

“Involving families from differing backgrounds in shared learning experiences: community cohesion on the doorstep:” a personal perspective

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Abstract

This article explores how two disparate schools came together to become a cohesive and supportive community despite many previous racial and cultural tensions. It then goes on to use lessons learned through this experience to engage parents from differing backgrounds into their children’s learning. Through focussing on life long learning and developing thinking and creative skills free and easily accessible learning experiences were shared with families. As well as addressing other issues this created a shared sense of belonging and gave access for all to learning and equal opportunities for all, including the most socio economically disadvantaged. It created a cohesive learning community on the doorstep.

Bridge Junior School, Leicester, serves a diverse community in a socio-economically deprived area. Housing is poor with much overcrowding. Less than ten percent of the adult population in the area have had further education post sixteen and child poverty indicators suggest levels of deprivation in the bottom ten percent nationally. (www.statistics.gov.uk)



There has been an established Indian Asian community in this part of Leicester, Highfields, since the early 1970s but it has been characterised by great flux and change both in terms of ethnicity and religion. The mainly Hindu and Sikh community, predominantly from the Gujarat and Punjab gave way to African Asian families. By the mid nineties there were mostly adherents of Islam: from African counties but Gujarati speakers. Those families who succeeded economically tended to move from the area to the outer city or its suburbs. Following the civil war in Somalia many Muslim Somalis found refuge in Leicester via stays in, particularly, Holland but also in Scandinavian

countries, bringing with them many European languages. In recent years there have been a number of French speaking North African Muslims who have chosen to give up residence in France in order to wear Islamic dress in English schools. Currently 82% of the school population is from Islamic families; seventeen different languages are spoken and over forty counties of origin have been identified. The majority do not speak English within the family.

The school, with 360 pupils of 7-11 years range shares a campus with a similarly sized school: Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Primary School. As a single faith school it takes its pupils from a wider catchment area. The two schools, however, share similar demographic and socio-economic features. Many of the white and afro-Caribbean families are working class and have been resident in the area for several generations. There is a small Irish population which settled in the 1920s. More recently Portuguese Goans (an enclave in India) and Polish speakers have added to the ethnic and cultural mix.

With so many shared educational issues and challenges the school remained disparate and coexisted in mutual isolation. Underlying tensions pervaded every day life coming to the surface with the occasional racial comment or stone throwing incident. These were perpetrated by each side, literally over the fence that separated the schools. Each incident was dealt with but with no overview. This ceased to be the case when a group of about twenty children from each school decided to resolve a verbal confrontation by meeting at a nearby precinct area with bats taken from their respective sports stores. The head teachers of each school intervened and immediately conceded that it was no longer time to sit on the fence.

There had to be a proactive commitment to bring the two school committees together. This was a number of years before central government had considered community cohesion as being on the educational agenda. Bridge and Sacred Heart set out what the shared principles should be. The starting point was in agreeing that “neutrality was not an option”. Neither school had reference points either from academic literature or from experience except both head teachers had shared beliefs that social cohesion, as it was then referred to, should be rooted in social equality and respect for religious, cultural and ethnical differences. It was agreed that

- all participants would be equal partners
- any project undertaken would be designed to promote the understanding that would emphasise similarities while accepting differences
- give all participants a sense of belonging to the shared community

A number of initiatives were considered before almost accidentally becoming involved with the dance and drama group Mighty Zulu Nation, as part of the “Pathfinder”

project.

Any engagement in any form of competitive sport was considered a non starter; it was too early to have activities that would involve winning or losing and the status that gave to the former. There has to be a confrontation of stereotypes and no sense of tokenism. Initial contacts had to be managed and structures had to be sensitive to all needs, including a shared vision of possibilities.

Being involved with Mighty Zulu Nation came about during an overheard conversation when both head teachers were attending a local authority Islamic Awareness meeting. Neither school had any form of cultural or ethnical ownership of the project; the power and creativity of the group's performances transcended prior experiences and above all the appeal was universal. It immediately allayed stereotypes on both sides: Muslim children and boys can dance. Music and drama can transmit messages which are cohesive and spiritual without being grounded in any one religious tradition. Involvement with the group was the explosive catalyst which brought the two school communities together.

Just as vital was to discover the best way to proceed after the project. School Councils from each school met and joint visits were made to local places of interest. Children met and discussed religious customs and observances. Similarities between Christianity and Islam were discussed and explored. Presentations about Hinduism and Sikhism were given. Parents joined their children to go on picnics off site. Perhaps most telling were the twice monthly 20:20 club meetings for creative and cultural activities. This club was composed of twenty children from each school working on joint projects in art, music, drama and conservation.

Each session ended with parents being invited to a presentation and to share meals together. A real sense of unity developed.

The success achieved through the two schools coming together was continued into the long term. Not only are the two communities genuinely at ease together but acknowledge they are part of a shared future. This ease was not necessarily always felt within Bridge Junior School. There was nearly as much tension within the school as had been present between the schools prior to the cohesion projects. We learned that community cohesion should start from inside: the school community, then the community on the doorstep.

The school population remains quite static in terms of numbers but not in terms of personnel. About two out of three children spend their key stage 2 years (7 – 11) only at Bridge. Although some families have been resident for three generations others may move within a few months, being re-housed or finding more appropriate accommodation. In a ten week period on average eight families move into the school and the same number

move out. There can be supervision of new arrivals, economic success and even of adherents of the same religion who practice different customs within different cultural backgrounds.

This had the potential to create cultural, ethnic and racial tensions. The lessons learned from a wider view of community cohesion were brought to focus on the micro level.

The common element amongst all community stakeholders is for children to have success in their education and have a positive view about themselves and their future. Bridge Junior School promotes a particular emphasis on learning: it should be life-long, challenging, be based on personal ownership and above all, be skills based. In the 21st century pupils should be equipped with the literacy, numeracy and technical skills which will enable them to be “young citizens of conscience”. Having a shared home perspective makes this more achievable.

A number of key justifications were considered for the promotion of community cohesion. If there was not a shared sense of belonging there could be feelings of isolation. If there was not equal access to learning for all there could be resentment. If diversity was not valued and acknowledged there could be bigotry. In all religious expressions there is spirituality, in being a citizen there are rights but only with responsibility. All these elements needed to be recognised and addressed through working in partnerships between school and families.

Each learning day begins with a focus on thinking skills. Children are presented with open ended challenges to encourage Thinking It Over. (There is an in-house cartoon character called Tio). They can enter their class twenty minutes before the start of school day and engage with Tio. The majority of children choose to take this opportunity. This leads to a calm and thoughtful prelude to the day. It promotes a readiness to learn as well as placing personal learning and enquiry at the forefront of provision.

The whole notion of thinking and life-long learning skills was presented to parents, 80% of whom attend twice each term “School Matters” meetings, and the overwhelming response was “how?” From parents asking questions the school developed its “Families In Thinking”: FIT 2 Learn programme. The purpose of which was to give both children and parents access to learning opportunities so that all could share the same experience and value of learning. This appealed to all parents and immediately brought them into context with groups they would not normally communicate with.

A definition of learning: if learning is what is left from an experience, children need more experiences. This became a mantra for provision. If a community is to be cohesive it should share equal opportunities of experience. Without experience learning is limited.

Criteria for the learning experiences were set. Transport for all was to be provided by the school, free of charge for parents and children. (This had major budget implications but having the wherewithal, the determination to succeed and make the programme high profile and high priority, the funding was found). It had to go to places that families could return to via public transport with no entrance fees. Easy access to learning and a potential to develop skills for both parent and child were vital.

There was also the intention to give parents confidence and knowledge of the immediate locality and across the city. To be part of a community a family must know what the community holds and feel part of it. “Families In Thinking” not only broadens horizons, literacy, but also sought to heighten a sense of belonging.

The language in which learning or education is transmitted can easily acquire a superior status over the mother tongue which is not the language of the country of residence. The national language will most often and most obviously be the language of education. To give parents the confidence that their home language has educational value and can access learning in their new language was vital.

The school community was united by purpose: through sharing learning experiences with their own children, parents developed common experiences with other parents with whom they may have shared little culturally, ethnically or by language. Visits were organised approximately every six weeks and were made to art galleries, woods, lakes, local history museums and the city food market. Each provided a wealth of opportunities for experiential learning.

The impact of each trip on children’s learning was assessed by how language and particularly writing furthered language development, which was based on first-hand experience. The sense of enjoyment in finding out about the extended local community was immense. From the parents came a plethora of positive comments. These ranged from being excited by seeing “art” for the first time to the serenity of being alone with their child in the silence of a wood. Many parents commented about having returned to the places of visits and brought in family “project” which had been completed at home.

Community cohesion has many facets. Bringing communities together when they have so many diverse elements is challenging. Whether this is between communities which see themselves as different or in communities that share certain commonalities the challenge is there. In education we must seek out every opportunity to bring communities together in learning, achieve a sense of belonging and recognising a shared future. Our goal is to produce “young citizens of conscience”; the opportunity is on our doorstep.

