

Section 3

all different
all equal

Why use peer group education for the campaign “all different - all equal”?

10 Points on why to use peer group education in a campaign against racism and intolerance

1. Peer group education fights racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance by means familiar to youth

Racial prejudice is strongly connected to group identity and group behaviour. It has much to do with how the individual perceives himself or herself as a member of a distinctive social and ethnic group in relation to other groups. At the same time, adolescence is a crucial moment in life development, a time when individual identity is formed. The loosening of family ties can give way to various options of group identity. Ethnicity as a clearly distinctive identity may become extremely important in this phase of life.

Peer group education takes its strength from unfolding the leadership potential of individual young people in the and relies on in-group values of youth. It transmits its message through these channels which play an important part in adolescence.

2. Each young person knows discrimination from his or her own experience

Racism and xenophobia is - amongst other things - a reflection of power structures: the powerful discriminate against the powerless.

The same can be said for ‘adultism’. By this term we describe the system prevailing in most modern societies which gives more status and respect to acts and opinions of adults as compared to the acts and decisions of the youth. Children and youngsters generally are told and taught that they have to wait until adulthood to be fully respected. Since young people have much less power than adults do, they are discriminated against. Thus, young people all know somehow what discrimination feels like. Not being taken seriously, having their legitimate wishes denied because you are a child actually is everyone’s first experience of discrimination in our society (for further reference see: Miller, 1979; van den Broeck, 1993; Jungk/Muellert 1989).

Racism is to me a disease for which we all have to find a cure. The hate towards people with a different colour of skin is stupid and ignorant. The fact that there are people in this world, that spend their life on nothing else than hating other people, makes me sick. At the same time it also scares me that people can be so blind with hatred. When I think about how much we know and how advanced our society is today; I strongly believe that racism should be something of the past. It seems that mankind still hasn't been able to successfully respect and understand that we are all equal.

Antonio Carras, 21 years,
lives in Norway, originally from Spain





Later in life young people form peer groups and gain strength through this new group identity. Strong peer groups and strong peer group behaviour is an answer to the power gap between young people and adults.

In the power struggle among - socially or ethnically - different groups of young people, peer groups and their values play an important role. If racist, xenophobic or anti-semitic ideas and intolerant behaviour prevail peer groups can form a vehicle for these ideas (in-group against out-groups). It is especially important to break these patterns and to substitute them with non-racist values and attitudes and the ability to welcome diversity. Peer group education would seem the system-inherent educational means for that.

3. Peer group education can create empowerment and a pride in leadership

Racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance in general have their source in feelings of powerlessness and suffered mistreatment. '*Human beings have to be mistreated systematically before they will mistreat others*' (National Coalition Building Institute, 1992).

Ultra-nationalist and racist, anti-semitic and xenophobic movements come in right here by manipulating the feelings of inferiority resulting from such mistreatment. They offer a seemingly superior identity based on violence and the oppression of others.

Peer group education empowers young people to take action and form leadership. It gives pride to what young people can achieve. These positive feelings make it easier to look at past 'hurts' sources of mistreatment.

4. Shared feelings open the way to welcoming diversity

Discrimination represents a form of group oppression. Groups of human beings are labelled as "dirty", "useless", "dangerous", "greedy", "violent" - without considering the character of individual members of a certain group. The victim, however, is hurt as a single 'individual' and suffers from the discrimination 'individually'. The pain of discrimination is expressed in shame and often enough, is turned into violent rage which aims at covering the shame.

By sharing experiences of mistreatment and the sorrow about it amongst peers, the shame can be shared and will eventually fade away. Individual identity and group identity are both strengthened through solidarity.

A feeling of positive pride in one's own identity arises and can free the way to accept the other one's pride in his or her own and different identity. Understanding oneself leads to understanding others. Diversity can therefore become a positive value in life.

"Black and white youth share common experiences and problems, like unemployment, schooling or homelessness. Instead of alliances there are often divisions and scapegoating. The attempt to discover racial and ethnic themes within the fabric of local urban life promises to be a slow and hesitant process but one which offers the possibility of creating alliances."

(Ritchie/Marken, 1986, page 17).

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5. Peer group education against racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism substitutes old group values by new ones

Racist and intolerant behaviour often forms a contagious behavioural pattern within a group of youth - and the same is valid of other forms of oppression such as sexism, discrimination against people with disabilities etc. Nobody in the group dares speak out and stand up against a racist group leader or a racist group. Thus the climate is slowly poisoned.

Peer group leaders create new role models which can set new values for the group and positive standards which can also become attractive for other groups members as well.

6. Peer group education against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance can create a snowball effect among a wider group

Racism and other forms of intolerance easily have a contagious effect on a group environment and can poison the atmosphere. Successful and attractive experiences of peer group education programmes, are soon shared with others in the group and can form a counter-movement. Successful action can also win over any adults who first may have been reluctant to join in.

7. Peer group education against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance keeps ideals alive

Young people who have had the chance to grow up without suffering heavy mistreatment can be full of idealism and love for the world and for human beings of all kinds. They have not yet been ultimately conditioned by greed, competition and chauvinism which is inherent in our social system. Their intuition tells them when wrong is done and when discrimination is happening.

Peer group action against racism presents a chance which enables young people not to loose these ideals but rather to recognize them as a common bond for changing the world. An "adultist" attitude (see above under 2.) would tell them that they will soon have to give up



Racism is to behave towards others as if they would not be the same human beings as you.

Dan Paunescu, 17 years.
Romania

their ideals and adapt to the “realities of life”. Peer group action against racism tells them that they are right in their perception of the world as it could be and empowers them to make ideals become true.

This empowerment can have an impact on other aspects of their lives which are not necessarily directly connected to the original issue.

8. Success motivates and leads to further successful action

Positive individual and group experiences and successful leadership give courage to go further. If a peer group could solve a minor racial dispute, in the youth club for example, through a common effort and peer group trained skills, this can create a positive impetus.

Peer group education gives opportunities for learning and training skills through organizing an anti-racist event, writing letters to the newspaper, speaking in public, leading a workshop etc. By passing on training skills, to deal with smaller racist incidents capabilities will grow to handle more difficult problems such as inter-group conflicts, or violence. Group dynamics among the peers are of much importance. Team building can help to change whole institutions in a slow but on-going process. It might lead from a first crisis intervention to crisis prevention by changing attitudes and the general atmosphere within the peer group and the institution involved.

9. Self-confident youth challenge the adults' world

Racist and xenophobic attitudes and disparities in the treatment of ethnic, religious or sexual minority groups might form a part of the structure of the school or youth organization that wants to launch a peer group education project against racism.

The reluctance of institutions to a) generally start anti-racist programs and b) start a peer education programme, may be encountered. Underlying fears to make necessary institutional changes, and the question of authority are often cited as reasons. By freeing creative forces in young people, peer group programmes against racism can challenge certain racist attitudes, the power structures and ethnic disparities within the system. It is young people's enthusiasm and the obvious turn for the better which can break through these institutional barriers.

“Establishing anti-racist work will depend to some extent on how far youth work is prepared to suffer the discomfort of recognizing both its own racism and its failure to develop a significant response to racism of its white clients.”

(Ritchie/Marken, 1986, page 7).



10. Peer group education can change the home environment of youth

Youth engaged in peer group programmes against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance will come home with new ideas of how the world could be. They will probably confront their parents with these values, or let them know about their new contacts with ethnically different groups. This could stir some tension but can ultimately lead to a shift in attitudes in their family. When parents see that their children are happier and more fulfilled they may let go some of their own prejudicial ideas. The snowball effect can incite new anti-racist activities in the home environment or neighbourhood.

You may wish to investigate the wider discussion on Discrimination and Xenophobia contained in Compass, for more reasons and thematic areas for using peer education.

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