ENABLING YOUTH TO CREATE CHANGE

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Youth see the world differently because the imprints of their experiences are distinct from adults. Our perspectives are the result of what is valued and normalized in the environments in which we live. In order to contribute to society in a meaningful way, the conditions in which youth act must enable their creativity and innovation. Youth interact within multiple communities, including virtual and physical ones. In each of these cases youth can be influenced by, and exert influence on, their surroundings.

One way in which the virtual community exerts influence on youth is through television. The experience of watching television has drastically changed since cable was introduced in 1948. In 66 years, we have seen a slow yet steady progression away from non-representation of minority groups towards integration and inclusion. As greater and more equitable representation of minority groups continues we can expect an equally positive growth of cross-cultural understanding. Minority group representation in media can have a normalizing effect and ultimately contribute to a reduction in racism and homophobia. Unfortunately, discrimination does not disappear with the advent of selective progressive programming; modern television continues to play-up stereotypes along gender, cultural, and class divides. The influence exerted through predictable plot lines that reinforce stereotypes can just as easily be imprinted on youth as the increasingly progressive stories and characters.

In the physical realm, it is critical to recognize that the multiple dimensions of diversity affect groups differently. One key reason why youth need to be brought into a dialogue about establishing anti-discrimination practices in municipalities is because discrimination is multidimensional. Municipalities cater to the entire community, therefore the best decisions are made collaboratively, among all stakeholders, in forums where people can connect on a personal level and see the impact of their actions. There needs to be a focus on the opinions of youth about what does not work and what can be done in the future. Youth must be encouraged to articulate innovative ideas because they can see possibilities that fall beyond traditional, adult approaches.

In order to have an effective anti-discrimination strategy, key stakeholders within the municipality need to share responsibility for being advocates for change. This begins by allowing youth to generate ideas that are taken seriously, be part of the decision-making process, and execute decisions that positively impact their communities. The experiences that have shaped the values and concerns of youth are different from adults. Ideas about what the world should look like are different due to the virtual and physical communities they have been exposed to. When adults tokenize youth and enforce adult-like expectations (board meetings, suits and ties, and PowerPoint presentations) it dampens youth's ability to realize new solutions to persistent problems. Adults need to

accept that youth are equipped to contribute to their communities in important ways, and that they will do so in different ways. While their approach may seem unconventional and unsettling, it is exactly what is needed to make change.