Young People's Perceptions of Effective Community Cohesion Practices

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Key findings

This small-scale study used Appreciative Inquiry to involve young people in developing community cohesion. It involved young people and staff in two schools in local authorities: one urban and one rural area.

- The majority of the 23 young people who participated were initially unfamiliar with the term 'community cohesion'. Their definition of 'community' was narrow and mainly restricted to their group of friends. Young people identified themselves as belonging to more than one community, depending on the activities in which they were involved.

- Young people reported that participation and communication were central to their concept of community.

- Young people from the urban school were concerned to foster cohesion between young people from different cultural backgrounds, whereas those in the rural school wanted to maintain their strong relationships with people of all ages in their own village while fostering greater communication with young people living in other villages.

- Characteristics of a cohesive school community identified by young people included: teamwork, caring staff and tutors, having responsibilities, good communication and active participation.

- In order to promote community cohesion within their schools, young people welcomed the role of student councils, clubs, induction activities for Year 7 students, music and dancing activities and multi-cultural events.

- To promote community cohesion in the local area, young people suggested organising sports, music and arts events, seasonal festivals (such as bonfire night and Christmas fairs), multicultural events (in the multicultural urban area) and youth clubs.

- The research demonstrated that young people are able to participate meaningfully in discussions that aim to improve community cohesion within their communities.

1. Introduction

From September 2007, schools had a duty to promote community cohesion and this is now subject to inspection by Ofsted. But despite the increasing emphasis on community cohesion, a review of recent literature on the subject revealed a paucity of research focusing on young people's views (Hetherington *et al*., 2007).

This report presents the results of a small-scale study funded and carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The NFER study aimed to find out what two groups of young people thought about community cohesion activities in their schools. The project adopted an approach known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to identify examples of good practice in community cohesion as perceived by young people. In particular the project set out to:

- examine the views of young people in relation to community cohesion initiatives and to identify their recommendations for future practice
- involve young people and representatives from two local authorities in a collaborative process of planning, designing and applying community cohesion initiatives.

Further information using AI in educational research can be found in a separate report (Shuayb *et al*., 2009).

1.1 Background to policy development in community cohesion

The thinking around community cohesion has developed and evolved in recent years, especially following the 2001 social disturbances in the north of England. The Local Government Association (LGA, 2001) spoke of democracy and diversity, and community enterprise was highlighted as a priority area. In 2002 (ODPM *et al*, 2002), leadership and local ownership of community cohesion was being stressed. By early 2008, the focus had shifted from identifying the multiple interests of different groups within multi-cultural societies to one of encouraging different ethnic communities to integrate, interact and live harmoniously with each another. The challenge has changed from one of multi-cultural inclusiveness to that of promoting 'well-being', equality, engaging citizens in the different ethnic sectors to participate in the community and bringing about cohesiveness. It was argued that discouraging separate, distinct groups and supporting people to find common ground in the quest for conflict resolution should build and strengthen the framework for one large holistic community, at the heart of which is the school.

The four key characteristics of community cohesion as defined in *Guidance on Community Cohesion* (ODPM *et al*, 2002) are still at the root of aspirations for community cohesion today. But other documents offering guidance and advice for local authorities have demonstrated the concern felt by central government and other national organisations over this period. *Community Cohesion - an Action Guide: Guidance for Local Authorities* was published in 2004 (LGA *et* al, 2004) and by 2006,

leaders in local authorities (both chief executives and elected members) were expected to champion cohesion and promote partnerships with voluntary and private agencies (LGA and IDeA, 2006). Further practical resources and toolkits were published in 2007 (see DCSF and Communities and Local Government, 2007 for example).

The central significance of the school in a community and its role in enabling the breaking down of barriers between young people was first recognised by the Independent Review Team chaired by Ted Cantle (Home Office, 2004 a, b and c). The review recognised the potential of schools to educate, open up access, promote dialogue and support achievement, in the service of the community.

From September 2007, all schools had a duty to promote community cohesion (DCSF and Communities and Local Government, 2007). Some schools have started developing links to the wider community through clustering, providing extended services and children's centres on site, or twinning with schools with different intakes. The curriculum also offers a potential means of changing attitudes and helping to eliminate racial discrimination amongst children and young people, as well as promoting citizenship.

In addition to statutory duties, including all maintained schools' governing bodies having to promote community cohesion and the well-being of pupils, there was an additional emphasis on community cohesion within inspections regimes, with cohesion seen as a key element in the indicator set (Communities and Local Government, 2007, p7). In 2009, Ofsted published guidance for inspecting community cohesion practices in schools.

2. Research methodology

The NFER research team adopted an AI approach in researching community cohesion. AI is a relatively new theory developed as an alternative to the problem-solving approach underpinning action research (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). AI aims to identify good practice, design effective development plans, and ensure implementation. It focuses on what works, rather than trying to fix what does not. It therefore eradicates the deficit model by suggesting an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice.

AI was initially developed as a method for promoting organisational development, but over the last decade it has also been increasingly deployed as a research tool in education.

AI is a collaborative and participative approach. It relies on qualitative research techniques such as group discussion and one-to-one interviews to identify good practice, think about change, and introduce it within an organisation. The AI process begins with a grounded observation of the 'best of what is' then collaboratively

articulates 'what might be', ensuring the consent of those in the system to 'what should be' and collectively experimenting with 'what can be'. The application of AI takes place in four stages: discovering, dreaming, designing, and delivering (Hammond, 1996).

1. **Discovering**: finding out the best and most positive experiences participants had in their organisation.

2. **Dreaming**: participants thinking creatively about the future.

3. **Designing**: designing plans for the future which reflect participants' views of good practice and visions. This phase involves producing provocative propositions, which are statements about what the participants want to achieve in their organisation.

4. **Delivering:** the energy moves towards action planning, working out what will need to happen to realise the provocative propositions.

2.1   Sample

The NFER research team sent an invitation to all local authorities (LAs), in the south of England. They then selected two: an urban and a rural LA. Each LA was asked to nominate a secondary school which had experience of community cohesion initiatives. Each school selected up to 12 young people between Year 7 and Year 11 to take part in the project. The group of young people selected in the urban area represented a variety of ethnic groups (this was not the case for the rural school, as it served an exclusively white population).

2.2   Instruments

The NFER team designed two AI interview schedules in collaboration with young people and staff. The schedules had four main sections, to reflect the four different phases of AI; Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver. The schedules were piloted by the two groups of young people and amended accordingly. The research team also designed interview schedules and written pro-formas to collect comments from all participants (LA representatives, teachers and young people) on the AI process.

2.3   Research process

The NFER team aimed to make the study to be as participative as possible and to involve young people in all stages of the research. In order to achieve this, young people were trained in conducting appreciative interviews and were asked to interview their peers about community cohesion. Such an approach allowed the research to involve a larger number of young people over a short period of time. It was the intention that such a process would create a dialogue about community cohesion amongst young people.

The NFER team ran a half-day training workshop for the group of young volunteers in each of the two case-study schools. In total, 23 young volunteers and two teachers were trained. During the session, young people interviewed each other in pairs. They piloted the AI interview schedule designed by the research team, analysed their data and explored how it could be used to design a plan for developing community cohesion. In response to the feedback provided from the workshops, the draft instruments were amended and redistributed to the young people. Each participant was given a pack containing recording equipment and blank audio-tapes and undertook to complete two appreciative interviews over a period of a month. In total, 44 young people were interviewed by their peers.

The NFER team met again with each of the two groups of young people to analyse the data and share the positive stories identified during the interviews. The data was summarised by the NFER research team and presented to the young volunteers to discuss and analyse as a group.

The main aims of the second workshop were to devise a plan of action and design a PowerPoint presentation to present to LA staff in the final workshop. Young people developed a plan based on the positive practices and visions identified through their interviews. The plan aimed to foster community cohesion in their school and local area.

The third workshop brought together young people and representatives from the LA and the school in each of the two selected areas. Young people presented their plans and discussed ways of implementing the recommendations with LA representatives.

3. Research findings

3.1 Young people's definition of community cohesion

The majority of young people who participated in the workshop were unfamiliar with the term 'community cohesion'. Their initial definitions of 'community' were narrow and mainly restricted to their group of friends. For example, one young person remarked that: '*It* [community] *is where my friends are rather than a particular area*'.

Both groups of young people identified communication and active participation as central to making community links:

> *When you are not in a community is when you don't try and be with other people and connect. Clubs are very useful because they connect people and they show the similarities between people. But when you don't get involved, other people will feel you are not part of the community.*

Young people from both schools identified themselves as belonging to more than one community, depending on activities in which they were involved: their school, age group or residence.

> *It's like building a web of relations, like when you belong to a club you meet new friends and then you develop a web.*

> *You create your own community depending on what you do and you create yourself rather than where you live.*

There were some differences in responses from young people in the two areas. Young people in the rural area talked about the confined nature of their local community and felt that they had benefited from strong relationships with a relatively small number of people living in the immediate area. One young person commented:

> *I tend to think I live in a village more than* [the local authority area]. *You don't know what is happening in other villages apart from those very close to you*

However, following their participation in the project, some of these young people appeared to adopt a broader definition of their community. This was partly due to the interviews participants had conducted during the project which allowed them to learn more about other villages, as these quotes from three different participants show:

> *I felt that I belonged to* [my village] *and it is my community but when I did this research and spoke to other people from other places it became wider.*

> *My community is the actual county.*

> *For me this project was about enlarging my sense of community and yes before that my community was my village and I really did not know any of the other villages*

3.2 Characteristics of a cohesive school community

Young people from both the urban and rural schools described a cohesive school as:

- having a supportive and approachable staff
- treating young people fairly
- providing opportunities to take responsibility
- involving them in activities.

Interestingly, the features of a cohesive school community are very similar to young people's perception of effective and caring schools (Shuayb, 2005). Although young people in both schools highlighted the importance of learning more about other

cultures, having a supportive and caring school environment was seen as more crucial for fostering cohesion in the school.

When asked to identify effective community cohesion practices at their school, young people mentioned outdoor activities and trips, music and sports events. Participants also noted that a cohesive school empowers young people through an active student council and clubs. Young people appreciated activities that encouraged teamwork, involved physical activities, where they learned new skills, were given responsibility, where they were able to make new friends and improve their relationships with staff. They also highlighted the importance and effectiveness of induction days for Year 7 students. Participants reported that these activities facilitated the transition process of young people and helped them feel part of the school community.

Young people's suggestions on how to make their school a more cohesive community included: multi-cultural evenings to learn about different cultures, areas where young people can socialise, teamwork activities, a school webpage run by young people, after school clubs, cultural trips, lunchtime clubs, arts and crafts activities, talent shows, sports clubs and activities, summer fairs and induction days.

One of the case-study schools acted on young people's recommendations by appointing a community cohesion officer to follow up their suggestions. The school planned to provide better seating areas where young people could socialise, as well as developing a webpage run by young people for them to advertise activities in their area. The school was also planning to establish a radio station run by young people.

3.3   Characteristics of a cohesive local community

There were some differences in young people's visions of a cohesive and ideal neighbourhood between those living in the urban and rural areas. Young people in the urban area highlighted features such as child-friendly parks and youth clubs; they also mentioned the importance of positive attitudes to cultural diversity such as tolerance, equality, celebration of diversity and ensuring safety for all. In contrast, those living in rural communities focused on qualities of friendliness in small group activities and wanted good facilities and services such as sports facilities and transport. They also stressed the role of youth clubs more than those in urban areas and saw such clubs as a good way to attract young people from different villages.

Young people's relationships with their local area also varied between urban and rural areas. Participants in the urban area were primarily concerned with what the area could provide for young people in order to make them feel part of their community. But they explained that these activities did not have to take place in their local area, as long as they were accessible to young people. Young people in the urban school also stressed the importance of valuing and involving different cultures. In contrast, pupils in the rural area had a strong sense of belonging to the villages in which they lived

and were concerned with developing relationships amongst the local villages as a means for fostering community cohesion in the wider area.

The AI process allowed young people the opportunity to reflect on numerous stories of positive experiences which made them feel part of their community. On the whole, young people from both rural and urban areas highlighted similar positive experiences. Both groups mentioned sports events, youth club activities, summer and Christmas fairs and musical activities. Young people living in the rural area also mentioned activities such as the village pantomime, activities at the village hall, bonfire night, scout groups, pub quizzes, events at the local racecourse and junior sport teams. Young people spoke positively about activities that involved adults and young people socialising together. They remarked that such activities not only made them feel part of the community, but also helped involve family members. Participants from the urban area enjoyed the trips organised by the local play centre, carnivals and street parties. They also valued the multi-cultural nature of their community and considered this to be an asset.

Young people's suggestions of ways for developing community cohesion in their local area included organising a website for young people advertising activities, sport activities, joint activities between young people and adults, trips, youth clubs, competitions, fairs, dancing events, quiz nights and town picnics. In addition, young people in the urban area suggested organising multi-cultural parties and learning about other cultures through famous people. They also suggested creating a website for young people to advertise activities. Participants in the rural area focused on fostering the relationships between villages.

In one of the LAs, a number of the above recommendations were taken up by LA representatives, such as involving young people in designing a webpage for young people in the county. The LA also gave technical support for participants to establish a webpage in their school to foster relationships among young people from different villages.

4.   Conclusions

Young people felt part of a cohesive community if they felt cared for by the members of that community both in school and within the local community. They also recognised that they belonged to different communities and did not feel that this was problematic in any way. Even though young people found the concept of community cohesion difficult to understand, they appeared to have a lucid perception of 'community'.

The main differences between the two areas reflected the geography, transport and social and cultural features of their communities. Young people in the urban area were concerned to foster cohesion between young people from different cultural backgrounds, whereas those in the rural area wanted to maintain their strong

relationships with those of all ages in their own village while fostering greater communication with young people living in other villages.

Young people identified the following features of organisations and activities promoting community cohesion:

- teamwork
- caring staff and tutors
- being empowered and having responsibilities
- good communication and active participation.

These features were promoted in the following school activities:

- student council
- clubs
- induction activities for year 7 students
- school and local area activities
- music and dancing activities
- multi-cultural events.

Community activities considered to foster cohesion included:

- sports, music and arts events
- seasonal festivals (such as bonfire night and Christmas fairs)
- multicultural events (in the multicultural urban area)
- youth clubs.

This study has demonstrated that young people appreciate the positive efforts their schools and local authorities make to improve communication and involvement, and are able to participate meaningfully in improving cohesion within their communities.

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