

The Mulberry Youth Conference A Case Study



The Mulberry Youth Conference, organised by students and staff at Mulberry School draws together young people from throughout the UK and beyond to overcome difference and promote understanding while exploring pressing national and global issues. Students hear from a range of adult presenters whose speeches serve to catalyse discussions on a variety of issues. Throughout the day the emphasis is on student voice, student leadership, and promotion of international dialogue and understanding.

Conference History:

The Mulberry Youth Conference developed out of the school's long-term commitment to programmes promoting student voice and active citizenship. Mulberry school is a girls' comprehensive in East London serving a student population that is largely Bengali. As this is a fairly isolated community, the school has placed great emphasis upon programmes that give students the opportunity to engage with young people from different backgrounds. In addition, as a girl's school we believe it is vital to engage our students in programmes that help them to assert their public voice and take a lead role in community life.



As part of this effort, over ten years ago Mulberry sent a delegation to the United Nations Conference on the Rights of Women in Beijing, China. This led to our being invited to the United Nations International School youth

conference in New York, a conference to which we have sent a delegation for the past eight years.

In 2001 a group of students attending the New York conference were so moved by the opportunity to communicate with other young people from throughout the world that they returned to Mulberry determined to start a parallel conference in London. The Mulberry Youth Conference was born, created by a core team of four Sixth Form students and four teachers. Since then the conference has gone from strength to strength. Last year, over 40 Mulberry students were involved in designing and delivering the conference. Guests include delegations from throughout Britain, Slovenia and the US.



“An Incredibly Moving Experience”: Order of the day

The Mulberry Conference is aimed primarily at students in Years 11-13, providing a context in which they may come together to address pressing global issues. Conference topics vary from year to year. Sometimes the topics are broad catch-alls such as “Diversity and Justice” which enable us to bring in a potpourri of national and international issues. At other times we focus in on a particular theme such as “The Impact of Mass Media.”

The conference day is divided into three distinct sections. The first are the presentations by the outside speakers. Speakers are asked to speak for 20 minutes on an agreed upon topic, followed by 10 minutes of questions. We usually hear from three or four speakers over the course of the morning. In

addition, sometimes we have chosen to run a Question Time style panel discussion, in which panelists address questions from the floor.

The second section of the day is the Discussion Groups in which groups of 15 students, led by two Mulberry students, explore their reactions to the morning speeches. At the end of the Discussion Groups students are asked if any of them wish to make a speech before the conference as a whole. If so, they are invited to submit a card indicating their topic. Following lunch, in what is often the most powerful part of the day, we hear from as many of the student speakers as time allows. It is hard to describe how powerful and moving it is for young people to hear other's their own age earnestly addressing the key issues that face the world and pledging to become active in addressing these.



Following student speeches, the conference breaks up allowing students to attend smaller workshops on topics of particular interest to them. These workshops, often presented by outside NGO's are focused on specific actions or activities young people can become involved in in order to make a difference in their communities.

Finally the day is brought to a close with a speech from one of the student organisers. It is important to note that at no time during the day are any members of school staff permitted on the stage: the day is run by and owned by the students.

The Impact:

The Mulberry Youth Conference has a profound impact upon students attending the conference and upon those involved in its development. Student organisers have testified to the greater sense of confidence it has given them, and the feeling that it gives them that they can do whatever they set their mind to. Over the course of conference preparation the students learn how to envision, plan and organise a very complex event. We have also instigated a programme whereby each year's conference leaders and presenters play a key role in organising and training the lead team for the following year, creating a self-perpetuating programme in which students are transformed into trainers.



This year the group organising the Mulberry Conference went on to independently plan and organise their own community conference involving over 400 attendees and raising over £3,000 for charity. I can think of no better testament to the conference's ability to inculcate the Entrepreneurial spirit in young people.

Finally, the entire school has benefited tremendously from the conference. This impact has grown as the conference's international element was developed. The presence of students from abroad has a tremendous impact in a mono-cultural school like Mulberry, suddenly opening us to the world. The opportunity for our students to meet young Americans, hear their points of view, and develop friendships across lines of national and religious difference is one that none involved will ever forget.