

# Generation next

Tracy Brown explores the ways that Amsterdam's diversity prepares its youth to be tomorrow's global citizens

Amsterdam's children live in one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world: 219 square kilometres that's home to more than 180 nationalities. While development organisations such as Oxfam and Unicef push for the worldwide promotion of global citizenship – preparing children to value diversity and be responsible world citizens – Amsterdam's youth are already entrenched in multiculturalism, every day.

Experts say that creating more chances for kids from different backgrounds to come together will maximise the benefits that the city's diversity offers its youth and better prepare them to be future world citizens, be they tenth-generation Amsterdammers or 'global nomads' from far-away lands.

'To be successful in the future, children need to be able to integrate beyond their own community,' says Shawna Snow, founder and director of Reckoning, an Amsterdam-based organisation that uses art as a vehicle for character education.

Shayna Schapp, Reckoning's art director, says that while multiculturalism abounds here, there are still barriers between cultural groups. 'There's definitely a division in this city,' she says. 'There's still a lot of fear, a lack of understanding of other ways of being, and one thing we're trying to do with our organisation is build bridges.'

Reckoning approaches its mission – 'to help build communities we all want to live in' – by looking for common ground. 'We began by asking ourselves what, in a pluralistic society, is our commonality? What do we all value?' Snow says. 'We found there are globally accepted pillars of character that all humans value, including trust, respect and citizenship. We focus on these and we can go into any school or mosque or synagogue or church, and everyone can agree that these are important values.'

Emphasising common ground is not to say children shouldn't identify with the culture or nationality into which they are born, educators caution. According to the Netherlands' Canon for Global Citizens, global citizenship 'does not stand in the way of other identifica-

tions; what it comes down to is looking for connections'.

Snow concurs: 'Our message is that we don't have to agree philosophically, but we can go beyond saying that we're "tolerant". What if we can embrace each other and actually be friends?'

Nathalie Oldenstam, director of Kids van Amsterdam Oost, has been using culture to connect children in her neighbourhood with one another and with the city since 2006.

Her vision – 'a group of multicultural kids discovering and sharing their talents in singing, dancing, music and painting' – focused on giving kids a sense of belonging.

'The Transvaalbuurt was one of the most difficult neighbourhoods to live in,' she says. 'We had a lot of drug dealers and I worried for the kids here.'

Oldenstam organised music, dance and art lessons for 20 kids the first year, which culminated in a neighbourhood performance. Some kids got so much experience that they went on to appear in the televised competitions 'So You Think You Can Dance' and 'Move Like Michael Jackson'. The group now has 54 members, aged 6-23, who represent various religions and ethnicities, and its benefits go beyond honing artistic craft to broadening the children's experience and connecting them with the wider world around them. 'We're giving them a safe place where they can be themselves,' Oldenstam says, 'to sit with us in a group and to share their story.'

Creating more opportunities for the city's diverse population to share their stories and work together is key to building connections and promoting global citizenship, says Reckoning's Snow: 'We all want a sense of belonging. When a community focuses on the positives of human nature, there's better integration.'

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