

Beyond agendas: supporting schools' deep learning

In this thinkpiece, Angie Kotler from the Schools Linking Network considers the ways in which schools, teachers and young people explore issues of identity, diversity, equality and community. In recent years, agendas such as the duty to promote Community Cohesion, Sustainable Schools and the Global Dimension have offered multiple starting points. As the future of these initiatives becomes less certain, Angie reflects on the underlying deep learning for which they have provided impetus, and shares SLN's experiences in supporting schools' journeys to equip young people to play their part in society.

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Introduction

Who am I? Who are we? Where do we live? How do we all live together?

These are vital questions that are at the heart of the work of the Schools Linking Network (SLN) and with which schools, students and teachers across the country engage from a range of different starting points. In recent years, agendas such as the duty to promote Community Cohesion, Sustainable Schools and the Global Dimension have offered multiple opportunities for schools to approach these issues of identity, diversity, equality and community. As the future of these agendas and initiatives becomes less certain (or more certainly finite) it is important not to lose sight of the underlying deep learning for which they have provided impetus. With over eight years' experience of developing programmes for schools and diverse communities to work collaboratively, and associated whole school thinking about issues of identity, diversity, equality and community, I reflect here on what we at SLN have learnt about schools' journeys to equip students to play their part in a diverse and complex society.

Background

In 2007, the Schools Linking Network was established as a national organisation, at the request of the Labour governmentⁱ, in order to support schools and local authorities across the whole of England to fulfil the newly-introduced duty to contribute to community cohesion. SLN grew out of a district-wide initiative that was originally set up in Bradford in 2002 in response to two major concerns. Firstly, a large disparity in achievement existed between young people of different backgrounds: children, and particularly boys, of Pakistani heritage and those from white British working class backgrounds were not achieving well in comparison to their white middle class peers. Secondly, riots in Bradford in the summer of 2001 and the events of 9/11 highlighted the ways in which different communities in the city felt separated, not only physically because they lived, worked and attended schools in different areas, but more significantly because of fear of the 'other'. This fear, which comes from lack of opportunity to meet and form relationships with people from different backgrounds, was then fuelled by media hype following both the riots and the attacks in the USA.

It felt imperative to address both the issues; that of disparities in achievement and that of segregation, and importantly not to see them as distinct, because it was clear that there was considerable cause and effect in both directions. The picture is a complex one, linked to economic decline and demographic change, where it can be hard for young people to see a future. In particular, boys and young men growing up feeling disengaged can struggle to find their own motivation and direction. This can easily turn to frustration, which in turn can lead to aggression and scapegoating of others. The challenge was to see if working with a diverse mix of people in new

contexts to provide a sense of purpose, connection and belonging would make an impact on both achievement and cohesion.

This was the backdrop to the original Schools Linking Project which went on to develop over several years, bringing together groups of children and young people from diverse backgrounds across the district of Bradford to work on a range of projects addressing the issues of identity and diversity, equality and community. This work has been evaluated and shown to achieve many of the desired goals – hundreds of young people have engaged and achieved things they would never have expected to and have gained a sense of pride not only in themselves but also in where they live (for reports and case studies, see www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk).

Introduction to the duty

Community cohesion, a term coined in reports both prior to and after the riots in northern towns referred to aboveⁱⁱ, was, however, always a rather problematic term. For a long time it was considered to only apply to places such as Bradford, where there are large immigrant communities, and perceived or real segregation between these and 'host' communities. However, the duty on schools made it clear that community cohesion was a broader and infinitely more complex issue, addressing our society's struggle to understand itself and how to behave. Immigrant communities and an influx of new migrants are clearly one challenge, but this is set against a backdrop of schisms in English or British society that are just as much about class as about ethnicity or religion.

In the national arena, it has probably taken three years of working with the duty for many schools to gain an understanding of it and more importantly, to develop a local and appropriate interpretation. We find it helpful to think of the journey of exploration as one of concentric circles rippling outwards, starting with the question 'Who am I?' to 'Who are we?', 'Where do we live?' and finally 'How do we live together?' The duty has provided a significant impetus for schools to grapple with these questions.

Many paths to the same outcome

The Global Dimension and Sustainability agendas also look at these questions and, though our work with schools developing local linking projects, we saw that many schools, students and teachers had come at the same issues from different starting points. Issues of environment and sustainability are also important elements of the questions 'Where do we live?' and 'How do we live together?'

A small rural school, for example, may have a strongly established global element to its curriculum. Through linking with schools in other parts of the world and reflecting on the learning from this, it may discover more about its own community, and explore what matters to us all and what skills we all need to live together in a healthy and mutually supportive way.

There are many paths to approaching issues of identity, diversity, equality and community and SLN is currently in a process of distilling the essential learning of all of these pathways. We can now say with confidence that it does not matter whether we have a legal duty to contribute to community cohesion; it does not matter whether we have an official sustainable schools strategy; it does not matter whether we have an official government line on global learning. What matters is that as professionals working with young people, we have a strong sense of the skills young people need in order to be healthy, competent, confident, articulate and responsible young people leaving our schools and taking up their place in society, wherever they are in the world.

Essential skills

Through our work, we have found that young people are hungry to meet and learn from and about each other; that they do not want to live in fear of difference; and they want skills and knowledge to allow them to challenge received wisdom. To create an environment where this is possible, teachers need support to develop their schools as communities in which everyone has a voice and knows they will be heard and valued. They need to provide rich experiences for the young people to engage in and an ethos of reflective practice in which the learning from these experiences is articulated and refined. In such contexts, young people are able to develop a sense of responsibility, to ask questions and make observations that are both meaningful and respectful. This is often called emotional literacy and it is evident in the best schools, where everyone behaves in a way that shows that they belong and that they have something to contribute both now and in the future.

In addition, we believe that young people need to be given opportunities within the curriculum to develop critical thinking skills, to be able to compare information from different sources, as well as with their own experiences, to research and evaluate and make informed decisions. They also need to find ways of expressing themselves. Communication is at the very heart of school linking and we use a range of communication media and techniques, from research and debate work to drama, dance or visual arts. Students have increased several grades in exams after linking project work which has motivated them and driven their achievement. We believe that, equipped with these skills, young people are better placed to engage with the world around them, to know that they have something to offer and have ways of finding how to offer it. At SLN we believe this is the biggest legacy of our work.

To be serious about developing these skills in all pupils, to offer equal opportunities for achievement, a school must first take a long hard look at *itself* as a community and consider how well it functions. This is hard to measure and Ofsted has been helpful here with guidance and an emphasis on the 'deep knowledge'ⁱⁱⁱ of a school being the crucial foundation for everything else it is trying to do. In a new era of returning to basics, we would say that this is the most basic skill of all and one that a school will not succeed without. This deep knowledge comes from using data,

certainly, but much more than that, it is about a school engaging with its community, listening and working tirelessly and creatively with everyone to create a feeling of belonging, connection, pride and aspiration. As one parent recently told us: "*The basics of education are maths, literacy, science and learning to live in peace.*"

We do not know for sure what the future will hold in terms of policy around community cohesion, sustainability or global learning, but what we do know is that universities and employers are telling us that these are the skills that are needed amongst young people. There is now a momentum in the 3000 schools we have worked with to take forward this journey of exploration, to have the satisfaction of knowing that when young people leave school they will be ready to cope in a complex global world. More than that, they will feel confident to contribute to making it a better place for all.

ⁱ Due to recommendations in two reports to government: Ajegbo, K (2007) *Curriculum Review: Diversity and Citizenship*, DfES Publication; Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*, Commission on Integration and Cohesion Publication.

ⁱⁱ Cante, T (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, London: Home Office and Ouseley, H (2001) *Community Pride, not Prejudice: Making Diversity Work in Bradford*, Bradford: Bradford Vision.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ofsted (2009) *Inspecting maintained schools' duty to promote community cohesion: guidance for inspectors*. Available at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/Media/Ofsted/Forms-and-guidance2/Education-schools/s5/Community-Cohesion-Guidance-on-inspecting.doc