

Religious Identities and practice, 'community cohesion' and young people in educational settings

Synopsis

This project examines the expression of religious identities and practices in the public space, with particular reference to the experience of young people in educational settings, both recent migrants and established residents, in order to establish the potential contribution they might offer, and/or the practical barriers they present to 'cohesion' within local communities. The project involves qualitative primary research including in-depth interviews with students, staff, parents and educational policy makers and service providers in relation to educational settings in four local areas in England. It also includes observational study of religious education/personal, social, health and citizenship education curriculum based classroom activities relevant to community cohesion, among Key Stages 2 and 3 students in selected schools in the four areas. The research provides an opportunity to critically examine the relevance and impact of the duty on schools to promote community cohesion in the areas and schools studied more than two years after it was implemented, and to explore the role of religious difference, identities and practice of pupils in facilitating or impeding implementation. At the same time, broadening the focus to a wider range of educational settings, particularly religious educational settings in the community, would provide valuable insight into the role of such settings as facilitators of or barriers to community cohesion in comparison with schools.

Background

Evidence from a recently completed COMPAS study in religiously diverse areas in England with significant migrant and established Muslim populations indicated that educational spaces, specifically though not exclusively schools, are perceived positively by people living in those areas as public spaces in which hopes for a cohesive community may be furthered. Further, the place of schools in this context has been moving up the policy agenda as shown by the duty placed upon all maintained schools in England since September 2007 to promote 'community cohesion'.

At the same time, dissemination of the *Immigration, faith and cohesion* project findings in the three localities with significant Muslim populations studied – Birmingham, Newham and Bradford – revealed widespread concern among local educational policy makers and practitioners about barriers to 'community cohesion' found in educational settings in socio-economically deprived areas, particularly in schools where pupil populations, both migrant and established, are segregated according to religion and ethnicity. There was also concern about the importance of eliciting the views of young people of school-age in these areas about the relation between religious identities and 'community cohesion' particularly in the context of the national policy focus on youth radicalisation and preventing violent extremism.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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Focusing on young people who have recently migrated to the UK as a central component of the research, and comparing their views of community cohesion with those of young people from longer established groups is important because recent migrants could be seen to constitute one of the greatest challenges to facilitating community cohesion in local communities as well as specifically in implementing the duty on schools. In areas where there has been significant immigration of families in recent years, schools and other educational settings have been struggling to cope with expanding student numbers in the context of limited resources and the need to accommodate increased cultural diversity. An opportunity to examine such challenges faced by educational settings in the face of the religious diversity of incomers would provide valuable insight into facilitators of and barriers to community cohesion in local areas.

Aims

The aim of the research is to understand how educational settings mediate religious identities in shaping the views and experiences of community cohesion of young people from both recently migrated and established communities in England. Do young people of different faiths or of no faith, both those who are recently arrived in Britain and those in established communities believe 'community cohesion' is possible? Do they think it desirable? What factors within their faith backgrounds contribute to the appropriation of values and behaviours contributing to community cohesion as it is defined in policy terms? What factors, from their perspectives detract from or prevent the evolution of a more 'cohesive community'?

Methods

The research focus will be on educational settings in four areas, Birmingham, Newham, Bradford and Oxford. The first three areas were included in the initial *Immigration, faith and cohesion study* and will provide an opportunity to build on the findings of that project with a focus on young people and educational settings. The choice of the fourth area, Oxford is largely determined by local educational practitioners' concerns about the importance of understanding the views of White British young people in similarly deprived areas for whom religious identity is of varying significance with respect to 'community cohesion' issues.

In all four areas, mainly qualitative primary research will be conducted involving two components:

- 1) in-depth interviews with pupils, teachers, school governors, parents, youth workers, religious instructors, community educational providers for young people and local educational policy makers.
- 2) Observation of the responses of young people within the context of classroom curriculum-based activities supporting PSHCE/RE lessons in primary and secondary schools (key stages 2 and 3).

Current work in progress

Work is ongoing on developing the research proposal with a view to submitting a grant proposal to a funding organisation in the later Summer/early Autumn 2009.

Researchers

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Funders

Grant application to be submitted to a funder later this year.

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