

Is difference good for us? - Hampshire

A report on the Hampshire and its neighbour's social cohesion project, UK



Introduction



This article is a report on the Hampshire and its neighbour's pilot project on social cohesion conducted between March 2007 and March 2008. It was financed by Hampshire County Council, NASACRE (National Association of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education) with the Westhill Trust and Aimhigher. It involved six schools, secondary and primary, in Hampshire and Southampton. The purpose of the project was to conduct a pupil-led enquiry into the concept of difference and determine to what extent and in what ways forms of difference impacted on these pupils' experiences and attitudes as they pursued the project. At the end of the project pupils presented their findings and recommendations at a conference held at the University of Winchester on 27 March 2008. These findings and recommendations suggest that pupils were significantly affected by the experience of undertaking the project, that their attitudes were affected by participating with pupils in schools other than their own, and that their perceptions of difference and awareness of the significance of social cohesion were appreciably altered.

Background

Following events of recent years, most obviously the attack on the twin towers in New York, the London bombings, the activity of Al Qaeda, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the recognition that suicide bombers were often 'home grown', there has been an increasing concern about the cohesiveness of British society, on the one hand, and 'homeland security' on the other (for relevant recent literature on this subject see for example Ali, 2007; Hussain, 2007; Omaar, 2007; Spencer, 2006) . Because recourse to religion has been a significant feature of these events it has impacted locally in Hampshire on some attitudes to what, previously, would have been seen as positive, or at least unobjectionable, multicultural educational provision; most obviously visits to places of worship by schools.

Headteachers began to notice and report increasing parental withdrawal of consent for their children's participation in these events, especially in 2006-7. This withdrawal was especially related to visits to a local mosque in Southampton but also applied elsewhere, Sikh Gurudwaras and Hindu Mandirs. One primary school headteacher reported a 10% withdrawal rate by parents when she had previously run the visit to the mosque for several years with no parents withdrawing their children. Reasons for withdrawal could be varied but one given was that a parent was afraid of her child being bombed (there had been a recent bombing of a mosque in France). Therefore it would be wrong to conclude that it was just attitudes to Islam that were changing when the safety of offspring was also an issue.

Approach

The approach to the project was influenced by two publications. *Brideless in Wembley* by Sanjay Suri (2007) and *Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion: draft guidance for schools and Consultation Response Form* (DfES, 2007) In one of his studies for his book *Brideless in Wembley* (Suri, 2007), Sanjay Suri parked himself on a bench in Leicester's largest mall, The Shires, to conduct a study, between 12pm and 5pm concerning 'what I dared to call myself a rough quantitative survey...I wanted to see how many came to The Shires with their ethnic own, and how many with others...the mall seemed a random enough place to see who might step out in mixed ethnic company.' (p. 23)

After 5 hours he reports:

'I scanned perhaps 12,000 to 15,000 people. Through this I counted only 44 people in 12 mixed groups...Most of these mixed groups were clearly university students...If this observation was valid we were talking zero point zero zero something by way of multicultural Leicester...Leicester did not appear a multicultural city, only a city of adjacent cultures. Perhaps not even that; just variously monocultural.' (p.25)

In *Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion: draft guidance for schools and Consultation Response Form* (DfES, 2007) we read:

'...we passionately believe that it is the duty of all schools to address issues of "how we live together" and "dealing with difference" however controversial and difficult they might sometimes seem' (p.1)

The project's approach sought to address ways in which pupils from different backgrounds could work together and ways in which issues related to 'difference' could be addressed.

Method

In February 2007 the Executive Member for Education endorsed this two year project on social cohesion. The project has now been running for one year with pilot schools in Hampshire and Southampton. This report is a commentary on its progress and presents the findings and recommendations made by pupils involved at the conference held on 27 March at the University of Winchester. This conference was attended by 64 guests including headteachers, faith representatives, education officers and Council and SACRE members.

Six schools have been involved to date: four Hampshire and two Southampton schools comprising three primary (Year 6 pupils) and three secondary schools. The schools were paired in order to construct joint enquiries into the concept of difference as they experienced it in their lives and in relation to those differences they celebrated, were comfortable with or found challenging. Selected pupils from these schools met to carry out this enquiry, which involved creating cultural maps, questionnaires, learning walks, and research training. Attention was paid to ensuring that these pairings took account of diversity, especially in terms of social and cultural background and ethnicity. 60 pupils presented at the Winchester conference.

The pupils' enquiries in the twinned schools developed different foci.

In the Fairfield Primary and Costello secondary enquiry the main focus was the admission of new Nepalese pupils into Costello Technology College and the need for them to be socially accommodated within the school population. Pupils already in the school needed to be prepared for the arrival of the new Tibetan pupils. Since Fairfield is a multi-lingual school its Year 6 pupils were able to work with Costello pupils in determining how best to address these issues.

In the Wildern and Cantell enquiry the main issues were media mis-representation of minority groups and the connected issue of parental attitudes. Since the schools had very different catchment areas resulting in a diverse ethnic population in Cantell and a mainly white population in Wildern they explored how this affected perceptions of difference within their own schools and through meeting together with named partners for each pair of pupils.

In the Mount Pleasant Junior School and Kings Copse Primary School enquiry issues concerning meeting pupils from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds emerged and the impact of those on perceptions of identity and on pupil confidence and preparation for later life. For example, one pupil wrote: 'When I was back at (my) school I felt safe and at home' and another wrote 'We may have differences but it doesn't mean we can't be friends'. A strong feature of this partnership was the way in which pupils were paired up across schools and the preparation for meeting up done through photographs and e-mail communication.

The project was supported by Hampshire services, especially the RE inspectorate, the Intercultural Inspector, the Hampshire Archive and Local Studies as well as other members of HIAS. This brought together varied expertise and ensured that the Hampshire initiatives already in place, Rights, Respect and Responsibility and the conceptual enquiry methodology in the Agreed Syllabus Living Difference, were used to maximum combined effect to give direction to the project.

Outside funding was made available through the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) and the Westhill Trust, Aimhigher and the University of Winchester and through the Hampshire Archive and Local Studies. Additionally funding was provided from the Rights, Respect and Responsibilities budget and the Hampshire Interfaith budget. The RE inspectorate received £18,000 to lead and support the project from the education budget.

The project also involved providing training for faith representatives to inform them of the role they might be invited to play in progressing the social cohesion enquiry by pupils in schools. To date two separate training days have been delivered to a total of 17 representatives. It is intended that these training opportunities will also be made available in 2008-9 as the project undertakes its second year.

Findings and recommendations

The schools involved presented their findings and recommendations at the conference on 27 March 2008. The main findings and recommendations are summarised below:

Findings

- that parental involvement in social cohesion would be beneficial
- that media representation of schools and of religions can prevent cohesion amongst children and misperceptions of religion
- that a felt lack of national identity prevents cohesion
- that it is very easy for pupils from different schools to see each other as rivals and to initially be uncomfortable working together and make judgements based on 'race' and class. They need opportunities to share activities and experiences and to develop a project dependent on shared responsibilities and outcomes in order to enable friendships and respect to develop. For example shared whole school days would allow for mixed team sporting and cultural activities. Working toward a shared presentation on this project increased commitment to one another.
- that the admission of new pupils of different ethnicity and mother tongue can result in tensions if pupils in the school are not prepared for this by the school

Recommendations

- The recommendations below were agreed by the pupils of the schools involved and are presented for consideration by Hampshire County Council and the management and governors of their own schools.
- Prepare pupils for intake of new pupil admissions of minority cultural and ethnic backgrounds by educating pupils into the cultural heritage of new pupils
- Provide a buddy system for new pupils
- Ensure space is available for minority groups to meet together and use strategies to ensure that mixing together occurs more readily within school and class time. For example by using teamwork strategies in classroom learning.
- Support and monitor the integration of new pupils and provide opportunities for them to speak with other pupils about their cultural identity and experiences.
- Teach cohesion in and out of school
- Address social cohesion with Years 6 and 7 as pupils transfer to a new school
- That the Rights, Respect and Responsibility initiative should be introduced in all schools
- Link schools with different catchments in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3
- Involve parents through parent conferences/culture days
- That greater financial resource is required by schools to address social cohesion effectively

Summary and future action

The above recommendations will now be considered by Hampshire County Council and the management and governors of the schools involved to determine how they might result in improved provision for social cohesion.

The completion of this one-year pilot project is intended to provide the basis for schools in Hampshire and Southampton to respond effectively to the duty to promote social/community cohesion.

Funding for involvement of further schools in this project is already agreed for 2008-9 and we would welcome applications for future involvement in 2008-9, building on achievements so far (please contact; clive.erricker@hants.gov.uk)

A more extensive presentation of this project is available which has been submitted to an International Handbook for publication. For this please contact: clive.erricker@hants.gov.uk)

National interest has been shown in this project by bodies disseminating good practice case studies. These will be going onto the following websites:

Academy For Sustainable Communities: www.ascskills.org.uk/showcase

iCoCo (Institute of Community Cohesion): www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk

Four of the six schools involved will reprise their presentations to the Hampshire County Council Cabinet on 2 July 2008.

Two of these schools will present nationally at a conference on Community Cohesion in Schools on 26 June 2008 in London.

A report on the project will be given by Clive Erricker at the NASACRE AGM on 8 May 2008

Presentations from the schools involved in 2007-8 are on the following Hampshire Interfaith Network site: <http://www.hants-interfaith.org>

DVDs of the presentation event are available from: david.bond@hants.gov.uk

Ofsted judgements on the contribution to social cohesion within the RE provision at Wildern School are available on the Ofsted website

References and further reading

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