

It has already been noted that the activity had a positive effect upon the levels of integration between pupils. The trip to Northern Ireland has helped to create some friendships that previously had not existed and even where friendships were not formed

helped create a better understanding of different cultures and racial groups and improved team working skills amongst the pupils.

The improved integration and understanding between pupils takes place as a result of the racial and gender mixing in the different houses during the trip. The Youth and Community Worker noted that:

“We make people who are in different gangs share a room for the week and get to know each other.”

It was also noted by the Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) that the ethnicity of the Youth and Community Worker, who is a Bengali, was important as he ends up being in charge of the house with pupils who might have previously held the most racist attitudes. The Assistant Head said:

“the work you do is so intense that you have to confront your feelings about it and they have to say how they feel in front of people and, by the end of the week, you’ve got pupils saying “I never thought I’d say this about..... but they’ve learnt their names and they’ve had to do things in groups; they’ve had to help each other climb walls; they’ve had to do everything like that and it is just fantastic.”

The mixed houses which are competitive and the team based activities that take place have a positive effect on the pupils’ views of other students. It also led to greater levels of trust and understanding. The pupils in the discussion group said that they had learned a lot from the trip to Northern Ireland and that the experience had impacted considerably on their personal attitudes towards people of different ethnic groups. By living and socialising with people from different backgrounds, pupils said they overcame their own personal prejudices and that the similarities rather than the differences between the individuals from different racial groups were highlighted. Comments included:

“Now when you are living together, you don’t have much of a choice you have to [get on]. It comes naturally”

“Everyone was helping each other... we went from handing out the plates... never even argued or nothing, just handed out the plates, putting them all down nice and neatly. He was going, do you want help with the food? I thought, yeah, wicked man”

“Everyone had so much in common with everyone else. It wasn’t like your own little world and you were completely different from me, because a lot of things that were like similar , that’s how we actually got to get along with each other”

The quotes above illustrate the positive effect that the teambuilding exercises and the mixed house system had on pupils from different ethnic groups. Other comments included:

“The best thing about Ireland was the parties and I got a couple of new mates out of it”

“The best thing is that we were actually all united together and we weren’t all in our separate things, like we was actually one, altogether, one group”

The pupils noted that the integration during the trip between pupils of different ethnic groups continued even when there were no staff members present. In the discussion group reflecting the confidence of the pupils to be honest about their experience to the facilitators they said that at night-time when the students had unofficial parties or gatherings that everyone was involved. One comment included:

“But like in the night the teachers must have thought well they’ll do their own things, but like even if they did jump out, there’d be white with blacks”

The activities developed by the staff organising the trip were fun and helped promote the developing sense of trust and teamwork between the participants. The competitions and races made people work together in order to gain ‘house points’ and some of the physical activities such as rock climbing and canoeing depended on a high degree of trust between participants. One pupil in the discussion group said:

“The canoeists all had to work as a team to go faster and meet the others and then for more fun we had other people that was holding the harness up so that we basically ... had our life in their hands, so it was really like trusting”

The questionnaires also reflected the comments made by students in the discussion group. Many comments about more mixing between pupils of different ethnic groups were made. These included:

“I get along better with Asians”

“I mix more with people of different ethnic backgrounds”

Positive effects on the behaviour of students

As well as helping to promote integration the trip has also had a positive effect on the individual pupils who were chosen to take go to Northern Ireland. Discussions with classroom teachers revealed that they had noticed a positive effect on the behaviour of students when they returned from the trip. The staff members who had been involved in the day to day management of the activity were able to point to individual students who were seen to have changed. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) said that:

“But one of the boys is well into the sixth form now. He used to be terrible but he’s completely changed.”

Evidence for the positive effects that the activity has had on pupils also came from the students themselves:

“You know in Belfast, one thing I learnt is how quick people are to judge each other and blame it on the other side...how quickly they are looking for someone to blame”

“Yeah because before I went on the trip, I was like going downhill and now I’m just gradually going uphill”

“We were quite trouble makers before, so we’ve sort of got that reputation and now we’re trying to make amends as it were”

The trip also helped with the personal development of the pupils. Students in the discussion group noted that the experience had made them more confident and more assured about their cultural identity. The new experiences during the trip allowed the students to discover new qualities in themselves, such as leadership and team-working skills. This point was backed up by comments made by the Youth and Community Worker who said that the experience had led to a dramatic improvement in the self-esteem of several individuals. Also the fact that everyone was assigned a useful role during daily tasks like cooking helped to develop a sense of worth. In the questionnaire students recognised that the trip and being involved in the ‘Unity Cru’ had a positive effect on their development:

“I learnt communication skills and problem solving”

“I’m more responsible and aware of mixing with different races”

“I’ve become more responsible and have a wider understanding of different pupils”

The fact that the school recognised pupils who had previously been in trouble and who were not performing well academically and showed belief in the ability of these pupils to change has had a positive impact on those pupils. Trust has been established between the pupils and the activity leaders and the pupils don’t want to let these people down. The Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) when asked about what happens when pupils who have been to Northern Ireland do something wrong said that:

“We’re here all the time having meetings with this person and that person, or where we’re up to. We put them on a guilt trip – “I can’t believe my children go to Belfast and then come back and do this to me, can you Jabba? No Miss. We used all that.”

The comments by the Assistant Principal (Social Inclusion) show the new dynamic that has been created between the staff in the school and pupils. The Assistant Head went on to state that she is honest about her feelings towards racism and upset at the behaviour of the pupil. She went on to say:

“... and then I go out and Jabba’s sat in here with them and they’ll go “Miss just got the wrong idea about us”. And then they try to prove that they’re not racist.”

Comments by people in the discussion group reflected the fact that pupils don’t want to be seen as letting themselves and staff who have invested time in them down:

“It keeps yourself on track as well, because you know you’ve got that sense of responsibility. You can’t let someone else see you doing something stupid because you’re part of the ‘Unity-Cru’ so it keeps yourself in check as well”

Change in attitude towards racism

The pupils were most emphatic about the change that the trip had upon their attitude towards racism and discrimination. In the questionnaire when asked 'Did the trip to Belfast improve your understanding and ability to get along with different groups of pupils in the school?' 100 per cent of pupils responded positively. Comments made by pupils about their understanding of racism and discrimination included:

"It's silly to fight over people's skin colour"

"It made me realise that fighting don't solve nothing, and that racism upsets everyone not just one person."

The positive effect that the trip has on the level of integration and mixing between the pupils has already been noted. The increased awareness of racism and discrimination and its implications seen in terms of Northern Ireland ensured that pupils are more aware of the consequences of discrimination and its impact upon individuals.

The 'Coca Cola' houses and the teambuilding activities that take place during the trip demonstrated to the pupils how united and integrated communities can work. The trip to Belfast and the interaction with young people from both sides of the Protestant/Catholic divide also taught the students about the nature of conflict. Some of the students in the discussion group said that the experience had showed them the way that people are prepared to pre-judge each other. For others it served as a warning about how bad things can get when tensions dominate a community and are passed on from generation to generation. Many pupils in the questionnaire and the discussion group reported that they were shocked by what they saw in Belfast and did not want this to occur in George Green's and on the Isle of Dogs. The trip helped to put the school community's racial problems in perspective and also pupils came away from Northern Ireland feeling positive about themselves and empowered to tackle the smaller problems they perceived in George Green's. Comments included:

"It made me realise that there are bigger problems in the world than the stupid fights and arguments that we have in our school"

Chapter 6

The factors that made the activity successful

The previous chapter outlined the five positive affects that the trip to Northern Ireland and the development of the 'Unity Cru' has had on George Green's and the individual pupils involved. This chapter will examine the factors that made the activity successful.

A whole school approach

If a school that suffered from similar problems to George Green's merely imported this activity into its schools its level of success would be nowhere near as high as in George Green's. The school under study has a whole school approach to equal opportunities. Efforts to promote equal opportunities for all is a central feature of the school and is in no way treated as an add on.

The school has strong leadership and a senior management team that sees the fair treatment of all students regardless of ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation and religion as central to creating a safe school environment in which all pupils are given the opportunity to succeed.

The equal opportunities policies that have been put in place by the school are visible to all members of the school community. All of the school employees are aware of the equal opportunities policies, its importance to the school and their role in promoting and upholding it. The parents/carers of pupils are aware of the equal opportunities focus of the school and what the school expects from them and their children. The rising academic performance of George Green's has increased the popularity of George Green's amongst parents and led to a rising school roll.

The whole school approach to equal opportunities has enabled the school to have the secure foundations on which to work to improve the behaviour and change the racist or prejudiced attitudes of some of its pupils. The equal opportunities activity that has been discussed in this study has built upon these secure foundations with a small number of some of the previously most troublesome pupils.

The whole school approach to equal opportunities in the school includes its workforce. The pupils who we surveyed and talked to were perceptive and saw the multi-cultural workforce in George Green's as significant. The school was setting an example to pupils by clearly displaying integration between staff from different backgrounds. The fact that the school was actually practising what it preached was recognised by the students. The inclusive attitude taken to all of the staff was also important in ensuring that people with different roles in the school communicated and worked together.

The equal opportunities policies of George Green's and their active promotion to all of the school community has an effect and through the interviews and conversations with teachers it was clear they increased their confidence in dealing with equal opportunities issues. Some of the teachers who took part in informal conversations said that the equal

opportunities focus of the school was one of the reasons that attracted them to apply for the job at George Green's. The interviews with the Principal and discussions with members of the Senior Management Team illustrated that the school had clear leadership and direction in the area of the equal opportunities and that nobody was afraid to deal with difficult issues.

The experience possessed by the school in terms of equal opportunities and the strong leadership of the Principal and Senior Management Team meant that when the large scale trouble between different ethnic groups occurred the school sought immediately to deal with the issue. The trip to Northern Ireland with pupils who had been at the centre of the trouble was a brave move for the school. The school could have easily have been criticised by the media for rewarding bad behaviour by sending misbehaving pupils on a week long "holiday". The activity developed by the school has led to positive changes at George Green's and succeeded in stopping a culture of violence from occurring.

Investing in pupils

The activity under study reflects the pioneering attitude to equal opportunities in George Green's. Few schools would see the solution to the problem of racism and gang violence on an ethnic basis as taking some of the worst offenders away together for a week. However, this different approach to combating discrimination and changing the behaviour of students has been successful.

From the evidence collected one of the main factors that has led to the success of the scheme is the investment that has been made in the pupils by the school and the staff involved. Many of the pupils who were selected to go to Northern Ireland both in 2002 and 2003 were not the typical students who get selected by schools to attend events and trips. These students had been involved in fights, poor behaviour and were academically underachieving. The trip to Northern Ireland and the involvement of pupils in the 'Unity Cru' has been successful because relationships and trust have been developed by the students and those adults involved in the project. Secondly, the pupils have seen that the school recognises that they have the ability to be positive role models and that the school believes that they have something good to contribute to the school community. Thirdly, the mix of activities that the pupils undertake in Northern Ireland and the areas in which the 'Unity Cru' is involved has increased the confidence of these students.

The comments made by the pupils and the staff involved in the project showed that the school has helped to move the culture of the school towards one where it is good to be seen as someone who resolves conflict. The example given by the Assistant Head (Social Inclusion) at the end of page 16 is significant as it shows that things have changed and that problems are getting resolved before they escalate. The fact that pupils also trust the staff enough to discuss issues like this is also hugely significant and reflects the strong connections between the pupils and the staff involved in the project. These connections have led to good behaviour from students who do not want to let these staff down.

Furthermore, it is clear from both the discussion group and questionnaire that many members of the group take pride in being seen as a role model. They believe that they have some influence over their peers and younger children within the school and therefore have developed a strong sense of responsibility about setting a good example.

Learning through experience

Students both in the discussion group and in the comments made in the questionnaire recognised that living with people from different backgrounds helped break down misunderstandings and ensure a greater awareness and understanding of different cultures. The living arrangements and competitive group activities were important to the success of the activity because they ensured that pupils learned to work together and also that they socialised in their own informal environment away from the supervision of adults.

The 'Coca Cola' houses also demonstrated to the pupils that they could live and work together with people from different backgrounds. The discussions about racism and efforts by teachers to tackle discrimination did not take place in an abstract way as during the trip pupils saw how united and integrated communities can work. This practical approach to the problems faced by the school was one of the reasons why the activity has been so successful.

The adults involved in the activity were also recognised by the pupils as being people who were approachable and prepared to listen to the pupils and their contribution to the success of the project was extremely high.

Pupil ownership

The discussion group with students revealed a real sense of enthusiasm for and ownership of the trip to Northern Ireland and the 'Unity Cru'. The projects appeared to instil an enthusiasm for tolerance and integration in the students themselves.

The majority of pupils said that they were initially attracted by the prospect of a week off school and missing lessons. However, it was clear from the discussion group and interviews with the school staff that a process of conversion occurs in which pupils feel they are making relationships on their terms, and taking ownership of the issues involved through a high level of participation. The trip provides the pupils with the time and the space in which to get to know one another away from the classroom and their normal home environment.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The activity put in place by George Green's after the escalation of racial violence in November 2001 has been successful in reducing the levels of racial conflict within the school. The trip to Northern Ireland and the development of the 'Unity Cru' has improved the behaviour and attitudes of many of the students who have taken part in the activity. The activity has led to reduced violence, the development of the students' confidence and a more positive attitude amongst the students who now see themselves as role models for younger people in the school. This has led to a gradual change in the culture of the school in which pupils attempt to resolve conflict without resorting to violence.

George Green's is a school situated in an area of East London with a history of racism and racial problems. The school has made equal opportunities central to everything that it has done. Equal Opportunities is not seen as an 'add on' to the work of the school but is seen as a way of raising standards, ensuring that its pupils are able to live in a multi-cultural society and have a prejudice free environment in which to learn.

The staff members at George Green's who took part in this study are aware that they have a long way to go until they have a school with complete integration between the different ethnic groups. However, this study has shown that the enthusiasm and dedication of the staff in George Green's to tackling discrimination is affecting and changing the attitudes and the behaviour of students.

All schools are subject to external factors such as parental and community attitudes. George Green's, by addressing racism and promoting equal opportunities in such a proactive way, is providing pupils with the opportunity to learn that they can work together with different groups of students. The school is also giving pupils the opportunity and ability to challenge racist beliefs and stereotypes.

The staff members at George Green's when faced with rising violence and racial conflict did not leave the problem and allow a vicious cycle of violence and negativity to damage the school but sought to tackle the issue head on with an innovative and different approach to the issue. The approach taken by the school has been successful and this is seen in the comments and views of the students themselves. The approach taken by George Green's provides an insight into how a school can mainstream equalities and put in place projects to change the behaviour of individual students and the culture of the school as a whole.