

The case for parental engagement in Greece

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham, external evaluator

The themes of yMIND strike at the heart of the racial and gender discrimination that too often appears across all societies. As people seek stability in traditional beliefs and institutions, alternative ways of life can challenge their world view and can be unsettling, provoking resistance. In Greece, for example, leaders and practitioners who were introducing yMIND found they had some work to do to take parents and religious leaders with them.

The issue

Greek partners found that the role of parents in determining whether yMIND could be successfully implemented or not, could not be underestimated. In some cases, parents refused to allow their children to participate. In other cases, young people themselves voiced in class attitudes from home, that homosexuality, for example, was against their religion.

Adapting the approach to make the topics more accessible

On a practical level teachers simply selected out activities which would have brought the discussion onto the controversial topics:

We have dropped some suggestions on religion and homosexuality because we have reactions from parents who would not allow their children to participate in the action. These issues require more time for students to prepare and develop a relationship with us so that there is freedom of communication and trust between us. Messages can be passed on without specific reference to sensitive sections.

Engaging parents

Other practitioners and leaders made the suggestion that schools and practitioners could do more to involve parents, to overcome this distance:

*I want to extend education and exploit the school's potential to benefit parents too
Also, parents' and guardians' [care givers] clubs should also be involved in order to sensitize students' parents*

Such sentiments align with guidance given by the framework of effective teaching and learning, created for the yMIND project:

Involving learners and parents or guardians, in addition to school staff, creates a culture of shared responsibility for school issues, which is characterised by mutual support among all stakeholders.

The case for parental involvement was supported by seven of the fourteen studies included in the literature review¹.

Broaching controversial topics

Where issues are controversial, or run counter to religious or cultural beliefs, this clearly presents a challenge for practitioners - especially where these are reinforced by an authority, such a church establishment. How should they sensitise children on these subjects, without provoking a negative response more widely?

Some Greek practitioners did this by adapting the approach. In any case, the resources and activities for yMIND are designed to bring children and young people into the subjects gradually. Often they begin with a general discussion of discrimination, and in this way lead to a greater understanding of discrimination against particular groups.

For example, the 'Do qualities have a gender?' activity (no 12 in the diversity competence training handout²), supports an exploration of the cultural construction of gender, the fluidity of the concept and how individuals do not fall into clearly defined categories of 'male' and 'female'. Through such an activity, practitioners do not need to directly confront firmly held views, but begin the process of reflection and questioning – habits which also have value for education more generally.

Involving parents

Involving parents in their children's education provides multiple benefits, and yet it is something schools on the whole find difficulty in achieving. How practitioners go about involving parents will depend on local circumstances, attitudes and what opportunities are in place, but some starting points include:

- Use the process of gaining consent from parents to discuss yMIND themes with their children to begin the conversation of their importance
- Setting homework for pupils which requires them to speak with parents or other family members about the themes discussed in class – a selected yMIND activity might be suitable for this (eg the personality molecule, crumpled onions)
- Discuss in general terms at parents evenings the topics children have been exploring
- Invite parents to the whole school event element of yMIND, to involve them in the discussions, for example by exhibiting the creative materials their children have produced

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

¹ <http://www.youth-mind.eu/images/products/evidence-based%20principles%20for%20effective%20T&L%20for%20website.pdf>

² www.youth-mind.eu/images/ymind/gp1.pdf