Community cohesion: where next for schools?
A briefing for teachers, NGOs and policy-makers

This briefing from Think Global and Runnymede Trust builds on the findings of a high-level round table hosted by Baroness Walmsley in December 2010. It explores how NGOs, teachers and policy-makers can continue to promote community cohesion in a policy environment which aims to reduce prescription and promote school freedom, including no longer inspecting schools' contributions to community cohesion.

The key message that emerges from this briefing is that promoting inclusive and cohesive communities is not an add-on for schools. It is a core part of what education is for in an interdependent, globalised world. Whether or not schools have a formal duty to promote community cohesion, every school needs to prepare its pupils to grow up in the world we live in, with its unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented uncertainties. Respecting, celebrating and interacting with people from different backgrounds and cultures are important parts of the preparation that schools need to give their pupils.

The briefing offers initiatives and ideas to help schools to meet this need and what those working in the field of education can do to support schools. By implementing these measures, schools will be helping to create an education system fit for the 21st century. Simultaneously, they will be helping to create and sustain inclusive, cohesive communities locally and globally.

Context

Since September 2007 schools have had a duty to promote community cohesion ('the Duty'). Every school has been inspected on that Duty since September 2008. However as part of the Coalition government drive to remove burdens from schools, the duty to promote community cohesion will no longer be inspected by Ofsted.

Nevertheless, research from Think Global suggests that interventions in the classroom can make a real difference to this agenda. For example, half (47%) of people who have not learnt about the wider world at school are uncomfortable with there being so many races and religions in Britain today, whereas amongst those who have learnt about the wider world in schools only a third (31%) express this discomfort.

This briefing seeks to explore how schools can make the most of the new freedoms promised by the government to build on the progress of the past few years in relation to community cohesion. As Ofsted

ceases to inspect the Duty, what opportunities do schools have to ensure their students learn to respect and interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures in the UK and around the world?

In writing the briefing we draw on the findings of a high-level round table organised by Think Global in December 2010 as part of its wider programme on the Global Learning Charter. Speakers at the round table included: Baroness Walmsley; Sir Keith Ajegbo; Henry Tam, Communities and Local Government; Hetan Shah, Think Global; and Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Runnymede Trust. Several teachers and head teachers attended and actively contributed to the discussion, as well as representatives from Ofsted, local authorities, subject associations and other civil society organisations. All comments in this briefing are anonymised and taken from round table participants unless otherwise indicated.

What was the duty to promote community cohesion?

In 2006 the Government introduced a duty on all maintained schools in England to promote community cohesion, to be inspected by Ofsted. The Duty on schools came into effect on 1 September 2007 and inspection by Ofsted commenced in September 2008.

Community cohesion tends to be defined in policy terms with four strands:

By community cohesion, we mean working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.[i]

Guidance on the Duty makes clear that 'community' includes:
- the school community;
- the community in which the school is located;
- the UK community; and,
- the global community.

The guidance also makes clear that the Duty refers not only to cohesion across ethnicities and religious groups, but also across different cultures and socio-economic groups.

Why does promoting community cohesion matter for schools?

It is a truism to say that British society is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and made up of diverse socio-economic groups. Young people live in a globalised society and economy, and schools are at the forefront of this diversity, dealing daily with issues relating to identity, race, religion, and social and economic inequality.

Many schools recognise this and respond by developing a curriculum and school ethos that encourages

pupils to respect and interact with people who are from a different background or culture.

Other schools still need further encouragement to recognise and respond to the diversity of modern society. One round table participant described a situation in a largely mono-cultural school admitted its first black pupil. The head teacher was caught off-guard by the attitudes of the other pupils, saying *"Well I just don't understand it because we didn't have racism before he came."*

With schools facing these challenges daily it is vital to provide them with the tools and support to promote community cohesion effectively.

Where next for cohesion in schools?

Efforts to create change in schools can broadly be characterised in two ways: top-down or bottom-up. Top-down efforts are recommended to, or imposed on schools from higher up in the education system. Usually they come from the Department for Education or non-departmental public bodies. Inspecting the duty to promote community cohesion is a good example of a top-down initiative. Bottom-up efforts are either developed by schools themselves or by partners that they work with on a small scale. Successful bottom-up initiatives gradually spread through the education system from school to school.

In general terms it is easiest to create change when both top-down and bottom-up efforts work in parallel, for example in combining the inspected Duty on schools with initiatives such as school linking that allow schools to meet the Duty.

The current government has said that it wishes to reduce the number of top-down requirements placed on schools. If cohesion is to remain a priority in schools, the removal of inspections relating to community cohesion implies that bottom-up initiatives will need greater support and investment if they are to continue to create change.

The round table discussions centred around two themes: community cohesion in a context of greater school freedom and choice; and innovative ways to promote community cohesion in practice.

School freedom and choice

Two of the strongest policy themes to emerge from the newly-formed Department for Education are those of school freedom and choice. A pared-down curriculum and strong rhetoric about teacher and head teacher freedom should mean less prescription over what is taught in schools. Free schools, an expanded academies programme and a growing number of faith schools combine with the independent sector to create a huge diversity of formal education provision.

These themes are both threats and opportunities to cohesion in schools. The duty to promote community cohesion, whilst not perfect, *"is engaging schools [and helping them] move in the right direction."* As Ofsted ceases to inspect the Duty in

the name of school freedom, the quality of cohesion work in schools is likely to become much more variable.

Some teachers are adamant that *"if it's your priority to [promote community cohesion], you're going to do it anyway".* In this context, greater freedom in the curriculum will allow committed teachers to incorporate more cohesion work into their day-to-day teaching. However, the strength of the Duty was that it encouraged schools for which community cohesion was not a priority to focus more on this issue. Without the Duty, these schools may fall behind.

In turn, greater choice amongst parents about which school their children go to may exacerbate segregation between pupils as it may encourage greater divisions along racial, religious and socio-economic lines (Weekes-Bernard, 2007).

To make the most of these potential school freedoms, NGOs and policy-makers will need to ensure that they offer teachers the tools and confidence needed to tackle some very tricky issues. It is not easy to talk openly about issues such as racism at school. For example, if a child makes a racist remark in a classroom, how should a teacher best respond and how should they best counteract the misinformation and prejudice informing that remark? Teachers need high quality training and development to respond effectively to such challenges in the classroom

Existing and innovative ways to promote cohesion in schools

The Duty has proven to be a good way to encourage schools to consider their role in promoting community cohesion. However, schools are burdened with many regulations and have little time to comply with additional duties. In some cases the Duty led to a tick-box response from schools and was something of a blunt instrument with which to stimulate change.

Looking forward, there are a wealth of measures, both existing and new, that NGOs, policy-makers and head teachers can use. We list some of these below. Not all of these measures have cohesion as their starting point; as one round table participant noted: *"like happiness...you don't get cohesion by aiming for cohesion".* Nevertheless, all of these measures help young people to look beyond themselves and their immediate lives. Research indicates that encouraging pupils to look beyond their immediate horizons and learn more about global issues helps them to respect and interact positively with people from different backgrounds and cultures in the UK (Hogg, Shah, 2010).

To promote community cohesion schools can focus on initiatives and ideas such as:

- linking with another UK school through the Schools Linking Network;
- promoting a model of *"democratic schools"* where pupils are encouraged to participate in decision-making, incorporating

processes such as restorative justice in cases of bullying;

- UNICEF's [Rights Respecting Schools](#);
- promoting sustainability in schools through the [Sustainable Schools](#) initiative;
- teaching about equality in the curriculum; and,
- using resources available on the [Global Dimension website](#) to help children and young people to think critically about issues such as global poverty. This will help them to empathise with people in different parts of the world and so promote global citizenship.

As schools get to grips with the new freedoms discussed above, they will have new opportunities to incorporate these initiatives and ideas. For example the curriculum review announced in January 2011 aims to slim down the national curriculum, with the prospect that teachers and head teachers will have more space to use their own creativity and judgement.

The most significant challenge policy-makers and NGOs are likely to face in this new environment is how to make schools aware of the opportunities and resources available to them to promote cohesion. Continuing professional development (CPD) and initial teacher training (ITT) remain the most powerful ways to influence what and how teachers teach, yet round table participants noted *"the tremendous demands on ITT already."*

One solution may relate to the Government's proposal for the expansion of school-based ITT,

through a network of training schools. Encouraging these training schools to develop or maintain an ethos of community cohesion throughout their work will help to ensure that ethos is transferred to new trainees, even if the content of training is not explicitly about cohesion. Regular CPD opportunities will of course remain vital in this new environment. Again, the challenge will be how to persuade teachers and head teachers that this training should remain a priority in the absence of an inspected Duty.

If NGOs and policymakers wish to see cohesion and inclusion remain a priority, resources will need to be made available for bottom-up initiatives and opportunities for training and development amongst teachers. Leaving this issue to a purely demand-driven approach will mean that it will not be a priority for those schools that do not already see it as a core part of what they do. As a result, many young people will not receive a well-rounded education.

The big picture: what is education for?

Participants at the round table were clear that we cannot and should not consider community cohesion in schools in isolation. Instead, the importance of promoting inclusive and cohesive communities through schools is one aspect of a larger debate: what is education for in the 21st century?

There is a clear need to update our education system so that school prepares young people for life in an

interdependent global society and economy that offers unprecedented opportunities but also unprecedented uncertainties and risks.

Seeing community cohesion as part of this bigger picture encourages us to link the agenda to wider school standards and attainment, as well as to issues such as the citizenship curriculum, democracy in schools, issues of identity, pedagogy, sustainability and global learning (Kotler, 2010). This means moving away from specific projects and theme days towards schools genuinely embedding cohesion in their own curricula.

Seen in this light, whether or not schools have a duty to promote community cohesion may be less important than issues such as: the overall quality of teaching and learning; whether schools are supported to offer outstanding citizenship teaching; the importance placed on school councils and other fora for democracy and participation; a rigorous approach to equality in school; the role of the school as the centre of its local area; pedagogies that encourage critical and creative thinking; and education about the wider world.

We can expect young people to emerge from such an education system not only with knowledge of curriculum subjects but also confident to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures within the UK and globally, able to understand the similarities and differences between people from different backgrounds, ready to work in a globalised economy as the BRIC countries become economic leaders, and willing to challenge prejudice, discrimination and injustice.

Further reading and resources

DFES, 2007, *Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review* (The Ajegbo Report), London: DfE. Available at: www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-00045-2007

Hogg, Shah, 2010, *The impact of global learning*, London: Think Global. Available at: www.think-global.org.uk/resources/item.asp?d=2076

Kotler, 2010, *Supporting schools' deep learning in the changing educational context*, London: Think Global. Available at: www.think-global.org.uk/resources/item.asp?d=3474

Weekes-Bernard, 2007 *School choice and ethnic segregation*. London: The Runnymede Trust. Available at: www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/SchoolChoiceFINAL.pdf

Global Dimension website: www.globaldimension.org.uk

Rights Respecting Schools: www.rrsa.org.uk

Schools Linking Network: www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk

Sustainable Schools: www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools

[All cited 9th February 2011]

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[i] Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, speaking in Parliament on 2 November 2006.