

Pioneering a new educational forum

Liz Fekete reports on a debate on asylum-seeking children recently organised by students from Bristol's City Academy.

Most people in the UK will have heard of 'Question Time', the televised debate in which politicians and public figures are questioned by a studio audience about issues in the news. Bristol City Academy students, many from newly arrived communities or refugee backgrounds, appropriated the Question Time format for a half-day event called 'Time for Questions'. It was attended by over 300 students from across the city, as well as teachers, school governors and members of the community. On the 14-strong panel answering the students' questions were Kerry McCarthy MP (Labour Bristol East), local Liberal Democrat councillors, the prospective parliamentary candidate for the Conservative party, Bristol Defend the Asylum Seekers Campaign and a seven year old schoolboy, Norik, detained with his family for six days in 2006 and still fighting today for the right to live and study in Bristol.

The format and the debate

If you are part of an audience in a television studio debate, a warm-up act is provided to get you in the right frame of mind. This event started with young magician 'Billy the Kid' rousing the audience with an amusing display of tricks. With children from Bristol Brunell, Whitehall Primary, Cotham Secondary, Bristol City Academy and City College all seated and suitably warmed-up (parents and members of the local community, including asylum seekers and refugees were also well-represented), 13 year old Asiyah opened the debate. Asiyah, a prime mover in the 'Question

Time' event, told her young audience that she had seen several of her schoolmates taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre and held in conditions which she believed gave the lie to the government formula that 'every child matters'. When Asiyah quoted Martin Luther



King's injunction that 'an injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere' she was greeted with loud applause. But applause turned to laughter when she turned to adults on the panel declaring: 'It's our future, and it's time for us to take charge' because, 'let's face it, these older people aren't going to be around for ever'.

As author of *They Are Children Too*, which had been distributed to all Bristol secondary schools prior to the event, I was then invited to brief the young people on the nature of child detention in the UK. City Academy principal, Ray Priest, a panel member, explained that of the 1,300 students at City Academy, from 41 different nationalities, 111 were asylum seekers or others experiencing immigration problems.

Then it really was, time for questions. Feelings were running high. Five City Academy pupils (from

Somalia, Uganda and Jamaica) had faced deportation orders in recent months and 14 year old Mariama, part of the committee organising the event, also fears deportation to war-torn Liberia. But despite this, politicians, including those representing the Labour Party, were given a polite and sometimes enthusiastic response. In fact, the debate, as all the politicians agreed afterwards (even the Labour MP who faced the hardest questions), was of a very high quality.

Questions included: 'Why do people underestimate asylum seekers and refugees and make them feel uncomfortable?'; 'how would you feel if it were your child that was taken to a detention centre?' The question 'once a child has been deported, can they ever come back' was particularly pertinent as, only recently, a higher education student had been forced to return to Mauritius in the middle of his A Level course. Other questions included 'why do we put more stress on poor countries, by sending people back?' and 'how come we spend so much money on deportations, when the money could be used to support local services and people experiencing the credit crunch?'

After 90 minutes of sustained debate, the young people were ready to return to their lessons. As they piled out of the lecture hall, they were still talking about the detention of children and evaluating the different political responses to the issue. It was clear that they felt that their voices had been heard. Many of the students later contacted the steering committee to ask whether the debate could be staged annually.

Background to the event

One reason why 'Time for Questions' was such a success was that the student audience had considerable personal experience of immigration and asylum issues. About three months ago Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers and several students at City Academy, many of them young Somali girls, organised a one-day community event at Easton Community Centre where several families came forward and spoke movingly of their ordeals in detention and dawn raids during which they had been forced into vans and almost vomited from the lack of air. Six young girls, led by Asiyah, then approached City Academy teacher Paulette North with the idea for the 'Time for Questions' event'. A steering committee was formed comprising the six girls as well as the DICE group at City Academy (a separate group of 12 students from newly-arrived communities). Having secured the backing of the principal, and support from the Young Bristol campaign and the Camelot Fund, it was possible to flesh out the young people's proposal.

After the event, I spoke to Paulette North, who has taught at the Academy for nine years. She was clear that this event had been organised by young people with adults playing a supportive role. Much of the credit for its professionalism, Paulette explained, should go to Global Xchange, the international volunteer exchange programme for young people aged 18 to 25 run by Voluntary Service Overseas and the British Council. It was a stroke of good fortune for City Academy that Global Xchange had a project going in Bristol in the months running up to December. Two Global Xchange students, John Mark from the Philippines and Laura from Scotland, were seconded to the

Academy. Laura, who had had no previous experience with working with young people, or with asylum seekers, was appointed to act as Asiyah's personal assistant and given office space where she soon found herself surrounded by dozens of students anxious for advice on how to make their vision a reality.

When I caught up with Laura after the event, she was back at her computer recording the feedback of excited students. 'It went great. I loved the debate', one student enthused. In a few days time, Laura will be off to the Philippines to complete the second half of the exchange programme. 'Before coming to the Academy I thought that working in Bristol would be the easy bit of Global Xchange... But this has been the most amazing challenging experience with a very steep learning curve', she concluded.

According to Paulette North, the event was so successful because it dealt with issues which were in the children's own backyard. 'There are so many children in Bristol with immigration problems'. The 'external context' of their lives 'erodes their sense of belonging here'. The by-product of the event, she hoped, would be a greater confidence amongst such students who could now see that it was safe to discuss such issues'. The damaging nature of the external context was revealed when I spoke with some of them afterwards. While everyone wanted to talk about fighting on behalf of friends facing deportation, nobody wanted to identify themselves as an asylum seeker or refugee. As Asiyah had said in her introductory remarks, 'I don't like the terms asylum-seeker, refugee'. These were derogatory and divisive terms and what mattered to her was that we were 'all human beings'.

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An educative function

By the end of the day, it was clear that the event had led to a cumulative change in the attitudes of both teachers and students. As I walked the Academy corridors with Paulette, she was continually being approached by beaming teachers telling her how proud they were of all the students, that they had behaved so well and asked such intelligent questions. One teacher remarked of one student, 'I never knew she had it in her'. 'It was an educative process for the teachers as well', explained Paulette. 'Suddenly they see their children in a new light'. And 'if you do things that relate to the children's lived lives this also makes sense educationally. Education is about making sense of the world. The event made the kids think, it made them reflect'.

Even though the school day was coming to a close, members of the steering committee were not going home. A second after-school event was planned. A proud principal was there again to welcome parents and members of the community. He told the new, mainly adult audience that it was his strongly-held belief that 'schools have a role in shaping the society of the future. They have to be brave about taking a stand on what is right'. What City Academy did by staging 'Time for Questions' was to 'help young people understand complicated issues via a democratic process'.

And the impact of the day went still further. Throughout the day Paulette's phone had not stopped ringing. BBC Education, BBC Bristol Driveline, *The Bristol Evening Post* and the local radio station, Ujama, were amongst those looking to break the story of how a group of young people pioneered an exciting new educational forum. ■

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