

Community Cohesion in the Classroom

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Introduction

This paper is based on a presentation given at the conference “Developing Community Cohesion in Schools”, at the Institution of Engineering and Technology, on 26th February 2008. It links to presentations given by June Bam-Hutchison and Jude Smith Rachele, who led successful workshops at the same event.

The conference brought together an audience of 150 teachers from across the UK, seeking to learn more about the UK government’s new priority of Community Cohesion, which from autumn 2008 will be a component of OFSTED inspections. My invited keynote talk was to be concerned in particular with learning and teaching. Other talks provided perspectives from head teachers, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, OFSTED, and concerned researchers.

My core argument was that the issues of community cohesion in school are not new. My classroom examples covered the period 1975-2008, based on personal experience as a teacher. A radical version of my argument would be that learning and teaching in the classroom have to make sense in terms of community cohesion. This involves a departure from conventional models of learning and teaching.

Personal Background

I attended secondary schools in the UK and USA, before attending King’s College Cambridge and London University Institute of Education. I taught history in Mitcham, Northern Nigeria and Essex. While teaching in Mitcham 1975-77 I was an Executive Board member of the Community Relations Council in Lambeth, and a teacher representative for the Council for Education in World Citizenship, with whom I had worked as a school and university student. On my return from Nigeria in 1978 I was head of a history department in Essex, then became a researcher in computers and education at Imperial College London. After managing national research in advanced IT, at Imperial and the Department of Trade and Industry, I moved to Kingston College in 1986, and to Kingston University in 1990. I continue as a Board member of CEWC and of the UK National Commission for UNESCO.

What has Changed?

There has been considerable demographic change in the UK since I began my professional career as a teacher. Many areas which were previously “mainly white” have now long been multicultural. In some cases sudden influxes of immigrants have transformed local demography over a short period. Kingston Business School now has students born in 106 different countries, and relationships are generally very good.

Despite these changes, which can be seen as part of a wider process of globalization, there is still limited international awareness. Schools can be fixated by their local community context, giving little attention to national and global dimensions. The UK have been members of the European Union for 35 years, yet we conduct debates as if we were still considering whether to join. There is no longer a British Empire, but there is a yearning to emphasise characteristics of “Britishness”, which have yet to be defined.

The events of September 11th 2001, and the subsequent London bombings, give graphic demonstrations of what can happen when community cohesion breaks down. We know what community cohesion is not. Perhaps we are forced back to the old question posed by Jesus Christ: “Who is my neighbour?”. Community cohesion emerges as a central issue, locally, nationally and internationally.

Revisiting the Classroom

Community cohesion provides a fresh means of making sense of learning and teaching in the classroom. We learn from encounters, not from proceeding in straight lines, by ourselves. We learn from differences: the process atrophies if we are all the same. Learning is not something that is delivered to passive recipients, but is the outcome of conscious deliberate action.

Within the classroom there is immense potential for additional learning. It is not just a matter of the old teaching the young. We should also consider reverse intergenerational learning, where the old learn from the young.

The Sound of Silence

I am often struck by what I am not hearing. At this conference there has been emphasis on the new duty to promote community cohesion. Nothing was said about the requirement for all secondary students to study the history of slavery, the slave trade and empire; this had been announced in February 2007, and applies from September 2008. Nothing was said about citizenship education. These issues are inextricably linked.

In the knowledge society, education needs to bring emancipation for young minds. It needs to include the encouragement of active citizenship, if there is to be healthy participative democracy in the future.

Community Cohesion as a Process

I have recently led a consortium which has proposed a five year research programme to the Leverhulme Trust, on “The Management of Cultural Diversity: Community Cohesion as a Process”. We see diversity as a vital resource for an innovative society and economy. At the core of the proposal is dialogue, providing a means of including different backgrounds and perspectives. We bring together schools and museums. There is a core project in the UK, with sub-projects planned in Africa and the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent, Latin America and the Enlarged European Union.

Teaching World History on a Shoe String

As a trainee teacher at London University Institute of Education 1974-75 I developed a United Nations teaching pack, which provided an alternative means of engaging diverse young people in the classroom, in Southfields and then Mitcham. Students were encouraged to go beyond the information given, researching the countries and roles they had been assigned, developing empathy with the situations of others, and gaining their first experience of public speaking.

Teaching about Race Relations in the Classroom

My first teaching post in 1975 was in Mitcham, where my head of department was collaborating with the Centre for Applied Research in Education, at the University of East Anglia. As an extension of the Schools Council Humanities Teaching Project, we engaged in action research on teaching about race relations in the classroom. Merton was a mainly white borough, but with a long tradition of working with CEWC across the network of schools, and with the UNESCO Associated Schools Project. Our experimental teaching was part of an integrated social studies programme, based on ideas from Jerome Bruner at Harvard, and making great use of team teaching.

Experience Centred Curriculum

The pivotal publication for our work in 1975 was “An Experience Centred Curriculum”, developed by an international team of teachers concerned with community cohesion as a starting point for learning in the classroom. Shared experience provided a rich foundation for reflection and learning. Teachers would need to participate in the various exercises in order to know how to use them in lessons. Exercises such as “Rumour Clinic”, “Blind Trust”, “Peaceful Negotiations” and “Star Power” could be used with groups of all ages, creating cohesion and facilitating learning on numerous different courses. They are used in my “From Slavery to Citizenship” (Wiley 2007), to accompany more structured activities such as Model United Nations General Assemblies.

Simulations in the Classroom

As head of the history department in an Essex Comprehensive School 1978-80 I developed computer aided simulations to assist in the teaching of history in each school year. The first challenge was to secure imaginative engagement; the computer enabled us to reach parts of the situation which other methods could not reach. Every member of the class was involved, in character. Their decisions made a difference. History was alive.

Logic as a Computer Language for Children

As a researcher at Imperial College London from 1980 I was working in partnership with middle school students in Wimbledon Park, who had joined the project from the first week. The students were both authors and subjects, as we learned to use logic as a computer language. As the ideas and the software spread across the world, it was the examples which came from the students which had the greatest impact: a database on the planets, a language translation system, a murder mystery, and a bird identification system. We were using logic across the curriculum, and we were a practical example of reverse intergenerational learning, as the students taught other teachers.

Taking Forward Good Practice

As a research manager at Imperial College and the DTI Alvey Programme (a £350m national programme in Advanced IT) from 1984, I saw the importance of good practice cases, and of finding means of effective diffusion and technology transfer. We used approaches such as community clubs and journeyman schemes. The same set of models was also transplanted to the IT Development Unit at Kingston College, founded in 1985. The key skill was collaborative working: community cohesion in practice.

The Council for Education in World Citizenship

CEWC had been founded in 1939, with a mission of education for international understanding, and a programme which has changed with the needs of the times: visits, conferences, speakers, publications, projects. While organising at local and national level, the focus of attention was world citizenship. The UK government withdrew core funding in 1994, but was grateful for CEWC support in developing the new citizenship curriculum from 1997.

CEWC, and partners such as the United Nations Association, encouraged the organisation of events such as Model UN General Assemblies (MUNGAs). Liverpool UNA has organised annual MUNGAs for secondary school students for over 20 years, with the Liverpool Schools Parliament in the City Council Chamber. Kingston University School of Education has organised a series of annual primary MUNGAs, with 10 local schools. The degree of engagement and shared experience is remarkable.

UNESCO

CEWC had preceded UNESCO, founded in 1945, at the end of the Second World War, with the realisation that wars begin in the minds of men, and that the foundations of peace need to be built in education. I had gained much as a young teacher from UNESCO ASPnet. However, when the UK withdrew from UNESCO in 1985, schools lost access to ASPnet. We now have a new UK National Commission for UNESCO, of which I am a Director, and an early priority was the rebuilding of ASPnet in the UK. The work was led by CEWC, and ASPnet is now coordinated by the National Commission. There are 8000 ASPnet schools in 176 countries around the world, once again including the UK.

Cross Community Dialogue

The Norwegian government had funded an ASPnet “flagship project” on “The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Breaking the Silence”, until 2005. UK schools had been excluded, but CEWC was able to build a new ongoing dialogue process, working with the African Diaspora Communities, starting in London, where the organisers were Rendezvous of Victory, working with Anti-Slavery International. A series of facilitated events enabled diverse views to be expressed on the legacy of slavery. It was not necessary to agree on all points, but to listen and to respect the views of others. Trust builds through experience over time. One outcome was “From Slavery to Citizenship”, in which many voices can be heard.

Quality for Peace

A comparable movement has been developing in the Indian sub-continent, led by the world’s largest school, City Montessori School and Degree College Lucknow. They won the 2002 UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, and have been nominated for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. They host 23 international conferences each year in Lucknow, and co-sponsor events in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Mauritius, Turkey, and a growing network of countries, including Iran.

Student Quality Circles play a central part in their work, bringing together groups of 6-10 students to tackle practical problems of their choice. They use tools first developed by the Quality movement, and report their work through group consultancy presentations, skits, posters and collages. The students have been empowered to take ownership of their learning. The conventions, at national and international levels, are based on their shared experience.

Communities of Practice

In the context of globalisation and new technologies, international links can be developed and maintained. Shared values can be identified as the starting point for ongoing dialogue within which there is much learning from differences. As we become more conscious of carbon footprints, we can make use of web technologies. CEWC is preparing international virtual summer schools.

Human Rights

There is a particular conclusion to our reflections on Community Cohesion in 2008, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The foundations are in place for sustainable relations between individuals and the state, between property rights and human rights. There are new debates on corporate social responsibility and enforceable international human rights law, which CEWC is hosting.

As a Business School Professor, I can declare that Business Education is, or should be, Human Rights Education, if we want to develop community cohesion.