

Cohesion, Equalities and Difference – holding them together

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Struggling

'How well,' asks Ofsted when considering the leadership and management of a school, 'does the school contribute to community cohesion?' They first asked this question in September 2008, and they have been asking it ever since at each school they visit. At the end of the school year, July 2009, they looked through all the reports they had written, in order to get a sense of the overall national picture. They found that a) leadership in relation to community cohesion had been judged in a large proportion of schools to be outstanding, b) a large number of other schools had been considered good, c) relatively few had been no more than satisfactory and d) no school had been judged inadequate.¹

Instead of reporting back to the Secretary of State that schools are so outstanding in promoting community cohesion that there is no need to inspect it, and that the community cohesion duty need never have been introduced, Ofsted decided to have another go at figuring out what community cohesion actually is, and how you recognise it when you see it.

The fact that Ofsted is struggling to understand and to recognise, with a view to judging more schools to be inadequate or no more than satisfactory, and that fewer are outstanding, has for headteachers its worrying aspects. But also the fact has its reassuring, even exciting, aspect. For it is a reminder that uncertainty and questioning about the nature of community cohesion are not shameful.

The struggle to understand and to recognise is occurring at the present time not only throughout the education system but in other areas of social policy as well. 'There is evidence,' asserts the Equality and Human Rights Commission in October 2009, 'that local authorities are implementing the drive to promote community cohesion and integration in breach of their positive legal obligations concerning equality and diversity'.²

This article is offered as a contribution to, but definitely not as an attempt to resolve, the debates currently taking place in schools, local authorities and central government, and in organisations such as the EHRC and Ofsted, about how to harmonise the duty to promote cohesion with duties relating to diversity and equality. It begins by recalling the problematic history of the term. It then argues that a prerequisite for combining the various duties relating to equality, diversity and quality is to identify and itemise the things they have in common. It continues by recalling the principal challenges for schools with particular regard to cohesion duty. As it were, it asks what it is that cohesion brings to the party – what added value does it contribute? It then describes the concept of cohesion from the point of view of a child or young person considering their own school. Finally, it reflects briefly one of the components of the cohesion agenda – the concept of religious literacy.

The history of the term

The concept of cohesion was introduced into public debate by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain in 2000. 'Every society,' the commission's chair Bhikhu Parekh pointed out in his introduction, 'needs to be cohesive as well as respectful of diversity, and must find ways of nurturing diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and a shared identity.' Subsequently, the concept was used by government reports into disturbances in northern towns and cities in England in 2001. In their turn, these reports led to the legal requirement that schools should promote community

cohesion. This was not, alas, an auspicious start. The government-inspired headline introducing the community cohesion agenda was 'Ethnic communities scarred by the summer riots should learn English and adopt "British norms of acceptability"'.³ For this reason as for others the community cohesion agenda has often appeared, or has indeed been, motivated by Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism – the purpose has frequently appeared to be to control and contain Muslims, rather than genuinely to empower them.

There are also other reasons for approaching the concept of cohesion cautiously. For example, cohesion is not a value in itself. It is easy to think of societies, groups and gangs which could entirely accurately be described as cohesive but which are also xenophobic, nasty and violent, and which seriously curtail the freedoms of their members. A further problem in the education system is that the agenda emanates from the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), not the Department for Children, Schools and Families. In consequence, there has been insufficient attention so far to educational objectives – the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children and young people need – and to children's needs and perspectives. Ofsted guidance, for example, concentrates on process compliance – management and leadership – not on outcomes for learners. It is also relevant to note that, unlike the situation in relation to the six equality strands, there is no history in relation to cohesion of struggle and campaigning – it is a top-down project initiated by central government, not the consequence of grassroots pressure.

Overall policy framework

For reasons of principle, as also for various pragmatic reasons, the duty to promote community cohesion needs to be integrated by governing bodies and leadership teams in schools with the legal duties they already have in relation to equalities around age, disability, ethnicity, gender, faith and sexual identity. However, in DCSF and Ofsted documentation there is an expectation that community cohesion is primarily to do with issues of ethnicity and so-called faith. Also, to an extent, there is an expectation it will be concerned with issues of social class. There is no convincing rationale for omitting consideration of the other strands in equalities legislation, nor – important though this undoubtedly is – for adding the dimension of social class.

If the cohesion duty is to be harmonised and integrated holistically with duties relating to equality and diversity, a starting point may be to itemise the features which all the six equality and diversity strands have in common. Some of the most significant are recalled below.

- Each equality strand has its own inspiring story – struggles, campaigns, demonstrations, behind-the-scenes lobbying, reasoned advocacy; iconic events and turning points; legal landmarks; emotive and distinctive slogans and catchphrases; and solidarity, solace, determination, personal friendships. The distinctiveness of each strand's story gives it strength and must be cherished.
- However, the cherishing of distinctive history needs to be combined with bringing and holding the strands together. To continue the metaphor, the strands must be woven into a single rope, bearing and exerting more weight than any one strand could on its own.
- Each is underpinned by much the same moral principles concerning equality, recognition of difference and social cohesion, and each can therefore learn from insights, emphases and good ideas in each of the others
- Each is confronted and resisted by much the same coalition of conservative, fearful and oppressive forces, not least in the media, and in each there are anxieties about so-called political correctness
- In each there is much the same interplay between a) attitudes b) behaviours and c) structures of power, and there is the need to foster and develop the

qualities, skills and insights of allies – people who are not themselves directly affected by disadvantage and discrimination, but who give moral, political and practical support to those who are.

- Each involves conducting equality impact assessments (EQUIAs) not only to identify and remove any negative effects a policy or practice may have but also to identify and maximise potential benefits.
- Each is inseparable from issues of social class and socio-economic circumstances.
- Each has developed in an international context, including successive European directives and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Further, in each individual institution there is much the same set of practical tasks and challenges. In schools, for example, all the strands pose the following challenges:

- closing gaps in achievement, and widening participation in higher education
- promoting understanding of legislation, and essential concepts such as colour and cultural racism, and the social model of disability
- ensuring the involvement of a wide range of people in planning – ‘nothing about us without us’
- developing holistic policy for dealing with prejudice-related bullying
- fostering and developing the qualities, skills and insights of allies – people who are not themselves directly affected by discrimination and inequality but who give moral, political and practical support to those who are
- involving pupils with a wide range of backgrounds in the public life of a school
- ensuring senior leadership teams and governing bodies give a strong and explicit lead
- using teaching and learning styles and strategies which enable all pupils to feel both secure and challenged, and both comfortable and empowered.
- collecting and using a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence, maintaining a robust information base
- creating and updating plans each year for creating greater equality – a smallish number of ‘equality objectives’, as they are likely to be officially known.⁴

Challenges and tasks such as these need to be integrated into the processes of self-evaluation and school improvement that are already in place and that are required by the inspections framework. Further, a list of such challenges can be a useful aid to curriculum planning. There are implications for all subjects, and at all stages and ages.

Tasks in the community cohesion agenda

Within the overall policy context sketched above, the following challenges are particularly relevant to the concept of community cohesion.

- enabling all pupils to feel they belong to their school, and are known, liked and respected both by staff and other pupils, and have a stake in the school’s well-being and flourishing

- developing knowledge of, and a sense of belonging to, the school's immediate neighbourhood, as also the town or city in which the school is located
- arranging links and contacts with other schools, including schools which are demographically different from their own, whether in the UK or elsewhere
- developing each individual school as a resource, catalyst and focus for a shared sense of belonging in its local neighbourhood
- developing a sense of shared history and shared future, and within this context developing not only global and local awareness but also a shared sense of Britishness involving not only mere patriotism but also a readiness to be constructively critical
- developing religious literacy – there are some notes on this topic later in this article
- teaching about rights and responsibilities, not only in the curriculum but also through a school's ethos and organisation, for example through the Rights Respecting Schools framework
- A staff policy on teaching about controversial issues.

Belonging

An essential concept in relation to community cohesion is that of belonging. It is relevant to recall an old music hall song on this topic:

I belong to Glasgow,
 dear old Glasgow town;
 But what's the matter wi' Glasgow,
 for it's goin' roun' and roun'?
 I'm only a common old working chap,
 As anyone here can see,
 but when I get a couple o' drinks on a Saturday,
 Glasgow belongs to me!

It would be culturally insensitive, and not at all consonant with the healthy schools programmes, to imply a few wee drams on a Saturday night are an appropriate way of fostering a sense of belonging. But the music hall song does valuably stress that belonging has two aspects – not only a sense of being recognised and supported but also a sense of ownership. The commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, mentioned above, suggested that belonging can be additionally described as having certain specific features. Adapted to apply to a school, and phrased from the point of view of an individual pupil, the features are as follows.

Being a somebody

Here at this school I am among my own people, I am at home, I know them and understand them, and they know and understand me. We speak the same language (including the same body language!), smile or laugh at the same jokes, know the same stories and music, have shared memories. I am recognised and respected, I feel that I am a somebody, not a nonentity.

Being looked after

People at this school look and listen out for each other. People mind their own business and respect my privacy but also I feel that I will be noticed and looked after if I fall on bad times, and so will people close to me.

Caring criticism

Since the school gives me a sense of belonging, identity and dignity, I am grateful to it. My gratitude may take the form of great affection and love, even self-sacrifice, but may also be expressed through criticism and questioning. Sometimes gratitude is expressed more by caring criticism than by blind devotion.

Family quarrels

The school is not marked by cosiness alone. There are often arguments, quarrels, and profound disagreements – and jockeyings for power and prestige, internal politics, alliances, betrayals. Expulsion or secession is frequently an option. But essentially quarrels within the school are family quarrels. I have a commitment to staying. I cherish the community, and am prepared to compromise in order that the community itself may be maintained.

Symbols and stories

The school is held together by symbols and ceremonies which mean the same to all its members. All the following can have symbolic, not just functional, power, and can help bind a community together symbolically: food; buildings and monuments; rites of passage relating to birth, adolescence, marriage and death; clothes (including of course uniforms and insignia); religious worship; music – particularly, perhaps, singing; various courtesies, customs, manners and rules of procedure; ritualised conflict in sport and games of all kinds; and – by no means least – iconic stories and narratives, both grand and ordinary. I belong through symbols.

These features of belonging are present, to a greater or lesser extent, not only in a school as a whole but also in each classroom, and in a school's neighbourhood. Further, they are the building blocks for a sense of national identity. This is illustrated in the following quotations.

National identity

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland –
That's a very long name for home,
Somalia's easier.
Southall's easy, too. ⁵

Being British is about driving in a German car to an Irish pub for a Belgian beer, then travelling home, grabbing an Indian *curry* or a Turkish kebab on the way, to sit on Swedish furniture and watch American shows on a Japanese TV. And the most British thing of all? Suspicion of anything foreign.⁶

We would rather not be white. We would rather be something more exciting.⁷
(Quoted by Keith Ajegbo, *Times Educational Supplement*, 26 January 2007)

I am a Glaswegian Pakistani teenage woman of Muslim descent, who supports Glasgow Rangers in a Catholic school, 'cause I'm a mixture and I'm proud of it.⁸

The thing I like most about Britishness is its messiness and incompleteness. I am a good example of it myself: I was born in Belfast, brought up in London and educated in Edinburgh. I like the unfinishedness of the idea of Britishness and I think that's what is shaping about it... I hope we will always be a messy, pluralistic place.⁹

Religious literacy

There is an increasing need for people in public bodies, particularly those with leadership and senior management responsibilities, to be 'religiously literate'. A crude measure of the need is the number of stories in the media that mention the words Christian and Muslim. In the *Guardian*, the word Christian appeared 770 times in 1985; 1,221 times in 1995; and 2,341 times in 2005. The word Muslim appeared 408 times in 1985; 1,106 times in 1995; and 2,114 times in 2005. A preliminary definition of religious literacy, for improvement and refinement, goes as follows: 'skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature and music without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious worldviews.'

The concept of religious literacy does not imply holding a set of distinctively religious beliefs, but to understanding the range of ways in which religion may affect a person's values and perspectives. It implies also that a religious tradition should be understood in its own terms, so far as is possible, not through templates and assumptions derived from another tradition. For example, it is religiously illiterate to suppose that imams in Islam have the same range of roles and responsibilities as clerics in Christianity. Also, it is illiterate to equate an attack on a bishop of the established church with an attack on a cleric in a marginalised community subject to racist violence. So it was religiously illiterate, for a group of French writers mentioned above, apropos the controversy about the Danish caricatures in early 2006, to defend them on the grounds that 'picking on the parish priest has long been a national sport'.

Religious literacy also involves recognising that within every tradition there is a tension and conversation between pressures to maintain the heritage and pressures to re-interpret it. It is religiously illiterate to suppose that all people with a strong commitment to a certain tradition have much the same orientation towards it. Further, religious literacy involves understanding the pressures in every tradition that lead to the emergence of 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism', and that may cause people to use religious discourse to justify, or try to justify, immoral acts. It is relevant to recall the young Bob Dylan:

I've learnt to hate Russians
All through my whole life
If another war starts
It's them we must fight
To hate them and fear them
To run and to hide
And accept it all bravely
With God on my side.

When human beings 'religionise' a conflict by claiming a divine seal of approval for their own actions, their discourse has one or more of the following five functions: a) to justify actions and policies that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to justify, b) to motivate combatants to perform acts which they would otherwise be reluctant to perform, c) to provide solace and comfort for defeats, uncertainties, risks, dashed hopes and privations that would otherwise be intolerable; d) to mobilise tacit or active support amongst onlookers that would not otherwise be forthcoming, and e) to provide legitimacy for authority figures who would otherwise be distrusted or opposed – an all too typical war cry is that of Shakespeare's Henry V: 'Cry God for Harry, England and St George'. Claiming divine support for one's own side frequently involves demonising – more accurately, perhaps, satanising or devilising – one's opponents, and doing this with religious imagery and frames of reference.

In all religious traditions a distinction is made between true religion and false. Sometimes it seems easy to see the distinction, or minimally to recognise false religion

when one sees it. But traditional teachings through the centuries have frequently stressed that discerning the difference between true and false religion is seldom straightforward, for human capacities for self-deception, false security and unhealthy defences against anxiety seem limitless. Similarly limitless, to put the same point in rather more traditional language, are the wiles and mischief-making of the Devil. 'We'd better acknowledge the sheer danger of religiousness,' wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury shortly after 11 September 2001. 'It can be a tool to reinforce diseased perceptions of reality, a way of teaching ourselves not to see the particular human agony in front of us; or worse, of teaching ourselves not to see ourselves, our violence, our actual guilt as opposed to our abstract "religious" sinfulness. Our religious talking, seeing, knowing, needs a kind of cleansing.'

Concluding note

It is sometimes said equality and diversify are two sides of the same coin, for it is as unjust to treat people similarly when in relevant respects they are different as it is to treat them differently when in relevant respects they are similar. But no, they are two legs in a three legged stool. A third leg, cohesion, has to be added if the project is to stand up and bear weight. It is a pity that the duty to promote cohesion has been introduced and handled by central government so thoughtlessly, for there really is a third leg to add. In a different metaphor, echoing the influential Delors Report from UNESCO, a fourth pillar, that of learning to live together.¹⁰ This would have been a far more satisfactory, creative and fruitful WAY of conceptualising the issues and tasks by which schools are faced. A quotation from the report is an apposite way of concluding this article:

Recognition of the rights of other people should not be jeopardized by the way children and young people are taught. Teachers who are so dogmatic that they stifle curiosity or healthy criticism instead of teaching their pupils how to engage in lively debate can do more harm than good. Forgetting that they are putting themselves across as models, they may, because of their attitude, inflict lifelong harm on their pupils in terms of the latter's openness to other people and their ability to face up to the inevitable tensions between individuals, groups and nations. One of the essential tools for education in the twenty-first century will be a suitable forum for dialogue and discussion.¹¹

¹ Reported at various conferences, autumn 2009

² *Cohesion and Equality: guidance for funders*, Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2009, page 2. The EHRC points out that the duty to promote cohesion and integration derives from *Our Shared Future*, the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

³ Article by Colin Brown, *The Independent on Sunday*, 9 December 2001

⁴ *Equality Bill: making it work – policy proposals for specific duties*, issued by the Government Equalities Office, June 2009

⁵ Quoted in *Equality Stories* by Berenice Miles and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books for Ealing Education Authority, 2004

⁶ Source unknown, but quoted in this form from the website of *The Daily Telegraph*, 2005

⁷ Quoted by Keith Ajegbo, *Times Educational Supplement*, 26 January 2007

⁸ The main character in the film *Ae Fond Kiss*, directed by Ken Loach, 2004

⁹ Michael Boyd, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, quoted in *The Observer*, 31 July 2005

¹⁰ *Learning: the treasure within* - report to Unesco of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, 1996, http://www.unesco.org/delors/delors_e.pdf

¹¹ From the summary at <http://www.unesco.org/delors/ltolive.htm>