

Partnership for Young London

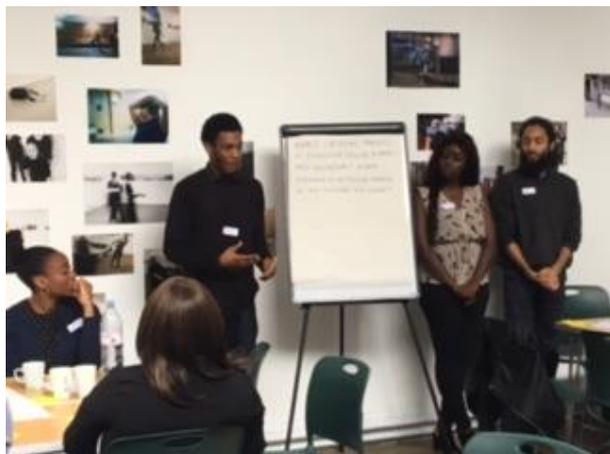
Conversations in Youth Work with Diaspora Young People

Sandra Vacciana

In June Partnership for Young London delivered 'Conversations in Youth Work with Diaspora Young People' in partnership with Ubele and [Conway Hall](#). Michael Hamilton skilfully guided attendees from a cross sector of organisations through this intergenerational, intercultural sharing of emerging themes in work with young people of African descent. We discussed where our practice as formal and informal educators is thriving and where we need to address gaps in our service.

Setting the Context

Michael's introduction was punctuated with a call to leadership – these conversations must evolve into actions otherwise we are, in part, accountable for upholding some of the barriers that prevent young Black people from living fulfilled lives as grounded individuals, with a strong sense of who they are and where they are from. So this event was very much about distilling a wealth of ideas into tangible actions that will **make a difference**.



Participants from 'Conversations in Youth Work with Young People of the African Diaspora'

Amsterdam and London - Background to the Event

The event was organised following an international exchange between Michael Hamilton's organisation [Think Share Act](#), youth projects and educational institutions in London, including [Goldsmiths](#), [Kori](#) and the Ubele Initiative and the Dutch group [Swazoom](#) based in Amsterdam, where colleagues explored the role of cultural education in the delivery of youth work. Both cities have been, and remain, destination points for large movements of people across the globe. This has often been linked to trade, forced exit and displacement due to political upheaval. Historically, people of colour have settled in London (and the UK) from former British colonies in the Asian sub-continent; Africa; and the Caribbean. The main minority ethnic groups in Amsterdam are from Surinamese, Moroccan and Turkish communities.

Differences in Practice

One of the key differences to transpire regarding practice between the two countries is that race is not always emphasised as a distinct aspect of identity within the delivery of youth work in Holland. The premise here is to adopt a 'colour-blind' approach to the work thereby seeing 'the whole person' rather than highlighting ethnicity or cultural affiliation. Conversely, in the UK - and London in particular - acknowledging race and understanding issues related to race and identity (and other protected characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, religion and disability) are seen as fundamental to being impactful in our work with young people. To understand this better Michael highlighted that the delivery of youth work in Holland and the UK is borne out of two very different political narratives around race.

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In Holland making race distinct was seen by some as being potentially provocative, problematizing and creating divisions; whereas in the UK, youth work policy and practice is anchored around race and cultural awareness. London, in particular, is quite unique from the rest of the UK and the world, in its history as a thriving and evolving hub of multiculturalism. Diversity is its strength but paradoxically there is an ongoing tension arising from cultural diversity which has often also been seen as a weakness, creating a strain on public services, 'taking jobs' from indigenous people, polarising racial/cultural difference, creating cultural conflict and generally 'muddying' what it means to be British.

Strengths from the Dutch Model

There are undoubtedly potential issues with a 'colour-blind' model; mainly the risk of overlooking the needs of an already marginalised group. However, the intention at the heart of this aspect of Dutch practice is profoundly important – that we are treated as unique beings rather than with the racial identification that is so prevalent in the UK. But how can we arrive at this point (and do we want to) given our political and historical narrative on race and, more specifically, how would a 'colour-blind' model sit within current youth work policy and practice?

Other virtues of the Dutch approach to youth work highlighted by UK delegates were that there appear to be less constraints on staff generally in comparison to the UK and therefore, youth workers seem more at liberty to deliver a universal offer to young people and be more spontaneous rather than adhering to a curriculum of work and the formalities this can sometimes bring.

Presentations

Tyler De Fretis and Marcus Senior

The unique context in which youth work is delivered in London was a point reinforced by [Tyler De Fretis](#). Tyler participated in the exchange, shortly before graduating from Goldsmiths College this year. She is originally from Nottingham and stressed in her presentation that she was struck by the differences between the two cities. She cited the relationship between the police and young Black people as a key example of where race is often used to obstruct young Black people from going about their daily lives and in some instances used as a means to criminalise and brutalise them. As someone just about to embark on her career in youth work, Tyler felt that our practice in the UK was effective in essence but informal educators needed to maintain an on-going understanding of the key issues affecting young Black people, and be committed to ending inequality, to ensure we can offer the best support.

Youth Work Manager, Marcus Senior, addressed a potentially challenging question raised several times throughout the exchange: **'Are Black youth workers ultimately better placed to work with young Black people?'** The consensus was that it is the correct skill-set that is paramount in being impactful with this (or any demographic of young people) not one's race. All young people should be afforded the opportunity to learn from a rich and diverse network of informal educators with a wide range of backgrounds and a wealth of skills. It was acknowledged that there is outstanding work happening in the UK and Holland by people of colour and White workers alike. The importance of strong and positive role models was recognised as being of the utmost importance to young Black people however; it was stressed that some of those role models should reflect the young Black people that we support.

Feedback from The Conversation on the Day - What is Working Well?

Participants named many useful examples of projects that have been proven to be beneficial in opening up the themes of race and identity in a meaningful way. There were many factors these projects held in common such as; providing opportunities for young people to challenge pre-conceived ideas about other people and places outside their neighbourhood. All the successful projects gave young people the chance to develop their soft skills in communicating effectively with their peer group - particularly when there were strong differences of opinion and open rivalry. There were platforms to have a voice and to discuss differences within cultural groups as well as between them. All the projects allowed participants to look at the concept of belonging and finally, they all adopted a creative approach, be that through an art form such as video or music; a task like cooking or learning about the settlement of Black people in Britain by actively engaging in a local history project.

What needs to be Urgently Addressed?

Although there are excellent initiatives being delivered, the strategy to improve outcomes for young Black people in London, and the UK more generally, is not consistently embedded across all services and the informal and formal sectors are not aligned. We need more joined up, aspirational thinking from a national perspective. Any strategy must involve the engagement of parents, carers and extended family members. We should be open to 'having difficult conversations in safe spaces'. A clear framework should underpin the delivery of our work otherwise positive outcomes are determined by the integrity of individuals and collectives rather than a universal commitment to end discrimination, which means that the fate of young Black people

remains a lottery – which is not good enough.

The question of a 'colour-blind' model was raised by some who asked - is it an approach that we, in the UK, should aspire to? There wasn't a definitive answer to this but one possible way forward is to not confine the topic of race and cultural identity solely to young Black people or to 'special' events in the 'cultural calendar' like Black History Month. Matters concerning cultural awareness are of relevance to everyone and therefore, should be embedded into mainstream curricula.

The call for a framework that is piloted and rolled out nationally is the beginning of a process of raising outcomes for all young Black people; local and central government must be engaged in these conversations, along with funders and other key decision makers. This backed up with training around racial identity and the continuation of the full range of projects that allow for an extensive exploration of what identity means, will empower young, Black people to find their place in society - our role is to help them successfully get there.

The event ended with a reinforced message from Michael that little progress will result from the event without strong leadership and management; all participants were invited to commit to work on one or more of the five actions prioritised as a result of The Conversation.

To this end, we have formed five **Task and Finish Groups**. The initial meetings will be convened at Guildhall between October and December 2017.

Calendar

Task and Finish Groups and Wider Steering Group

**African Diaspora Youth Work Training-
Racial Identity**
Wednesday, 25 October 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/african-diaspora-youth-work-training-racial-identity-tickets-38282296379>

African Diaspora- Wider Steering Group meeting

Tuesday, 31 October 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/african-diaspora-wider-steering-group-meeting-tickets-38317950020>

A conversation in Youth Work with Young People of the African Diaspora

Tuesday, 7 November 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/a-conversation-in-youth-work-with-young-people-of-the-african-diaspora-tickets-38282806906>

African Diaspora- Challenging Practice, Policy and Research

Tuesday, 21 November 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/african-diaspora-challenging-practice-policy-and-research-tickets-38282887146>

African Diaspora- Continuing the Conversation

Tuesday, 5 December 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/african-diaspora-continuing-the-conversation-tickets-38282930275>

African Diaspora- Developing a National Framework

Tuesday, 19 December 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/african-diaspora-developing-a-national-framework-tickets-38283026563>

Theory of Change

Tuesday, 12 December 2017

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/theory-of-change-tickets-38284184025>