Panel 1: Discrimination and Identities

This panel ask respondents to consider what a focus on the concept of discrimination can tell us about the ways different identities converge to shape the experiences of discrimination for children and young people? (gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality).

General observations

Reading the reports, it was evident that there was a significant commonality across different causes of discrimination and its impact on identity. I was struck by how the overwhelming word that emerged to describe discrimination was powerlessness. But multiple themes emerged relating to a sense of invisibility, isolation, imposed assumptions and the corrosive impact of discrimination. And what was sought from all the young people was dignity, inclusion and respect. It was also clear that whatever the nature of the discrimination, it is compounded by being a child or young person – that in itself becomes a basis for exclusion.

But from the perspective of young people with disabilities four key messages stood out for me:

1. Not being special

I need to be “normal”

‘I want to be accepted for who I am’

Real challenges arise in constructing a positive identity when so many forces conspire to define you as ‘lesser’, problematic, difficult. Adolescence is period when young people are working to forge and explore and test out their emerging identities – that is made infinitely harder when the external world imposes a pre-defined and largely negative perception of who you are and who you are able to become. It also constructs a relationship of ‘other’. You are ‘them’ not ‘us’.

Much of the language of disability seeks to construct an identity for children and young people as ‘special’ – special education, special needs, special children. Repeated and powerful demand from CWD of wanting to be ordinary, accepted, included. Interestingly, it echos the words of the yp in the STM on mental health, and also several of the reports this year. A critical dimension of adolescent identity is to be accepted among peers, not to be different and certainly not to be special. CoE research with CWD, all indicated that they never reveal their disability online as they fear rejection, bullying, discrimination. Implications that the digital environment affords them the chance to have an ‘ordinary’ identity, and do the same things in the same way as any young person does. In this way it serves to break down those barriers of otherness and difference. But also perhaps leads to further hiding away of disability which can serve to reinforce isolation and separation.
2 Wanting role models to identify with

One of the young people observed that no super-heros look like them. This can be a huge challenge for children with disabilities. So important to know that it is possible be who they are and still to aspire to a successful future. Problem is further compounded if they are gay, from a minority ethnic group or asylum seeker etc. *Story of a child thinking she would grow up without a disability because she saw no-one around her who was adult and disabled.* When children with disabilities are excluded, lack the appropriate support or denied opportunities, we are taking away hope, and the chance to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. Urgent need for more visibility of adults with disabilities to be proud of, to emulate, to reflect possibilities, choices, potential. Need for teachers with disabilities – strong recommendation in the GC on inclusive education.

3 People making assumptions

Many of the comments documented the impact of being perceived negatively - leads to loss of self esteem and to self doubt – can be corrosive of children’s well-being

‘There is a lot of overgeneralization and people should never assume what others are capable of’:

Focus tends to be always on what they cannot do or do less well than others. If always over-protected, no opportunity to explore potential and to learn to take risks. Powerful impact on self esteem and self worth. Difference in construction of identity depending on whether born with an impairment. Never known the experience of being treated as equal, so have internalized the sense of failure, lack of respect. *Example of blind children in Nepal - the amazing experience of discovering that he was better at maths than his sighted buddy. By contrast, South African children role play of teachers at school.*

4 Differences for different groups

Despite many common factors, exclusion can be compounded more for some groups of young people facing discrimination than others. For example, children from indigenous communities, migrants, those from minority ethnic groups, who experience profound structural discrimination and rejection in the wider society, may be fully embraced within their own communities and share a common culture, language and aspects of identity. However, children with disabilities and some LGBTQI young people may be on their own in seeking to explore and gain recognition and respect for their identities. And the experiences differ for children with different disabilities – they are not a homogenous group. They can feel different, excluded and alone even within their own families. They may be isolated and ‘othered’ by those closest to them. *Boy in school in Nepal. Only when he finally was able to go to school did he experience any love or friendship.*

Moving forward

Acquiring a positive sense of identity is contingent on being valued, reinforced as a person of worth, seeing your successes, being valued as a friend. But when society sends a message to the child that they are expected to change or adapt in order to be accepted, it tells them that who they are is not good enough, that they are not worthy as they are. The need to challenge this approach
came through powerfully in the report – we need to change and adapt the environment to include and accept all children. Only way to achieve that goal is through a rights-based approach to inclusion, that seeks to remove the barriers that children with disabilities face in every dimension of their daily lives.

a) **Culture and social attitudes** constitute the most powerful barrier. “I would love to have the power to secretly change people’s attitudes towards disability’. Need for training, awareness raising, improved knowledge across society, but particularly among those adults working with or whose work impacts on children. Important to understand difference between equality and equity. Also vital to move beyond conceptualising inclusive education as simply being a process of transferring children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Need to transform polices, cultures, values towards respect for diversity.

b) **Physical environment** – adaptation is necessary for all aspects of the environment - transport, communication systems, buildings, parks, need for investment in universal design. Too often the physical world is built with a narrow set of presumptions about who is using it – in a world designed largely by men, how long has it taken to accommodate spaces for mothers and children in the public arena? And what message does that convey when you are, effectively rendered invisible in the civic domain? And how does that impact on your sense of identity and value?  *Conference example*

c) **Listening to children and young people** – imperative to start listening, and taking into account what children say. *In NI Advisory Group, children said first time anyone had ever bothered to find out what they thought or needed.* Throughout the reports a recurring message stands out, all too familiar, that they are not heard, their views disregarded and under-valued.

d) **Targeted support** – appropriate technology, tactile rooms, quiet spaces, support staff, education plans. Too often children with behavioural difficulties, autism, are excluded from school rather than appropriately supported and helped to function within the school environment. In the disability report, and recurring throughout our Council of Europe study, the children highlighted the lack of available but necessary aids and adaptations, the failure of staff to understand how the technology works, blanket rules on mobile devices that fail to acknowledge different needs. These failures serve to marginalize them and impede their learning and inclusion. It also sends a powerful message that their needs don’t matter, and so, by default, they don’t matter either.

**Summary**

The experience of living in a world that consistently fails to recognize, accommodate and therefore value who you are, undermines the capacity for young people to construct a positive identity at a time in their lives when this is already challenging.

The reports highlight enormous insight and passion for change. It is our responsibility to build on that commitment to make a difference and facilitate and support a process of breaking down barriers, forging alliances, and building a more inclusive future that fully respects their rights.