School leaders, community cohesion and the Big Society

Perspective report

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- championing civic participation
- supporting teachers, schools and colleges with the delivery of citizenship education
- working with young people in community settings on issues that concern them.

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Executive summary

This report suggests that… the advantages of developing community cohesion are becoming more strongly embedded and the initiative in principle is widely supported.

This report summarises research conducted on community cohesion in English schools in 2010. The research uses an opportunity sample of 27 primary and secondary schools in three local authorities to generate insights on how the duty to promote community cohesion has been interpreted, enacted and accounted for since its beginning in 2007. The significance of this report is not in the sample size or spectrum but in the themes that emerged from semi-structured interviews. A related document, *Teaching, Learning and Community Cohesion: a study of primary and secondary schools' responses to a new statutory duty*, which provides guidance for teachers and school leaders, is also published by CfBT (Rowe *et al*, 2011).

The background to the duty to promote community cohesion, including its inception as a policy and its roots in other measures, is discussed in an opening section. The findings from group and individual interviews with teachers and school senior leaders are analysed under themed headings. Finally, some pointers for future policy development, including links with the 'Big Society' agenda, are discussed.

The main messages of this report are that:

- nearly all teachers and schools welcome community cohesion and agree personally and professionally with its underpinning values, although they interpret the duty very differently, according to their school context and present practice
- schools have had varied success in implementing the duty, paying more attention to action than to underlying social policy coherence, but in most cases the duty and the fact that it was to be inspected has resulted in schools developing and improving their provision
- some teachers are not clear about current guidance and inspection criteria, while a small number of teachers have objections to the legal and/or inspectable status of the duty
- strong resonances and opportunities exist for the development of schools' achievements in the light of the recent Education White Paper (Department for Education, 2010), a growing focus on localism (CLG, 2010) and the emergent policy focus on the Big Society.[1]

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[1] The 'Big Society' refers to a policy narrative employed by the Conservative Party in the build-up to the 2010 general election and subsequently, which invokes the notion of active citizenship and strong civil society *in preference to* an all-encompassing state, or in David Cameron's phrase at the 2009 Conservative Party Conference, the 'Big State'.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The duty on schools to promote community cohesion came into force in 2007 and since 2008 has been reported on by Ofsted. Community cohesion first emerged as a high profile area of British social policy in 2001, after a series of inquiries into disturbances in towns in northern England suggested that communities were fractured along ethnic, religious and cultural lines and that different groups were often living 'parallel lives', with little contact across entrenched community divides. Some areas that had hitherto been thought of as diverse and multi-cultural were now recast as collections of mono-cultural communities, living in neighbouring wards but rarely engaging in positive interaction. Following a national review of the state of race and community relations led by Ted Cantle, (Independent Review Team, 2001) recommendations were made to address this purported fragmentation of social bonds through moves ranging from police and local authority interventions (which were scaled up in the wake of the July 2005 London bombings) to a number of specifically education initiatives, including the statutory duty for schools to promote community cohesion. Cantle went on to establish the Institute of Community Cohesion, which was closely involved in developing the non-statutory guidance for schools.

The previous government, through the Department for Communities and Local Government, had invested time and resources in the notion of community cohesion. However, following the General Election of 2010, the new coalition government has signalled its preference for achieving the integration of British ethnic minority communities through the Big Society narrative rather than that of community cohesion. This preference has followed some high profile declarations that 'multi-culturalism', understood as equal but separate, is dead – not least from the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (and former Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality), Trevor Phillips (Phillips, 2004) and from those associated with a more radical anti-racist position (Kundnani, 2002). The coalition government's commitment to reducing the size of the state and its interest in replacing the Big State with the Big Society were underpinned by notions of autonomy, freedom, responsibility and localism. There would be an emphasis on strengthening social capital, so that 'dynamic and voluntary civic activism' would replace the 'dead hand of the state' (Cameron, 2009). The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, declared an intention to

> *… sharply reduce the bureaucratic burden on schools, cutting away unnecessary duties, processes, guidance and requirements, so that schools are free to focus on doing what is right for the children and young people in their care.*

[DfE, 2010:9]

At the time of writing this report, all the indications are that the duty to promote community cohesion will remain but it looks likely that Ofsted will no longer be asked to inspect it. Whatever the future may hold, this report is able to provide a valuable insight into how teachers responded to the duty during the time that it had statutory and inspectable status. It therefore throws light on four things:

- what happens when an issue that some would contend is not the core business of schooling is given, albeit for a limited period, statutory status and inspected

- teachers' understanding of the nature and social role of education in addressing fractures in the communities which they serve, and the impact that such fractures and other obstacles have on the life chances of students

- the multiple understandings and perspectives that teachers – especially those in leadership roles – bring to the specific issues of cultural diversity, and how this informs their efforts to address community cohesion

- the role of statutory duties as policy levers that drive change or support innovation in schools.

As outlined above, the new government has signalled its intention to move away from the discourse of community cohesion towards the promotion of integration through its broader 'Big Society' project. Concurrently, it has also pledged to reduce the statutory obligations on schools, whether this is found in the specifics of the National Curriculum or in the statutory duties that schools are expected to address. Taken together, these policy directions raise two questions: (1) To what extent can the work schools continue to do on community cohesion contribute to supporting the development of a Big Society? (2) To what extent can schools focus on these issues and still be true to their purpose as academic institutions?

1.2 The duty

The wording of the statute itself provided no definition of what was meant by 'community cohesion'. The non-statutory guidance, published in 2007 jointly by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Communities and Local Government, clarified policy makers' definition of community cohesion as a process of:

> *'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.'*
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> [*Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion*, DCSF, 2007]

It stressed that the term 'community' was multi-layered, comprising the school itself, its local community, the UK and the global community; and it suggested that schools' contributions to the cohesion agenda would be manifest in three general areas:

1. teaching, learning and curriculum – helping children and young people to learn to understand others, to value diversity whilst also promoting shared values

2. equity and excellence – ensuring that there are equal opportunities for all to succeed at the highest level possible and working to eliminate variations in outcomes for different groups

3. engagement and extended services – providing reasonable means for children, young people, their friends and families to interact with people from different backgrounds and build positive relations.

[DCSF, 2007:7]

Thus, the guidance looked at existing areas of school activity, areas where schools, by the very nature of their educational work, already promoted positive relations between people of different backgrounds, faiths and beliefs. Importantly, the guidance made it clear that differences may manifest themselves for ethnic, faith or socio-economic reasons, but that inequalities based on gender and sexuality should also be seen as a focus of the duty. Ofsted later came to focus on the

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first three of these areas in its inspection of community cohesion, as the other areas were covered by its judgements on equalities. This had two unintended consequences: there was a further 'racialisation' of the term community cohesion,[2] and some forms of inequality, discrimination or social fragmentation were seen as more salient or more important to address than others.

Subsequent guidance produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency in 2010 (QCDA, 2010) offered curriculum models for developing community cohesion in an embedded way. It included case studies of good approaches in schools and in one local authority, such as using drama or a secondary school developing strong links with its feeder primaries, in order to pre-empt problems when children from different schools come together in Year 7.

1.3 Complementary agendas: the educational context

During the time that the duty to promote community cohesion was being introduced into schools, a number of parallel and largely complementary educational initiatives were being rolled out by government and, to some extent, by other bodies, including NGOs. We shall see how these had to compete for teachers' and school leaders' attention alongside a continuing drive to raise standards of attainment within an increasingly diversified schooling structure.[3]

Following the publication of the independent advisory committee led by Professor (subsequently Sir) Bernard Crick (AGC, 1998), citizenship education had been introduced as compulsory element of the secondary curriculum in 2002. In the 2007 revision (to be introduced from September 2008), a much stronger emphasis on 'identity and diversity' was added following the recommendations of the report, *Citizenship and Diversity*, a review of the citizenship curriculum undertaken by former London headteacher, Sir Keith Ajegbo (Ajegbo *et al*, 2007).

In 2002, in Bradford, with the encouragement of a local authority Education Adviser, Angie Kotler, a number of schools had responded to the recent disturbances by developing a 'Schools Linking' project to promote positive links between local schools containing pupils and students of very different cultural heritage. In 2007, following the extension of concerns about isolated communities being more vulnerable to extremist rhetoric, the National Schools Linking Network, led by Angie Kotler, was established on the back of the success of the Bradford Project, supported both by government money and by the Pears Foundation. Funding was also made available for a website to support better teaching about identity and diversity in citizenship education. Called *Who Do We Think We Are?*, this had also been one of the recommendations of the Ajegbo Review. Ajegbo had also proposed that schools should, under the same banner, hold a multi-cultural week during the year to explore and celebrate diversity, although take-up was patchy.

Schools were already subject to a legal duty to promote race equality in school. Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000, schools must promote 'good relations between racial groups', promote race equality in all they do and eliminate any unlawful racial discrimination from their own practice. At around the same time, there was a growing emphasis on 'student voice' (Whitty and Wisby, 2007) which culminated both in the introduction of new regulations that enabled students to become associate members of school governing bodies for the first time (DfES, 2003) and in school governors being given a statutory duty to have regard to the departmental guidance on

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[2] The wider community cohesion project had already become focused around race, faith and ethnicity as a result of its provenance in the so-called 'race riots' in the northern towns and the post 7/7 agenda.

[3] For example, the same period saw the introduction and roll-out of academies, which are also notable for their shared concerns around citizenship, community cohesion and social exclusion.

… it considerably strengthened the importance of involving students in school decision-making…

consulting students on matters of concern to them (DfES, 2004). Whilst not making it compulsory, in England at least, for schools to have student councils, it considerably strengthened the importance of involving students in school decision-making, an area which many teachers in the current study saw as an important element in the development of cohesive school communities.

The move to introduce citizenship education into the school curriculum promoted many citizenship experts to exhort schools to look at how citizenship is learned by students through the whole-school experience. The Citizenship Foundation promoted the notion of 'citizenship-rich' schools (Breslin, 2006; Huddleston *et al,* 2007) whilst at the same time, similar projects encouraged schools to develop an ethos of being 'rights respecting' (UNICEF UK, 2011), so that students learn of their own human rights at the same time as developing respect for the rights of others. Each of these initiatives has a bearing in some way on the removal of discrimination, encouraging equality of esteem for all, and making schools more fair and democracy-promoting institutions. These developments can be seen as consistent with, and vehicles for, the promotion of community cohesion.

1.4 Complementary agendas: the broader policy terrain

Beyond the educational sphere, there was an even greater level of 'policy noise' around the concepts of citizenship and community cohesion. Crick's third report, *The New and the Old* (Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group, 2003) laid the foundations both for the introduction of ceremonies to celebrate the naturalisation of new immigrants and the framework through which those who seek naturalisation (or 'citizenship' in the legal sense of the term) are required to undertake language training alongside a programme of study that is subsequently assessed. In 2007, following the publication of the Report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*, led by Darra Singh, the then Secretary of State for Communities, Hazel Blears, announced that spending allocated to local councils for expenditure on community cohesion projects would rise from £2m in 2007-08 to £50m in 2008-09. The same year Lord Goldsmith (2008) published his citizenship review, *Citizenship: Our Common Bond* commissioned by the new Prime Minister Gordon Brown as part of his government's broader 'Governance of Britain' initiative which called, amongst other things, for the extension of statutory citizenship education into the primary school and the introduction of naturalisation-style ceremonies for all school and college students on achieving majority age. Finally, the publication of the White Paper, *Communities in Control: real power, real people* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008) sustained this theme of encouraging community engagement, especially across the boundaries of race, faith and ethnicity. Indeed, when taken alongside the formation of the Office for the Third Sector at the Cabinet Office in 2005, now recast as the Office for Civil Society, and the launch of government-supported initiatives such as The Big Lunch (Eden Project, 2009) this range of reports and initiatives with their themes of empowered communities, shared futures and common bonds can be seen as supporting or complementing the duty with which we are concerned here, and contributing much to the context from which the current Big Society narrative has emerged. The launch of a further White Paper with a localism focus from the new government (CLG, 2010) is additional evidence of this continuity.

2. The Study

This report draws on the findings of a small-scale study of the views and experiences of school leaders, subject heads and subject advisers in three local authority (LA) areas in England in discharging their statutory duty to promote community cohesion. The three LAs in question were varied in nature: one being a multi-racial city authority in central England, and the other two being large county authorities, containing conurbations with multi-cultural populations but also many towns and villages with low numbers of ethnic minorities. Teachers from 27 schools took part, all of them maintained schools. Six were schools with a religious character (Church of England, Roman Catholic and one Jewish) and the other nineteen were community schools. Not all of the schools invited to participate were willing to do so. This means that the sample is not statistically representative of the full spectrum of views on this duty. It is likely that schools enthusiastic about the duty were more willing to agree to give us interviews. Having said that, opinions expressed in the two teacher focus groups represented a wide spectrum of responses, though divergence focused mainly around the *imposition* of the duty and not the idea that schools should promote cohesion. Three or four primary and three or four secondary schools were sought in each area. The total number of teachers taking part was 35. A total of 29 interviews were conducted, including the two focus groups which included several teachers who were not subsequently interviewed on a one-to-one basis. The research team consisted of three established authors and trainers from the Citizenship Foundation and a doctoral research student from Leeds University, currently embedded with the Citizenship Foundation.

Against this backdrop, the interviews, which were semi-structured, covered a number of key issues, addressed in turn in the findings below:

1. What did teachers understand by the term 'community cohesion'?
2. How did schools respond given the different types of community they serve?
3. How did schools strengthen their own communities?
4. How have schools developed their curricula?
5. How successful have school linking approaches been?
6. What challenges have schools encountered in meeting the duty?
7. How was the impact of the duty measured?

From these questions a number of themes emerged which we address in the following section.

3. Findings

3.1 What did teachers understand by the term 'community cohesion'?

On the whole the teachers in our sample did not draw from the wider social perspectives or emerging definitions that had informed the order, but rather gave us interpretations of the term which were commensurate with the core business of schooling, namely teaching and learning. Their focus was strongly on key *attitudes and values* to be promoted amongst students as individuals, not on, say, community-related activities. The following responses were typical:

> 'Helping individuals to feel part of the community (at all levels) and helping them to realise how they can contribute to that community and benefit from it.'

> 'To me, community cohesion means understanding that we are all uniquely different and yet share fundamental similarities that draw us together as a society/community, be it local, national or global.'

> 'To me, community cohesion means providing children with a clear understanding of who they are, where they are from, a confidence in themselves and an awareness and understanding of the world they live in. It's about developing empathy and respect, understanding your rights and responsibilities and a sense that they are global citizens and also members of a range of communities.'

A recurrent definition of a cohesive society was one in which everyone is able to 'get along with' other people. The teachers in our sample agreed with the non-statutory guidance in looking for cohesion-promoting sites in the curriculum, in the nature of the school as a community, and in the way the school engaged with the wider community. However, in doing so, they were re-casting the non-statutory guidance in somewhat broader terms. Particularly of note was the strong emphasis they placed on the ethos and culture of the school, which is not mentioned at all in the non-statutory guidance. For teachers this includes practices which ensure that the school is seen as a fair or just community, where behaviour policies are seen by students as reasonable, where there are good, respectful relationships between staff and students and where students are listened to and feel they have some say in the running of the school. All of these practices, from infant to upper secondary, promote a positive sense of inclusion and belonging and might, therefore, be presumed to contribute to pupils' and students' achievement and attainment. Further, where the guidance talks of encouraging students to 'value diversity', teachers preferred words such as 'respect' and 'tolerance' to 'valuing'. The bottom line for schools is to promote a sense amongst students – who often display immature and negative attitudes towards people of difference – that everyone is worthy of respect. Schools gave the impression that they cannot demand that students value or even like other members of the school community, but they can expect students to show respect for each other in the way they behave.

There was full agreement amongst the respondents that 'community' could refer to local, national or international communities. One headteacher used the analogy of the layers of an onion and another likened the way these communities extend outwards to a set of Russian dolls. However, we shall see that teachers did not find it equally easy to introduce students to these different communities.

We have noted that teachers' definitions of a cohesive society were predominantly focused on students' attitudes and values, effectively by-passing contention about whether schools should

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promote 'multi-culturalism', 'assimilation' or 'integration'. Such debates have been conducted amongst politicians and social policy analysts, and are seen to influence governments' views and policies, but appear to be of less concern to teachers – at least at a theoretical level. The respondents displayed considerable levels of respect for different ways of life, cultures, values and beliefs throughout their responses. However, this stopped short of the full-blown multi-cultural model insofar as they had sticking points, as we shall see, around limits to the extent that teachers feel able to tolerate practices and values amongst ethnic minority groups which go against perceived fundamental values of British society, most notably the key value of equality for all.

3.2 How did schools respond, given the different types of community they serve?

Community cohesion measures are likely to be implemented differently by schools serving different communities, with strategies reflecting local contexts and concerns. Many of the school leaders working in areas of high multi-cultural intake found it relatively easy to identify how the concept could be applied to their school community, for example by addressing the challenges of helping the integration of ethnic or religious minority groups new to the area. The overcoming of language barriers amongst both parents and students became a priority for some primary schools. One school set up crash courses in English when faced with a large group of non-English-speaking newcomers. Another school made a video-based version of the school prospectus for use with parents speaking other languages. Several of the schools in our sample had found themselves in receipt of considerable influxes of children from ethnic groups new to Britain, placing demands on school staff for which they and, indeed, the local authority were hardly prepared. In a secondary school serving a large army barracks, teachers were faced with a large group of immigrant children from Gurkha families. Amongst other measures, the school developed a detailed monitoring system showing which children participated in what activities. This enabled the school to see how well migrant children were entering into the life of the school, but it also showed that other groups of children, such as those who were carers at home, were also at a disadvantage and needed special support.

It may be worth noting that this emphasis on integration seems predominantly one-directional. In practice, schools are more geared towards supporting outsiders in becoming more capable of thriving in the mainstream community, rather than creating conditions for two diverse communities to move towards each other – although school linking schemes are the exception to this.

Several schools in the study recognised the importance of addressing the needs of parents and families as well as those of the children themselves. Some schools made efforts to appoint teachers or teaching assistants with the necessary language skills and to develop mechanisms for parents and teachers to meet as informally as possible. However, dealing with parents of different cultures, faiths and beliefs creates complex challenges. Schools told us they found themselves on occasions walking a tightrope between respecting the values of other cultures and resisting some values which clash with very important British ones such as equal treatment in respect of gender and disability. For example, one teacher reported:

> *'When we were doing work on sex education, the male community people were saying, "No, no, no". But actually, when we talked to the mothers and when we talked to the mums, they were saying, "Oh, yes please, we'd love it if you did this for us." So actually there is a gender divide that we have to address. In terms of dealing with disability, again it's very challenging*

within this cultural setting, because if a child is disabled, if they were, say, blind for example, there are some mosques that won't let them through the door. And that's very challenging for the parents. If we're talking about a child with special educational needs, the parents can be very resistant to acknowledging that, because that has a wider implication for their inclusion within their own community if they're not allowed into the mosque.'

Thus, in a small number of cases, schools found that their duty to promote community cohesion seemed to be in tension with other equality priorities. Neither the initial departmental guidance, nor the subsequent QCDA guidance (2010), had prepared schools for such cases.

Schools serving white mono-cultural communities, such as those marginalised through the collapse of the mining industry, identified different needs amongst their students, as did those in more prosperous middle-class areas:

'It's the sort of area where it is professional, the majority will go on to university, they will find themselves in very diverse communities and I think for us it's how we enable our children to recognise that at an early point. But notwithstanding that we still have in some elements a lack of tolerance – so we still have parents withdrawing children from visits to the local Mosque. The first time in 20-odd years of teaching I've had a parent who has withdrawn her child from any other aspect of RE apart from Christianity. And not based on any deep religious belief, it's based on – well, from my perception a prejudice and a set of values that won't enable her or her children to learn about any other aspect of any other world faith. And that for me after so many years of teaching in the sort of school I'm in is really a very sad state of affairs.'

In one or two other cases, teachers were consciously addressing inter-generational fractures in their communities by attempting to enable students to meet older members of the community in order to establish rapport and even friendship, and reduce levels of fear and anxiety amongst local elderly people.

3.3 How did schools strengthen their own communities?

Many school leaders we spoke to saw the creation of a cohesive school community as a key step in meeting the duty. Given the importance attached to the school community as a site of citizenship learning, much work had already been done in this area by many schools. Many teachers pointed to strong student voice as an instrument to generate cohesion, a sense of belonging and also agency, or a disposition to act.

In one local authority, much work had been done across the phases to introduce a programme called 'Rights, Respect and Responsibility', (Covell *et al*, 2001) which promotes a rights-based approach to school discipline and behaviour based on the universal values contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Basing school discipline and relations on an explicit code which is continuous with values expressible in the wider community, is seen as equipping students with the values and social skills they need to become mature, self-disciplined, tolerant, respectful and participative citizens. This national project is promoted by UNICEF UK (UNICEF UK, 2011) and is one example of important existing national initiatives which overlap in significant ways with the duty to promote community cohesion. The respondents strongly linked such moves to generate cohesion within the school with improving the quality of the school as a place of learning.

Besides stressing their codes of values and ethos, many schools were also keen to be centres of community activity, some, for example, hosting after-school madrassas for Muslim students and language classes for parents whilst others had become involved in community activities such as festivals and carnivals, which were widely seen as helping to remove barriers. Schools saw community engagement and active citizenship initiatives such as these as generative of cohesion. Although they were for 'opt-in' groups and addressed only some pupils, they were an important complement to teaching and learning initiatives such as the provision of citizenship lessons as part of the National Curriculum. The more successful schools had embedded cohesion experiences for all while the less successful had relied on 'extra-curricular' or 'bolt-on' experiences.

3.4 How have schools developed their curricula?

There was widespread agreement that the curriculum was an important instrument for addressing a range of issues relating to community cohesion. Often mentioned were the citizenship and PSHEE curricula but RE and the humanities were also frequently seen as important. This was true of both primary and secondary schools:

> 'So when we do a lot of work in Year 6 we are looking at the fact that we live in Britain but Britain is a very diverse community where we can see influence from other countries. We can see it in the fashions, the music, all those kinds of things. We also try to look at how they can improve the community, so what can you do in the wider community, how can you benefit the people who live there?'

One primary school instigated a 'Global Education' fortnight to promote a sense of belonging to the worldwide community. The importance of the curriculum and its implicit messages were recognised amongst a number of schools. One secondary school, serving a highly multi-cultural area, had scrutinised the whole of its curriculum and related activities, in order to ensure that learning was relevant to all its students and even the work experience programme was seen as crucial from a community cohesion perspective. Interestingly, in both primary and secondary settings, schools reported that they found it easier to address community issues at local and international level than at national level. This is something reflected in the recent work of the Institute for Community Cohesion, 'locality' proving a much more effective 'connector' of people than the nation state (Johnson, 2008).

The non-statutory guidance highlights the role of the citizenship curriculum in developing students' understanding of the relationship between the citizen and the community. But citizenship is still a relatively new subject in schools and much of the provision still lags behind the statutory requirements. The duty to promote community cohesion has prompted some schools to re-assess how well they are delivering the citizenship curriculum. But there was also recognition that not merely the amount but the quality of teaching in this area is important. Form tutors' teaching of citizenship and PSHEE, for which they have no training, has been identified by Ofsted as the source of the weakest practice. Some schools claim that time cannot be found for citizenship, but others show that time need not be an issue. Imaginative ways can be found to overcome obstacles in the way of providing full specialist teaching. For example:

> 'Basically we deliver citizenship, PSHEE, careers and we deliver enterprise which is part of PSHEE. So we've got subject specialists. Three of us are experts in citizenship, four of us are experts in PSHEE. The SLT member in our faculty, he has a qualification in careers and enterprise. It's not like some schools do on an ad hoc basis, we have a set period of time

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where all students throughout the school know that for six weeks they will only learn about citizenship and we rotate it so that at any given time in the year everyone gets to sample these things. We have two lessons a week, so two fifty-minute lessons a week over the whole five years, so I consider us quite pioneering and progressive.'

In short, issues of creating or identifying opportunities, managing them coherently and balancing priorities have been central to how schools have used their curriculum for community cohesion. Generally, teachers have found that the duty has been a stimulus to further curriculum innovation.

3.5 How successful have school linking approaches been?

Many schools had extended the work of the curriculum to include school linking activities, more often within the local area between schools of difference or at an international level. One local authority had an internal schools linking programme whereas the other two authorities tended to look for international schools to link with through British Council schemes.

Diverse local authorities have the capacity to promote links within their own area, and these appear to be the most manageable, in terms of cost, logistics and identification of 'neutral spaces' for the initial encounters. We heard from a number of schools developing links with schools in other parts of the country, but these seemed considerably more difficult to establish in the first place and to sustain over the medium term.[4]

Some schools had invested much effort into making links, often through personal contacts, but were frustrated when nothing came of their efforts. One of these was a few months into a linking scheme when the partner school suddenly withdrew, demonstrating that such schemes are vulnerable, partly perhaps because they appear to be highly reliant on a few key members of staff who often undertake huge amounts of work out of goodwill in addition to their normal duties. This makes teachers much more cautious about future links:

'You know that was a really active link and it was brilliant but it was just like slashed, gone. And it takes a while to get new links. You can just like pick a school, that's fine – link, link, link – but then that's not the right way to do it. You've got to research a school. Is it something that's going to be long term? You don't just want to have another nine-month scenario where the children get excited, they've made what they see as friends and then suddenly that's just kaput.'

School linking schemes, as we have noted, are the subject of recent national and international initiatives which schools plugged into either directly or through the active promotion of the local authority. However, most schemes that we heard about were, by their very nature, time-consuming to establish and administer, difficult to extend to entire year groups, and dependent to an extent on external funding, which is never guaranteed indefinitely. Nonetheless, those students fortunate enough to be involved were felt by teachers to have benefited enormously. School linking, as we have noted, was a high-profile component of the drive to overcome ethnic, religious and cultural barriers between school-age students, and an explicit part of both the non-statutory guidance and the Ofsted inspection schedule, but the evidence from this study supports the view that their impact will be limited and uneven. Logistically, it is impossible for every white majority school to find a multi-cultural school with which to make links, simply because there are far more of the former than the latter.

[4] This is supported by evidence from the Citizenship Foundation's own experimental urban-rural linking project, *Broadening Horizons* (Sevitt, 2008) which involved a successful residential exchange between a mono-cultural school in Cornwall and a diverse, urban school in East London which was not repeated in subsequent years because of a lack of available resources.

3.6 What challenges have schools encountered in meeting the duty?

The open-ended wording of the duty and the guidance which accompanied it generated perceptible levels of anxiety. Implementing the duty created some difficulties for schools in deciding whether what they were already doing was likely to be enough to satisfy the inspectors. As already noted, all of the teachers we spoke to expressed themselves in sympathy with the aims and intention of the duty, recognising that in schools which lack cohesion, whether as communities themselves or in their relations with the wider community, students' own learning would experience avoidable obstacles. Nonetheless, they reported that in order to implement the duty, time and personnel had to be found and supported, colleagues needed varying levels of persuasion, reassurance and training, and monetary resources had to be found, particularly to support ambitious linking projects.

The need to balance the demands of this duty against the need to meet other school targets and priorities also presented difficulties, with the result that schools' responses to the duty could often be described as, almost of necessity, 'ad hoc' and often opportunistic. For example, an equal opportunities self-evaluation scheme for schools which had been developed in one authority had been taken up by many schools in that area whilst in another, there had been a strong emphasis on the Rights, Respect and Responsibility programme. In a third authority, some Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) money had become available and was drawn on to support a police/schools programme. In one of the local authorities PVE money had paid for a local NGO to offer training to teachers about the nature of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus the established culture and practices, and even available personnel in the local authority can be seen to have significantly influenced the different ways in which schools responded to the duty. This found expression in the different scope and nature of 'community' that schools chose to identify and prioritise: be it local, regional, national or global, the duty was wide in range and attracted a degree of post-hoc assimilation of ongoing practice.

Given that the duty came about through an Act of Parliament and was rolled out from the centre, it was always likely to be perceived by many teachers as another set of demands requiring schools to act in a number of ways, however loosely specified. One underlying question teachers asked was how much of a priority should they attach to this particular initiative, related to how long would government focus and support last?

> '*I think for a lot of teachers it seems probably to be the flavour of the year and that it'll go away in a couple of years' time. But I think it's a lot more important than that.*'

This exemplifies a recurrent issue of leadership and motivation for many headteachers. Some teachers welcomed the thrust of the duty as validating work they were already trying to do around reaching out to parents and providing forms of social support and education for students. More than one teacher expressed this feeling as being an emphasis on the kind of people-focused work for which they had come into education, but this did not mean that other staff would necessarily embrace this additional duty:

> '*I was actually really happy that this was coming through, the community cohesion. And I thought perhaps it gives value to something that needs value. So I was happy to do it and it's something I feel passionate about. It's just as long as all your staff feel the same and they don't feel like – "Oh gosh, another initiative, let's tick this box and that box".*'

One primary headteacher felt that the need to provide a secure and cohesive environment for children in challenging areas might compete with the obligation to make academic progress, and

… there is no necessary disjunction between high aspirations to make progress and strong community cohesion…

wondered how schools in such areas could be expected to impress Ofsted inspectors in both areas at the same time:

'*… when you've got children whose lives, home lives, are just dire. There's a big drug problem, there's single parents, there's all sorts of men that come in and out of the children's lives and the only place that's secure and happy for many of them is the school.* [Teachers] *work like billy-o to make sure that that happens, yet they're despondent because their results aren't what Ofsted expects.'*

This report has probed the synergy between the 'core business' of teaching and learning and the duty to promote community cohesion. Whilst there is no necessary disjunction between high aspirations to make progress and strong community cohesion, it is the case that, for some schools and teachers, the dichotomy seems real, with the two priorities sometimes competing for teachers' attention and energy.

3.7 How was the impact of the duty measured?

The duty came into force in September 2007 and Ofsted was required to inspect schools on their responses to it one year later. Guidance for inspectors, also available to schools, was published in September 2008, and then revised in January 2009. The later guidance focused more sharply on defining minimum expectations, including about how cohesive the school is and how the school knows this. Many teachers we spoke to during the period March to July 2010 still seemed unsure as to the criteria by which Ofsted were to judge them. Several schools had been inspected on the duty by the time we interviewed them, and they reported a range of experiences.

There is some confusion and disquiet about external accountability and the precision with which impact can be measured. Some schools received a disappointing grade and felt aggrieved that inspectors had not recognised their efforts. One school received a better than expected grade (Good), even though they admitted that the evidence of impact was still inconclusive. Several teachers felt that the measurement of the impact of community cohesion was an elusive target:

'*I don't think there's anyone that would disagree that community cohesion is extremely important – but it's the fact that it's then left up to the individual schools to try and fight their way through and say "Well how are we going to do this?" A lot of it is hit and miss, it's very inconsistent and I agree with what you were saying, it does not become embedded and yet we're judged on it, rightly or wrongly, we're judged on it.'*

Others felt that the impact of community cohesion activity would only be truly known over a longer timescale:

'*You're talking not two or three terms down the line, we're talking decades of quality building and quality work that needs to go on in school supported by lots and lots of resources, not least financial resources and not least personnel resources to ensure that it's effective and it's embedded.'*

Another teacher pointed to the very considerable difficulty of amassing the evidence for inspection purposes, including actual research issues in clarifying, for example, what effects can be attributed to specific causes:

'*I actually feel there's lots of things going on in the school that promote community cohesion. It's a matter of pulling it together and making it work and I know that we have to show impact.'*

… some schools are able to offer convincing evidence of their own activity having an impact on changing attitudes and improving behaviour…

A mixed picture emerges from these teacher perspectives. There is a consensus that efforts to build community cohesion within a school's community should return an identifiable benefit to learners and their attainment. The need to demonstrate impact within the school over a short period of time is clearly challenging for some. How that impact is planned for, monitored and externally measured seems unclear for some teachers despite the 2009 guidance. Nevertheless, some schools are able to offer convincing evidence of their own activity having an impact on changing attitudes and improving behaviour in school, and therefore, indirectly, on standards. The links between planning community cohesion work in an embedded way, and the effectiveness of a school's management of all its data, are factors in being able to identify impact. Also relevant is the extent to which school leadership teams are aware of the effectiveness of activity, and have made time for all staff to reflect on it.

Despite the challenges of demonstrating impact, many teachers expressed the view to us that the fact that the duty was enforced by means of school inspections had focused their attention on this area much more rigorously and this had brought undoubted benefits. As one primary headteacher put it:

'I hate to say it, but I don't think it would have come up to the top of my agenda had I not been pushed, because I'm so busy with other issues that it almost has to be that before I can find the time and prioritise this. Because although I felt that I was quite good at that area – and the staff did – this year with even greater focus, we thought: Let's really embed it into the curriculum instead of playing at it by doing "culture week" or whatever.'

4. Conclusions

4.1 The benefits of promoting community cohesion

It provided an incentive for less proactive schools to emulate those which had already identified and sought to address their communities' needs and concerns.

It is fair to say that the duty to promote community cohesion has received an ambivalent response from school leaders and teachers. Its statutory nature placed it on an equal footing, in theory at least, with other matters vying for senior leaders' attention. It provided an incentive for less proactive schools to emulate those which had already identified and sought to address their communities' needs and concerns. Whilst a few schools in our sample reacted to the duty as not of central concern to them at the time, most regarded it as important, not only for their students' well-being but as essential to the building of a successful school. They believed that a school's job it is not only to prepare students for examination success but to develop them as rounded individuals capable of meeting the challenges of living in today's globalised world. Further benefits were seen to accrue from improving relations with and between parents and their own communities, as well as drawing more effectively on resources available within the wider community to enhance the quality of the school's provision.

Great emphasis was also placed on the value of recent moves to improve student voice in schools. Student voice was felt to make schools more responsive, fair and cohesive. It was also seen as a way of developing students' willingness to take responsibility for themselves, get involved and develop a sense of shared ownership for the well-being of the school community. By implication, this would help young people to see themselves as capable of impacting on events in the wider community. Many schools reported that although they had thought they were 'doing community cohesion' reasonably well before the duty, its introduction had prompted them to re-examine their efforts in a range of highly beneficial ways.

4.2 The challenges of introducing a new duty

It is clear, nonetheless, that schools often struggled to find the time, personnel and financial resources necessary to respond adequately. There was a feeling amongst many respondents that they had been set a demanding set of targets, which they found hard to define and difficult to quantify. This rendered the inspection process stressful for many. To a degree, schools had to identify their own cohesion priorities according to the nature and needs of their immediate environments. This, they felt, increased the difficulty of having objective or standardised inspection criteria to work towards, although it also left them free to respond to needs in the light of their own data.

Many aspects of community cohesion were already subject to pre-existing legal duties, for example to respect equalities legislation, promote positive race relations, consult young people and teach citizenship. This circumstance led to a level of confusion about what more was expected of schools and teachers in the promotion of community cohesion. One new element, not already present, was the strong suggestion that schools should create opportunities for students to meet others different from themselves. In practice, this has not been easy to implement without considerable external help and support, both organisational and financial. Some schools were able to use parallel initiatives, but these were variable and not always available.

4.3 The issue of 'slippage' and narrowing of the cohesion agenda

We have noted that there has been a certain amount of inadvertent 'slippage' between the original duty and how schools in practice interpreted and implemented it. Specifically, the difference between 'enrichment' (for some) and 'entitlement' (for all), and the issue of dealing with communities whose values may be interpreted by teachers as inimical to the best interests of their students, have not been addressed at national level.

Slippage also appears to have occurred in the scope of inspection, with a narrowing of the duty to focus on faith, ethnicity and, sometimes, class. Our research has demonstrated that, in reality, schools identified a wide range of communities at risk of being overlooked or excluded, including the elderly, young carers and disabled young people. To these could be added 'looked after' young people and those still discriminated against on grounds of gender or sexuality. In effect, these categories have been separated from community cohesion and catered for by other inspectable requirements, particularly the duty to promote well-being and to provide a curriculum to meet the needs of all learners.

4.4 Schools, community cohesion and the 'Big Society'

It can be argued that several characteristics of community cohesion are also key to the success of the coalition government's aspirations to build a 'Big Society'. Among these, but not exhaustively, might be:

- the deepening of young people's knowledge and understanding of the political system, the apparatus of law, the economy and civil society

- the provision of meaningful opportunities for young people to engage in community activities and to learn how these activities make a difference

- the development of young people's skills and dispositions to participate constructively

- the growth of young people's awareness of how voluntary, private and public enterprises work, how they can be improved and how they can collaborate.

If the 'Big Society' is to become a reality, thought needs to be given to those educational interventions that are key to building it. The resources and evaluation procedures that accompany them, and where those interventions and resources should best originate from, are also open questions with many possibilities. Much of the educational apparatus needed already exists. Particularly, the ways in which schools have involved community members, employers, faith groups and others has to some extent bridged the gulf between 'school learning' and community-based, 'real-life' issues.

The evidence from this study suggests that teachers and school leaders recognise the importance of community cohesion and know that their schools work best when cohesion is deeply linked in to the curriculum, learning and the school ethos. This is not least because their training and experience tells them that learning flourishes when pupils and students are engaged and empowered, content, confident and working in learning communities that exhibit the values and practices that underpin community cohesion. Informed by the findings of Ofsted in outstanding schools (Ofsted, 2009), they have made multiple connections between the ways they review their curriculum, promote strong values, nurture communities, include all learners and believe that

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disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement. Prompted by the duty to promote cohesion, they have moved forward with their practice by creating new opportunities to link cohesion to the curriculum. These opportunities, values and practices are likely to provide the foundations for a 'Big Society'. As Ofsted continues to acknowledge, they are also found at the heart of most, if not all, successful schools, and they do not happen by chance, but by highly reflective, carefully planned, well implemented and effectively evaluated strategies.

The government's challenge is now to work with others to elucidate the desired qualities that exemplify a 'Big Society', so that educational settings can sustain and capitalise on existing strategies that are now widespread. This research suggests that for all there may be frustrations for some, the advantages of developing community cohesion are becoming more strongly embedded, and the initiative in principle is widely supported. Any possible changes in policy or inspection arrangements around community cohesion need to reflect the gains made. To maximise the opportunities of the 'Big Society' as an idea, it would seem prudent to ensure continuity with the current practice and inclusion of the lessons learnt from the duty. Schools could then be set free to be in the vanguard of the 'Big Society', giving young people their first experiences of community organisation and disciplined, rigorous reflection on diversity and identity.

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