

Challenging extremism locally and in the wider world

[Accrington Academy](#) in Lancashire worked with local artists to tackle extremism, through an intensive programme of dialogue with students, reflecting on local and then wider world issues. This led to the creation of a public art installation and a Community Ambassador programme.

What did the school want to achieve?

Accrington Academy aims to promote positive relations both in the school and in the community in which the students reside. The opportunity to work with [Curious Minds](#) on a project to develop young people's ability to challenge extremist ideologies, fitted well with this aim. The project was designed to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to articulate, challenge and debate complex and often controversial ideas around extremism in a safe environment, and to challenge stereotypes and prejudice.

How did they set about doing this?

Twenty-five students aged 11-16 were chosen to work on an intensive programme of discussion and creativity. They came from a range of backgrounds and ethnicities and included those lacking confidence or communication skills or with challenging behaviour.

The students participated in five two-hour dialogue workshops facilitated by a visual artist and staff trained in [Philosophy for Children \(P4C\)](#). In the first session, the students were given a selection of newspapers and asked to make individual collages of stories which caught their interest. The workshop leaders had made a brave decision not to plan beyond the introductory session in order to work on issues raised by the students. This paid off as discussion about stereotyping in the media led to students raising the even greater stereotyping in popular video games.

The students brought in video games, analysed the characters and conflicts presented and compared them to the way conflict is dealt with on a confrontational television talk show. They then developed their own version of the programme based on characters from their video games, which allowed them to air concerns and grievances in a safe way through role play and comedy, highlighting the irrationality of both violent extremism and stereotyping.

A workshop with a community police officer explored how the students felt about their local community and how they could improve it, and another about what they would look for in a friend led to discussion about issues of trust and segregation within the local community.

The students then worked with the visual artist to create an image to represent how they felt about their place in the community, portraying hopes and fears. The images were then made into tile prints from which lanterns were created.



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Meanwhile, a sound artist interviewed the students about their experiences of the workshops and recorded interviews in the town centre about how passers-by felt about their local community. The recordings were made into a sound collage to accompany the visual exhibition which was displayed in an empty shop in the shopping centre.

The students invited passers-by into the exhibition and asked for their views, hopes and fears for the area. Discussions focused on how the students and local community could work together to create a proactively positive community. Over two and a half days, 677 people signed the visitors' book.

How well did they achieve their aims?

"The impact of the project was positive and transformational and we achieved far more than I expected," says Koser Mahmood, English teacher at Accrington, who coordinated the project. Sharing feelings about the local community expanded into discussion about how issues in the wider world were reflected in the students' attitudes and local community. The students developed increased confidence, communication skills, group work skills and an ability to express their opinions.

"The most significant aspect of the project relates to students' awareness of their place within the community and a realisation that each and every person is an important part of it" says Koser. *"A common vision has been created and a sense of belonging and awareness of life opportunities has been established."* The students took a range of positive messages and views into the community. One student inviting a passing adult to visit the shop was asked, *"What are you selling?"* *"Nothing but goodwill,"* was the student's reply. *"The words and images were very challenging and ambitious... If more adults could share the views expressed by pupils here, the community would be a much safer place,"* wrote one visitor in the comments book.

The project has produced 25 Community Ambassadors who are keen to share their vision with their peers and the wider community. As well as contributing to work planned by the school, members of the group are developing individual skills. A Bengali girl who wrote poetry about her experiences of the project has developed into a talented rapper with an important message to communicate and has won a bursary to be mentored by an established poet.

What do they plan to do next?

The work has had numerous spin-offs. The project will run again next year with a different group of students. Learning is being disseminated through whole school, issue-based days in which the Community Ambassadors help to lead workshops and discussions. The ambassadors will be leading workshops with local primary and secondary schools entitled 'Ten questions to save our community' which will culminate in the creation of a giant picnic rug. A Community Role Model resource pack is in the process of being developed based on the Accrington workshops and will be available to schools across the UK.

With thanks to Koser Mahmood. Case study © DEA. Pictures © Accrington Academy. Researcher: Gillian Symons.

