

Ester's notes on the first session at Hideaway youth club on Tuesday 10th September 2019.

I arrived at the youth club at 5pm. My colleague Ali was in the office with two youth workers taking about the RAD project and the evening session ahead. The conversation was swirling round different places. I came in halfway through so I wasn't sure what was going on – it seemed like we were planning the session, but I couldn't quite see what the plan was.

Both youth workers are from Greater Manchester. L runs the session and T is another youth worker. T seemed interested in the project and said that her dad was a miner- she remembers her dad striking in the 80s and following it all on the telly. Later she told me that it wasn't a major hardship for her family because her mum worked so they had money.

We went into the session. It was busy. Some girls were sitting on the sofa area looking at their phones and chatting. Two others were sitting around the table, one of them was stripping tissue paper to create gift packaging. She continued to do this for the whole session. Other girls were on the chairs and one girl was on the computers.

The session had started. I was a bit unclear what was happening so just chatted to the stripping paper girls. Ali wanted to show the girls the BBC documentary about the 1980s and so got one of the girls to help her work the TV. Eventually Ali got it playing and tried to talk to the girls about it. It was difficult as the youth workers didn't pull the girls into a circle to introduce us or the project, but rather left us to it. It was quite noisy, so Ali started half-shouting over the top of the noise about the project and the film. I talked a bit to explain the project. The girls listened but didn't say much. We had a brief discussion about whether things have changed for girls in the last 30 years. One girl said that she is freer than her mum as her mum was a housewife and didn't have the same opportunities when it comes to work / careers. The girls also said that they are less free in other ways – there is more pressure to look a certain way. Freedom is a theme that comes up in other youth club sessions we have done when we talk to young women about social change.

We started watching the film, but the sound wasn't very loud. The youth workers were interested and paused what they were doing to look at the screen. They both recognised people on the film as some of it was filmed in the local area and commented on this, saying their names out loud. One of the youth workers (T) talked to me a lot about those times and the miners' strike and was clearly interested in the period. This was a 1 on 1 conversation however that didn't include any of the young people so eventually I said I had to go as I wanted to hear what the young people had to say.

I went back to talking to the girls in small groups. Somehow, we got to talking about egg donation – prompted by one girl who is studying science and was discussing whether we have the science / technology yet to make fertilised embryos without sperm. This led to me asking the girls if they would donate an egg to their sisters if their sister couldn't have a baby (they all had at least one sister). One girl said no, and this led to a huge confrontation / discussion that went on for nearly an hour, with new girls joining in the conversation as they arrived at the youth centre or drifted over to where we were talking. It felt uncomfortable at times – as if the girls wanted to pick on this one girl, who didn't seem to be friends with any of the others. She held her own though – although she became annoyed at times. The

conversations were interesting about who owns an egg and whether an egg is a life or just an egg. It seemed to me that this would not have been the hot topic in a youth club thirty years ago.

At some point during the session Ali and I spoke with youth worker T and agreed to try doing some poetry writing with the girls. Another youth worker had arrived by then – the mum of one of the girls. She was with us and told us that the girls were a bit tired and all over the place because it was the first week back at school. Don't take it personally – she told me. It was all a bit confused again because the youth worker T thought we were going to do it using post its and had gone off to find them (and couldn't in the end) but Ali didn't realise that T had gone to do this and thought we had been left to our own devices and started the activity. As it was so noisy this meant Ali had to half-shout to be heard. Ali managed to get the girls to write a poem using the sentence starter 'Girls are...'. Different girls contributed different lines. It kind of could have worked but the space wasn't set up right. The girls had interesting things to say but it all got a bit lost. Some of the girls sitting around the sofas didn't want to take part at all. They were on their phones, making little videos of them dancing. Another felt tired and was lying on a friend's lap under a blanket. Different girls arrived later and another youth worker did too. The session is very relaxed with people drifting in and out. All of this felt very familiar from other open access youth work sessions I work in – chaotic, flowing, uncertain, with little golden moments that evaporate as fast as they are created. I hadn't realised that this was how this group operated though – I had assumed that a 'girls group' would involve sitting round in a circle doing activities together and having discussions, but in fact this is a different version of the 'girls group' where young women have sole access to the youth centre for the evening to hang out, eat and take part in activities as they choose.

Eventually Ali and I decided we should go. I tried to suggest to the group lead that she talk to the girls when we weren't there to find out what they thought and whether they wanted to work with us. But she wanted me to talk to them. I went round and told the girls about the project in mini groups of 2 or 3. They all said that they were up for it. Talking about the project led to some interesting conversations about sex education. The girls hadn't had any at school and reported some of the unhelpful myths and comments from their mothers that they had learnt. This seemed like a topic they were interested in. Artistically, some were really interested in performance. Others weren't.

There's clearly lots of enthusiasm for debating, discussing and getting involved and lots of appetite for creative work in this group. It's going to be tricky to work in an open session where the girls are doing their own thing though and I'm not sure how we will set up a safe space or group working environment. This is our challenge – to see what it is possible to do with the data in this open access youth work space and find out what methods of engagement are possible.