YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A ROLE AS LEARNERS AND LEADERS

Jennifer Kuhl loves connecting local and global issues, and is intrigued by ways that health, education, environmental activism and social justice intersect. Since graduating from International Relations (UBC), Jennifer has worked as an educator in Zambia, and as a democracy campaigner, a health research assistant, and a choreographer in Canada.

It takes considerable effort to choose a way of being that differs from that which is familiar. Old habits die hard and this can be a concern when the habit is as problematic as discrimination. If racism and discrimination are learned behaviors, habits we hone over time, recognizing this way of thinking early in life could be a powerful way to raise a generation that is less discriminatory than the previous one. Identifying discriminatory worldviews before they become normalized is more effective than trying to change an entrenched habit or belief and this is one reason why it is important to engage youth in anti-discrimination work.

Young people have a strong ability to envision a better world because they are not combating decades of experience with the way things "already are." This penchant for innovative thinking is exemplified in young scientists like Ann Makosinski from Victoria B.C, who at fifteen, wondering whether it was possible to power a flashlight with heat from a human hand, built one that did exactly that. Involving youth in anti-discrimination work has the potential to spark effects similar to involving young people in science– they bring a fresh vision about possibilities. In Vancouver a campaign for more inclusive transgender policies in schools was led by 17 year-old Roan Reimer. Reimer campaigned for policy changes and then took part in drafting the new policies to ensure that transgender teens will face less discrimination in Vancouver schools. Reimer's work is a great example of young peoples' capacity to imagine a less discriminatory future and, to be willing agents of change to create that future.

So how does a municipality engage youth in anti-discrimination work? Opportunities to learn about discrimination are a necessary beginning and ideally happen in such a way that young people are allowed to learn from each other, rather than from a lecturer. By creating safe and supportive spaces for young people to learn about the ongoing impacts of racism and discrimination, in a manner that encourages empathic understanding, municipalities can play an important role in helping to create a less discriminatory culture. Young people who understand the harm caused by discrimination have the potential to be exceptional educators of others. To see the power of youth as educators, one can look at the role passionate kids played in encouraging adults to recycle, where young people's contribution arguably contributed to a widespread cultural shift.

Policies implemented without education have the potential to backfire. This is particularly true of those pertaining to discrimination and racism as people may respond to new policies with the attitudes and prejudices they already hold. The Vancouver School Board recently implemented a policy of acknowledging First Nations Territories at all school assemblies. While this is laudable, the policy will not necessarily reduce the discrimination faced by Indigenous students and

unless work is done to help students understand the context of the acknowledgement, this gesture has the potential to be seen as tokenistic and might even exacerbate racism. If the municipality were to pair the policy with a program that encouraged young people to learn about the history of colonization, and the ways that the colonial and oppressive history still impacts the relationship between settlers and indigenous people in Canada, students might be able to become ambassadors for a less discriminatory culture.

Including youth in municipal work to reduce racism and discrimination has the potential to be effective and important. Addressing discriminatory beliefs in the younger generation, before they are entrenched, might be easier, and could create the opportunity to leverage young people's capacity to see possibilities for change that escape the creativity of adults. Municipalities can play a valuable role in engaging youth in anti-discrimination work by bringing them together in safe spaces where they can learn and lead. Doing this well will create an environment of empathy and understanding young people need to become advocates for a more accepting and less discriminatory culture. If done well, the involvement of young people in municipal work will benefit both the young people and the municipalities that involve them.