

A collaboration between Eton College and Falinge Park High School in Rochdale: finding commonalities

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Dr Iro Konstantinou

Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning, Eton College



Seemingly, Falinge Park School, a comprehensive school in Rochdale, might have little in common with Eton College, a selective public school in Windsor. This project aimed to uncover some of the commonalities between the two schools through discussions of wider social issues.

Over four sessions in the Lent/Spring and Summer terms in 2021, five students in Year 9 from each school came together to discuss topical issues which are affecting student lives and society more widely. Our aim was to encourage students to find commonalities in their experiences and understandings of how these issues might affect people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and localities. Students met on Wednesday mornings, with two teachers (one from each school) leading the session and a researcher who provided some of the materials and observed the interactions. Eton boys would normally have a tutorial (which was replaced with these sessions) and Falinge Park students would also have a tutor session. Each session lasted around half an hour and was hosted on Zoom.

The sessions were planned as follows:

- Session 1 - definition of human rights and discussing human rights stories (a theme which aligned with Falinge Park's initiative at the time)
- Session 2 looked at free speech and social media
- Session 3 focused on the right to protest
- Session 4 was on mental wellbeing

Even though we had provided the teachers with relevant materials, we encouraged them to allow students to allow the conversations to develop naturally and divert from the topic if students found a topic particularly interesting. Our aim was to build the student relationships rather than enhance their knowledge as such. We found that a lot of the discussions had a focus on mental wellbeing, which was expected since these sessions were happening during Covid-19 which was found to have a negative impact on students' mental health and wellbeing.

At the end of the four sessions, we held two separate focus groups with the students from each school.

Key findings:

- Students from both schools had preconceptions about the other school. Falinge Park students were worried that the Eton students would be too posh and they would not be as good as the Eton boys in the discussions and they might embarrass themselves or their school. Eton boys believed that the Falinge Park students might be hostile towards them seeing as Eton is often portrayed in the media as a privileged school with negative connotations.

- Students from both schools found that these preconceptions were unfounded. Falinge Park students found that once they gained confidence, they were equally good in the discussions. Eton students found that their counterparts at Falinge Park were very kind and the discussions were built on mutual respect.
- Students found the opportunity to 'just have a chat' as a great way to meet students from other schools and make sense of what is happening in the world. These informal discussions on current affairs provide the opportunity to find solutions but also learn from each other and understand how others experience similar situations. This enables students to learn about the lived experiences from those from different localities and backgrounds.

Key recommendations:

- Provide similar opportunities for students to come together and have informal conversations where they get to know each other and find similarities in their experiences. These can be small scale (4-5 students from each school) and short (half an hour weekly for one or two terms).
- Where possible arrange for some face-to-face interactions but the majority of the sessions can be held online.
- Provide some resources which will serve as the foundation for the discussions but be flexible as this will allow students to discuss issues which really matter to them and will engage them in a more meaningful way.

Below you can see some representative quotes from the focus groups which exemplify the main findings above.

Preconceptions and getting to know each other

Falinge Park High School (FP) and Eton College (EC)

I thought the Eton pupils would be really posh and they would speak posh English – I was surprised when they turned out to be normal. (FP)

I was afraid of meeting them in case I embarrassed myself but I felt once we got to know each other and understand each other as the meetings progressed we shared more ideas. (FP)

I thought I had to act differently but very quickly relaxed around them and it was nice. (FP)

As the lessons went on I gained more confidence while at the start I just stayed silent. (FP)

Quickly realised they were normal people talking normally. (FP)

Did not expect them to be the way they were. It feels like there is a stigma, how Eton is portrayed in the media. (FP)

At Eton we like to think that everyone else is less privileged than us, maybe not as eloquent. But this was wrong. There were great points they were making. (EC)

I thought that they would not like us or would not give us a chance. But I think we showed them we are normal people and can understand other people's ideas and they can understand ours. (EC)

I thought there might be hostility against us, if they have heard of us in the media. I thought they might be aggressive but they were totally the opposite. There was a lot of respect. (EC)

Key learnings for students

The topics we talked about I did not have so much knowledge but Eton knew so much and I felt I was lacking knowledge not because of my school but because they pay more attention to the news and things like that but I don't always read these things. This made me realise what I need to do. (FP)

Not sure knowledge-wise, [Eton] did not learn anything [from us] but [that] low reputation schools can maintain the same type of standards. (FP)

At the end of the day it was just a group of people having a chat about what is going on that we might not talk about very much, we might talk about it on social media, read in the news. But we don't usually talk about these things, we try to make sense of it in our heads, so having that chance to talk about it, was good. At school we talk about sports and stuff like that, not about current affairs. (EC)

Trying to find solutions was really beneficial. Usually we just see the problems but we don't really try to see how we can solve them. It might not be that we will go out there and do something straight away but it is about thinking about the solutions. (EC)

Suggestions from students

Perhaps rather than have debates on topics we should time getting to know each other, get to know you sessions, not just formal to build mutual understanding. (FP)

We would visit each other's schools and show them round. They are different but we can see that we are the same through our discussions. (FP)

Just really being active with other schools on a small scale like this project. It does not need to be controversial topics or debates or big events. It is just about getting people talking and getting to know each other. (EC)

There are a lot of sporting events but this is about competition but making partnerships and friends requires having time to talk and getting to know each other. (EC)