

Community cohesion

The duty on schools around community cohesion is frequently interpreted as a requirement for them to bring children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds more closely into the fold.

In fact, its scope is far wider, as a talk2learn NCSL in Dialogue debate on the subject highlighted.

Key points raised were:

- community cohesion can focus on international and domestic cultural issues in class and in extra-curricular activities
- it can also embrace working with families, community organisations and other agencies to address practical social problems
- addressing community cohesion can be a problem in predominantly white communities

Community cohesion is not just about race and faith, emphasised Sheila McCreary of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) who led the debate jointly with DCSF adviser and former head Sir Keith Ajegbo.

"It is about a wide variety of different types of background including socio-economic status, urban or rural, young or old, disability, sexual preference, the list goes on. There are also four different types of community, the school itself, the local community, the UK, and the global community."

Tyla Arabas, an ethnic minority achievement co-ordinator in a secondary school in Newham, London, organises events ranging from ethnic minority focus groups to Family Man days to encourage fathers' involvement in school under the community cohesion banner. The work can sometimes take on a very real-life significance, she added.

"Unfortunately, we are in the process of running our second anti-deportation campaign but I guess this should also be seen as part of community cohesion since it makes our community stronger and gets the parents involved while students get a crash course in human rights," she added.



Mark Klekot, headteacher of a primary school in the West Midlands, said his school has identified developing children's sense of self through their culture and heritage, and linking it to that of others, as a theme and is changing its curriculum accordingly to introduce more local content into subjects such as geography and history.

"The children's real lack of understanding of self is a key issue. We are in an area of significant social deprivation and there is an ever increasing danger of ghettos being created. In this instance I believe focusing on teaching and learning is the way to go."

Partnerships can help broaden children's horizons in new ways, said Sharon Ezekiel, assistant headteacher at a Jewish school in London.

"We are teaming up with a local school that is much more diverse than us and looking at a shared futures programme where the children will be learning together and sharing some special things about our own cultures."

Steve Williamson, a primary headteacher in the North-West, said his school's efforts had concentrated on working together with local bodies to renew the neighbourhood.

"Many school leaders persist with the myth that the community is out there and is to be served rather than growing together. Yet, this tends to lead to a parochial and exclusive form of community development.

"Our projects around community cohesion have focused on creating a sense of security in the community developed around housing and life on the local estate and linking PCSOs, tenants, housing officials and pupils in renewing the neighbourhood."

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