

Case study: Belonging to Dewsbury Schools Partnership Project

What was the issue to address?

Teachers and governors were keen to increase interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds across Dewsbury high schools. Staff were becoming increasingly concerned that students were only mixing in class, remaining largely segregated during break periods and at lunch time.

What did we do?

To encourage interaction between young people in Dewsbury, a project was set up under the banner of the 'Belonging to Dewsbury' programme, to provide an environment where young people were encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings in a responsible yet creative way.

The 2007 Parliamentary Writer in Residence, Rommi Smith, was commissioned to manage a schools partnership project. Rommi led a series of summer workshops to equip two classes of year eight students with the skills to compile a collection of poems exploring their experience of living and studying in Dewsbury. Having sought the permission of parents, students of Earlsheaton Technology College and Westborough High School took part in classes to boost confidence and develop an individual style of self-expression through the medium of poetry and song. Pupils were encouraged to record their thoughts and feelings in an art form where feelings of pride and a sense of belonging to Dewsbury came to the fore.

The students then recorded their poems in audio CD format and took part in a competition to design the creative artwork for the CD and jewel case

What difference did we make?

As a consequence of this project, students were given an opportunity to interact with and build friendships with their peers at a school in a neighbouring area. The project gave the students a common goal to work towards but importantly, enabled young people to feel that their voices were heard and valued especially when alternative messages were being drowned by the negative media attention the town was receiving. It was important to find out how Dewsbury's future generation felt about their home and this project provided an ideal vehicle for young people to voice their feelings and concerns.

Students were given the opportunity to practice their interpersonal skills and ability to express themselves clearly and creatively – life skills that will help them to talk to each other and break down the barriers that previously prevented them from finding out about and understanding each other's way of life.

What were the keys to our success?

The project was led by Rommi Smith, a writer, qualified teacher and performer experienced in training youngsters to get the best from arts-based activities to team build, explore one's identity, or to express one's self either on an individual or collective basis. As a high profile figure, she provided the ideal inspirational and role model to spur and engage the interest of the students.

With the skills the project was able to develop in students, an empowering experience was provided that fostered pride with a clear sense of achievement. All of the students were able to see their hard work come together in a professionally published audio CD which was then presented to each student individually at an event to celebrate their shared efforts, mark the end of the project but the beginning of new and lasting friendships between pupils from the two high schools.

What are we doing next?

The Belonging to Dewsbury Committee is undertaking an extensive evaluation of the project and plans to replicate the project with other schools in the area.



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