

Improving communication skills

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham, external evaluator

At its essence yMIND is about dialogue as the antidote to the violence, bullying and discrimination the intervention tackles. It was therefore inevitable that improving the communication skills of participants emerged as a key theme in the delivery. While this demanded patience, perseverance and skill from practitioners, it became clear from practitioner logs that given the space, responsibility and coaching to discuss these topics, young people became more confident and skilled in communication.

What did good communication look like?

Communication was poor when young people disrupted discussions, and made jokes and abusive comments. Communication was good when young people were comfortable to talk openly about the topics of discrimination, violence and bullying. Many of the groups participating in yMIND made the transition from poor to good communication to some degree over the course of their participation.

The children expressed their very personal thoughts and did not believe that in so little time they would feel so comfortable to express themselves freely. (Greek practitioner)

What hindered good communication?

Several factors were identified as hindering good communication, including:

- Young person's lack of confidence
- A fear of exposing one's thoughts to a wider group
- When the focus of the discussion moved from a general handling of the topic, to individuals talking about themselves.

In addition, practitioners had to be careful not to dwell too long on any particular activity, and pay attention to when young people were ready to move on, or have a break. Being ready to adjust the plan for the session to increase energy, or allow more time to develop particular skills or themes, was an important feature of the good handling of yMIND sessions.

How was good communication achieved?

Several of the strategies described in case study 1. *Behaviour* on how to create the conditions for good behaviour in classroom interaction are prerequisites for good

communication too. In addition, practice showed how good communication was achieved within the context of yMIND.

Motivation to talk

The themes of yMIND are intrinsically of interest to young people. While the topics themselves can be delicate to handle, all indications across the project were that this was something young people did want to talk about – activities engendered debate and enthusiastic participation. yMIND can therefore be seen as a good topic area on which the development of communication skills can be based.

Compared to previous sessions, the group participates much more active in the session. In the "Harassment at School" exercise, everyone had opinions on the cases they wanted to express. (Bulgarian practitioner)

Breaking classroom norms for communication

What became clear in several cases was how regimented students' habitual classroom communication was:

All students raised their hands (as if in normal lessons) to indicate they would like to speak. Thus, open-ended questions were received with 25 hands in the air – not quite an easy task to solve. (German practitioner)

In many cases, the problem was solved by dividing students into smaller groups, or using activities to structure conversations. In both cases, the teacher moved away from being the central focus of classroom interaction, and so responsibility for leading communication was devolved more among young people.

Create some distance to enable young people to talk about the subjects

While there were many occasions on which young people were prepared to talk about the behaviour of classmates, members of their family and wider social group in relation to the topics of yMIND, in other cases the themes were too close to home. yMIND activities provided the distance required to depersonalise discussions, including simulation and role playing:

The fact that I played the victim helped to express thoughts that existed across the classroom about our theme. (Greek practitioner)

In this way, yMIND offered a staged approach to handling the topics of discrimination, violence and bullying, until eventually young people were in a position to conduct very involved and productive discussions on its subject areas.

For more detailed information on the yMIND project and interventions, visit our website at: <http://www.youth-mind.eu/>

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