

'People at the heart of our processes' - a case study of how an early years setting promotes community cohesion.

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This research was carried out as part of a Doctorate in Education at Bristol University. It investigates the approach taken by an early years setting to promote community cohesion. The provocation for the research focus derives from the author's growing unease over the perceived limitations of a target-driven culture currently pervading English schools. A case is made for the importance of schools' community cohesion work; presented here as a potential vehicle with which to broaden and extend the school experience beyond the narrow, individualistic confines imposed by accountability frameworks.

A review of literature on schools' actions taken to promote community cohesion reveals that the majority of studies report on 'one-off' actions', weighted towards concerns around ethnicity, with limited high quality case studies conducted within the early years (Dyson and Gallannaugh 2008). To address this knowledge gap, a singular case study has been conducted on an inner city maintained nursery school and children's centre in England, with the aim of gaining insights into the nature of an 'embedded approach' to promoting community cohesion. Empirical data gathered within the case study has also been used to address the secondary, more philosophical question, around whether community cohesion work might serve as a conduit through which to 'rehumanize' the educational arena.

The setting was specifically chosen for its excellent reputation in community relations. The qualitative case study has been conducted over a four month period, with a range of data gathering methods deployed to disaggregate their community cohesion work. These included; interviews, focus groups, observations within the classroom and family support sessions, photographic and documentary data. The six distinct themes, which emerged from the codification process of the data analysis, are demonstrated with supporting evidence. These data themes are linked to key theoretical and conceptual constructs within the community cohesion and broader discourse; a process, which identifies four interrelated principles on which the setting's community cohesion approach is based.

The first of these community cohesion principles emphasizes the key relationship between critical self-examination and the quality of response towards others; a number of pragmatic measures illuminate how non-inclusive values and assumptions (which might militate against community cohesion) are supportively and sensitively challenged. The second principle is based on the setting's affordance as a 'protective site' or 'community haven' with secure local knowledge and community responsive relationships offering scope for members to build 'attachments' to the inclusive site, leading ultimately to a sense of belonging, important for cohesive living. The third principle represents the importance of taking practical measures to disrupt parallel living or social segregation. The robust commitment to bridge social distances between disparate groups is spearheaded by the setting's pragmatic measures to

'move closer' to the community they serve. The dynamic efforts to 'connect' with their families and community are rooted in an appreciation and endorsement of the equal value of all cultural capitals; an inclusive worldview, which presents as a valuable role model or social template for the multi-ethnic population served by the setting. The final principle represents the importance of recognising and affirming the identities of all community members. Efforts made by the setting to promote inter-cultural understanding and a positive attitude to difference are found to contribute to the egalitarian, community-centric model of identity formation within the setting, deemed conducive to cohesive living.

Two conclusions are drawn. The first conclusion effectively presents as a distillation of the setting's approach to community cohesion. To this end, the analogy of a diamond is drawn on to encapsulate the essence of their approach and to highlight the significant value of their community cohesion work. The second conclusion provides an affirmative response to the secondary research question related to whether the setting's community cohesion work can help to rehumanize the educational arena. This definitive answer is predicated on the evidence of the central importance placed on human relationships within the setting.

Implications for policy makers and practitioners are offered, along with personal reflections on the study and recommendations for future research.