

WORKING WITH BLACK GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN.

(A training course for black women youth workers).

1. BACKGROUND

The setting up of this training course for black full-time, part-time and volunteer women youth workers had three main aims:-

- (i) to look at and discuss work with black girls and young women within a setting created for black women youth workers.
- (ii) to provide support and the sharing of ideas for black women who are often isolated and work with very little support within their club/project or centre.
- (iii) to challenge the training role black women are often asked to play.

Although I have been employed at Lambeth Girls Project for almost two years and there are other black women working within Girls Projects or with job briefs to work within this area, both myself and other black women feel that the image of work with girls and young women is that of white women working with target group. In the past black women had been 'invited' to facilitate sessions on 'work with black girls' which labels this work as a specialism within an already specialist area of youth work. This however further marginalises work with an already marginalised group of young people and can often put a burden on the black women workers to 'tell us how it is done'.

There has also been little opportunity for black women youth workers only to come together in training events which solely address the needs of black girls and young women. The main reasons which have prevented this previously are related to the actual position, relatively low numbers and geographical spread of black women in the youth service - the majority of whom are either voluntary or paid sessional workers which leaves little or no time to meet together with other black women for support, advice and guidance. Although the majority of women who attended the course were from the borough of Lambeth, a few women came from both Hackney and Lewisham and as far as we were aware the course was the first of it's kind to be run.

2. WHY A COURSE FOR BLACK WOMEN YOUTH WORKERS ?

The opportunity arose for me to initiate the setting up of this course from my participation in the Inner London Education Authority in-service course for workers with either a training brief or an interest in training and who are wanting to develop their skills as a tutor. The main assignment for all students was to assume the tutor role in a substantial piece of training which was to fall within the duration of the actual course - this however did not automatically mean that the participants had to design or create the actual event itself although several course participants did so. Being a student on this course raised several questions and thoughts in my mind as to the role I had already played or may in the future be asked to play in training exercises, events and courses. Both black women and men in the 'caring' and 'people' centered professions are often asked to assume the role of tutor within sections of courses which directly relates to the needs and or 'problems' of black people and can quickly become labelled as 'race specialist' whether or not they choose to assume that role.

I felt that it was important that black workers should be designing, organising and tutoring their own training events for black participants and that by creating a course such as this one it would attempt to break down these stereotypical training roles. The tutor team consisted of black women youth workers from across I.L.E.A. who were engaging in work with girls and young women - often these women are overlooked and gain little recognition for their experience. The course was offered for black women only in order to create an atmosphere of strength, support and sharing of issues relating to our work which was felt would have been difficult if not impossible to achieve in a group of both black and white women. On reflection this is seen to be true as much of the sharing and learning which took place would not have happened had white women been present.

3. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It was not absolutely clear at the initial stages that the course would be aimed specifically for black women youth workers although it was clear that the tutor team would be made up solely of black women. Therefore a general questionnaire was sent out to all the women youth workers in Lambeth to try and assess their training needs. From the responses received the needs of black women to meet together were highlighted quite clearly and it was due to this and the need to limit numbers to a maximum of fifteen participants that it was felt that the course should be designed for black women only.

The first meeting of the prospective tutor team took place in June and we had two subsequent meetings in July and early September. Individuals from the team who were working in pairs for their session also met together and came back to the large group with ideas for their workshop.

As a co-ordinator, I secured funding from the Youth Service Training Unit for tutor fees, equipment and refreshments and also arranged the venue although it was held at my place of work. This was not a particularly good idea, on reflection, as the Project is in the north end of the borough, in an area which is badly lit and is not easily accessible to women with physical disabilities or to women with small children in pushchairs or prams. The area of 'venue' should have been given more consideration particularly for a borough wide event and this is something that I shall have to be more aware of in the future.

A letter was sent out to every woman worker who had responded to the questionnaire informing them of the tutor teams' decision and although we had anticipated several responses from white women we in fact only received one letter. From the onset it was also felt by the tutor team that if the course received a favourable response that it could be repeated in other boroughs although it was also felt that other black women workers should be involved.

Although the planning and preparation began in May, I still feel that the actual course could have commenced at the end of September as the summer period fell in between which left little time for planning in September. But the constraints of the in-service training course which I was participating on meant that the training assignment had to be completed by the third week in October therefore due to this a later start would not have been possible.

THE COURSE

The course was run on an evening basis at Lambeth Girls Project for four weekly sessions and consisted of three discussion and one practical workshop. Thirteen black women responded to the publicity sent out and although the number of women who attended fluctuated an average of six women attended each session (although a total of fourteen different women attended individual weeks). The course was run on a Monday evening - this being the night in Lambeth when there is the least number of girls only nights taking place which meant that women workers would be free to come along although it did mean for the majority that they were attending in their own time.

SESSIONS

Session 1 - Detached and daytime work

- Primarily a discussion workshop with the tutors posing several questions. Areas discussed included contacting black girls, what we offer black girls and young women, differences between work with black girls and white girls, and what does work with black girls and young women mean to us as black women workers.

Session 2 - Setting up and maintaining Girls Nights

- Primarily a session where the tutors talked about their experiences as workers attempting to set up girls only provision in youth clubs projects. Shared good ideas for programmes for black girls and young womens groups, including keep-fit, discussion on relevant health issues, black theatre trips, creative writing, poetry reading, cooking, African arts and crafts, recording sessions at music studios etc.

Session 3 - Black womens challenge to work with Girls and Young Women

- Primarily a discussion session where several questions were posed. Areas discussed included advantages of black women working with young black women, demands black women workers can make on the youth service and supporting each other as workers.

Session 4 - Practical session - Batik, Tye-Dye and Jewellery Making

- A session which enabled the participants to learn the history and technique of some simple African crafts which could be used in our work with black young women. An arts and crafts booklet with full details of how to do crafts was produced by the tutor for the participants to take back to their club/project/centre.

Issues raised on the course

(i) Support for Black Women Workers

This theme came up constantly throughout the course as many of the women felt isolated and lacking support. They felt that there were few other black women they knew of whom they could ring up for advice, help etc. It was noted that there were also difficulties in getting a regular support group together as many of the women, whether full-time or part-time were 'stretched' in terms of their workload already and that a regular meeting for

them as black women would not be easy to arrange. However, some workers did say that a training event like this one gave them a lot of support and gave them a new lease of life to go back out into their work.

i) What Black Women Workers Offer Black Girls and Young Women

Discussions centered around what black women could and did offer to their groups and individuals they worked with. Knowledge, experience, time, friendship, support, advice, understanding based on experience of being a black female in a racist society, political education, cultural activities, offering experiences outside their immediate environment/surroundings were some of the functions of the work.

When discussions centered around this area there were positive feelings of strength, and solidarity in the work that we are doing as black women.

i) Contacting Black Girls and Young Women

Several ideas were floated as to where black girls and young women could be contacted. Black organisations, friendship groups, local estates, schools plus social services, intermediate treatment and probation. It was felt that family and more particularly parental contact was important in allowing girls and young women to attend groups and outings - also transportation i.e. mini-bus was an added advantage.

v) Racist Incidents

This area was discussed on many occasions as workers had experienced racist incidents towards their group when they went out on trips, holidays etc. Workers felt that incidents of this kind could completely spoil the fun, and enjoyment of the activity but that they had also been used as cohesion for the group when discussion had taken place about the incident after it had happened. It was felt that we were particularly vulnerable as a group of black women when we were in certain situations i.e. a group of black young women and a black woman youth worker driving a mini-bus; holidays outside London or when we were demanding to be treated fairly such as being given adequate service in restaurants etc.

Despite being the target of racist incidents it was felt that the experiences gained by being out together as a group of black girls, young women and workers far outweighed the feelings of anger and disgust that came about immediately after any particular situation.

v) Negative Images of Black Girls and Young Women

It was felt that the role of the black women youth worker was to challenge the negative stereotypes that were given of black women and black people generally in Britain and to present wherever possible positive images of ourselves. It was agreed that there was very little of this depicted on a mass basis but that within our own circles, families, communities there were several examples that we could find. Also the importance of employing black women with specialist skills for events and sessions for both black and white girls was discussed and that resources and contacts should be shared amongst the group.

Early on in the course we discussed the issue of the 'problem' centered approach that we felt had been attached to work with black girls and young women and felt that this label was a result of both personal and institutional racism directed towards the young women and that the 'problem' was the white workers and the system and not the young women themselves. Being able to discuss this area at least amongst black women workers was extremely valid and important since often as isolated workers we felt it could be sometimes difficult to openly challenge these assumptions and negative stereotypes.

GENERAL COMMENTS/EVALUATION

Although it is difficult to evaluate the long term effects of such a course, by the end of the four sessions it could be seen that the aims which were identified had been achieved. There was a general feeling of support and solidarity of being black women working together in this situation and the feedback from participants led the tutor team to believe that training exercises of this nature are of extreme value and importance and should be developed further.

Some of the participants said that they were a little hesitant about attending an event for black women only as they had not previously done so, but felt that their experiences gained here would lead them to do so in future. Many participants expressed positive feelings of firstly meeting so many other black women youth workers from the same borough and secondly being given the opportunity to share their experiences with in such a supportive environment and to learn from others with more experience in the work than their own.

The tutor team also feel that the course was successful in meeting its original aims and it is hoped that a similar London wide event could be organised soon.

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OCTOBER 1984