

BBC New Report - James Cleverly Account Write-up

James Cleverly visited Colfe's School on the morning of 23rd March 2009 and we were fortunate enough to be able to interview him on current issues relevant to us as a group, and his new position as Boris Johnson's 'Ambassador for Youth'.

James immediately set up a relaxed environment for us to talk to him and as he had once been a pupil at Colfe's, it felt comfortable to question him – almost as though he was an old friend. In the initial moments I was drawn to his height but I was unsure if he really was extremely tall or if his authority and importance had magnified his stature!

James sat in front of us and in turn, some members of the class each asked him a question that was important to them. Personally, I am concerned about local crime and the many stabbings in London which are publicized, so I felt it important to raise the issue. My chosen question was: *'Have the numbers of killings increased or dropped in the past few years? Why do you think this?'* James answered that the killings have slowly been increasing but he told us about policies that the police are putting in place. One of these methods was to send out more police patrols to search suspicious people for weapons.

In the immediate, James mentioned his colleagues are aiming to give others a thorough education about the dangers of carrying a weapon. They were also attempting to create more youth centres for young people. These would give them a sense of belonging to a wider community instead of having to be in a gang, which could be manipulative and ultimately, destructive. An interesting fact that James mentioned was that a misconception of gangs is that the public believe that young people join gangs so as to run away from order and discipline. However, in truth, gangs often have a strict set of rules, harsh punishments and an organized hierarchy. This is certainly not escapism for the better!

Not specifically discussing killings, but focusing on generic gang crime a member of our class queried, *"What do you think has caused the recent increase in gang crime over the years?"* James instantly disagreed with the question, "There hasn't been a recent increase in gang culture recently. If you tap your history teacher on the back they'll tell you that medieval apprentices had gangs and there were open riots in the street. However, there has been a recent increase in weapons culture, and to prevent people from carrying a weapon, the police have set up 'Operation Blunt' incorporating 'knife arches' and 'knife wands' - with harsh penalties for carrying a weapon." On a softer scale, he emphasized the need to increase self-confidence, so that people do not feel the need to carry a weapon to defend themselves.

I thought that the historic view point was a fantastic one and found it fascinating (and comforting) to hear of the various methods that are being implemented to target this huge area of concern. Knife Arches and Knife wands are reassuring as they tell us that the police are watching over us and keeping us safe.

James also made us aware of stereotypes in our thinking. He stated that people often complain about 'gangs' who are really only groups of youths that are 'hanging out' together. Some shady characters could also be as scared of you, as you are of them. An example that James gave - *Whilst walking down street, two burly 'hoodies' walk towards my friend and I. We are pretty big too but inside we are thinking 'Oh oh – trouble! Here are some big guys!' They walk past us and we sense they are on edge but they were most probably thinking the same as us.*

It is difficult for us to stop our preconceptions running away with us when we feel intimidated. It was positive for us to be told this viewpoint.

As a community, we questioned what roles we could undertake to reduce the risk of local violence. James thought that this was a very good question and clarifies that on our own, we cannot do too much, but as a community - we can set up more areas for youths and can help people feel like they belong somewhere. This left a heavy topic on a lighter note and I felt as though every one of us could make a difference.

Another issue that was raised and the class felt was important to hear was James' view on what the government could do to prevent underage sex. He was positive in answering and attentive to preventing these situations. He thought that the main drive would be to provide young people opportunities such as a good education and various activities in their free time that would deter them from using sex as an alternative. More should be done to keep them occupied with other hobbies such as sport, music etc meaning that they don't need to use sexual intercourse as a time-filler.

He spoke of the different perspectives of interviewers and politicians and certain methods that are used to divert questioning or make individuals be seen in a particular light. They often want different stories than the other party e.g.:

Interviewer: "Isn't it embarrassing that you were caught speeding on Tuesday?"

Politician: "Ah yes ...on that particular day I had a very interesting conference where..."

Interviewer: "Yes, but isn't it a bit shameful that you nearly ran someone over whilst speeding, but you always preach that road safety is very important?"

Politician: "Oh absolutely! Road safety is key if we're to..."

There was another perspective that James spoke about, and one that ties into our current work with the BBC News Report. This was the role of the media in provoking responses from the public, or fuelling gang settings. For example, the news both on TV and in newspapers often increases the intimidation factor. 'Boy stabbed to death' makes for a better headline than 'Boy does charity work'.

I conducted a separate interview with James which I found extremely insightful. It was great to have a one-on-one discussion as it allowed me to ask extra questions and this enabled me to penetrate deeper into the certain subjects. I asked him:

"What actions are you going to take in the future to insure that tragedies like Jimmy Mizen do not happen again?"

James imparted that as part of the London Mayor's office, he urges schools to install knife "arches" (a walk-through metal detector) and introduce hand-held scanners to tackle knife crimes among the youth. He told me more about Operation Blunt, which is a London knife crime initiative, aiming to reduce the number of knives on London's streets. The operation attempts to arrest offenders and those carrying knives on the streets, whilst raising awareness about the severe consequences of carrying knives.

An obvious stance whilst talking to James was his view on our looming participation with the BBC School Report.

Q: How do you feel about the BBC School Report as an opportunity for young people?

James was very positive about the potential of the project. He emphasized that it was a chance for us to have a voice and that it could be a very good opportunity for children to learn about the way media works, cultivate good skills for working as a team, and it would give us a broader understanding of life for the future.

Since the interview with James, I am even more conscious of the importance of the media and what responsibility we have today for the School Report. We have an obligation to get the truth to the public and reveal as many sides to the same story as possible – with many facts and quotes. It was fantastic to have the opportunity to meet James and he certainly helped broaden my thinking and awareness ahead of tackling the BBC School Report.