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Home > 'No Outsiders' and the Importance of Solidarity Between Marginalised Groups

'No Outsiders' and the Importance of Solidarity Between Marginalised Groups

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'No Outsiders' is a resource for teachers. In the last few weeks those two words have become synonymous with division for some members of the Birmingham Muslim community. For some members of the LGBTQ community, they have become synonymous with a battle for visibility and rights.

Designed by a Birmingham Teacher, Andrew Moffat, who was made an MBE last year for services to equality, No Outsiders aims to support primary school teachers teach the Equality Act. It helps children understand that those sitting beside them in class may worship in a different way, have different hobbies, look different or have two mummies. It focuses on all protected characteristics, giving children a valuable reference point when they come across something with which they are not familiar. The ethos of this programme takes me back to a teacher who was influential when I was a schoolgirl. She said on a great number of occasions that while there is difference, all people are of equal worth. No Outsiders teaches children to recognise this worth.

Protests began outside Andrew's School, Parkfield Primary School in the Alum Rock part of Birmingham a few weeks ago. Alum Rock's community is largely Muslim, and protestors have linked their opposition to the programme with LGBTQ 'lifestyles' not being compatible with Islam, and that 'promoting' them is injurious to the rights of the Muslim community. I am mindful as I write, that these protestors do not speak for the whole Muslim community, in the same way that I, as a lesbian, do not speak for the whole LGBTQ community. The protest group has drawn, in my view, false opposition between the LGBTQ community and Islam. One of the schools of thought that has been propagated is that this is not homophobia, because

LGBTQ issues are simply not part of Islam, and therefore should not be taught to Muslims. That is then compared with the idea that if one is not Muslim, it doesn't make one Islamophobic. It is a problematic argument attempting to dress up religious prejudice as the defence of a minority group.

What has been interesting is the response from the LGBTQ community. A small group has formed locally, called Supporting Education of Equality and Diversity in Schools (SEEDS), made up largely of members from the community. The group, with which I have had some involvement, has had very thoughtful debates about the best response. All have registered a view that they do not want to come to a point where the LGBTQ community is viewed as being in direct opposition to the Muslim community. Both groups suffer due to bigotry and hate, both are minority groups, both are protected by the Equality Act. Indeed, some members of SEEDS reached out to the protestors and have met with them twice, with mixed results. As a Quaker, I am moved by this action and support it. Consistent with the Quaker peace testimony, the group has sought to bring understanding on both sides.

On the surface this is a simple issue of bigotry towards a minority group. However, there is more than one minority group to consider here. As the debate has continued, it has become clear that No Outsiders is seen by some in the Muslim community as a tool of Prevent, the Government's programme to identify and tackle extremism. It is worth noting at this point that Prevent is designed to identify extremism of all kinds, including that which led to mosques in Birmingham being attacked last week. However, for many in the Muslim community, Prevent is seen as a prejudicial tool. The protestors believe that No Outsiders is a de-radicalisation tool aimed solely at Muslim children. This is not the case. It is about teaching children about difference, acceptance and respect. If it also prevents children from growing into adults who hold extreme views, then surely that is a good thing for us all? Within a wider context of Islamophobia, which no doubt all of these protestors have experienced, this is a highly sensitive area of discussion and this must be considered as solutions are sought.

At a time when mosques have been attacked in my city, understanding between minority communities is vital. And there is evidence of this in Birmingham in spades. At an event after the Islamophobic attacks, the LGBTQ community was visibly there ? and welcomed. These are not mutually exclusive groups.

I do fear for the children living in families where they hear words of fear and hatred towards LGBTQ people. They are the ones who will suffer most. I grew up under Section 28, and I will be forever grateful to that teacher for teaching equality, even if she couldn't teach LGBTQ equality specifically. Shame, self-hatred, confusion and fear are hugely damaging, and we all have a responsibility to challenge that. No Outsiders is part of the solution for all of us.

Sally Xerri-Brooks is a Quaker and lives in Birmingham with her wife Rachel and their daughter.

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