The Influence of Education on Community Cohesion:

Adaptation of policy to practice

Abstract

In the last fifteen years, social and community cohesion have become key concepts in European social, migration, and education policy. Although their definitions often remain ambiguous, social and community cohesion typically refer to harmonious coexistence of individuals of all cultural backgrounds within a community. Frequently connected with education at the elementary and secondary level, they are regarded a desirable outcome of compulsory schooling. Drawing on longitudinal data from two schools in England, we analyze the interplay between national policies of community cohesion and local level practices. In a discussion of the findings, we show that, despite the gaps between national policy and local practice, parental and community members' involvement in school and family education are efficient tools to enhance community cohesion at the local level.

Keywords: social cohesion, community, inclusion, elementary schools, family education

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Introduction

Over the past decade, interest in and use of "cohesion" has once again surged in public policy debates and discourse. In Europe, against what in recent years has become a massive influx of immigrants, social or community cohesion is often utilized as a central strategy to manage the resulting increased diversity within societies and education systems (Council of Europe, 2008); however, how and to what extent European and national policy uses of concepts like social and community cohesion actually factor into local school level approaches remains unclear. The aim of this paper is to explore the interplay of recent policies and practices of community cohesion between national and local school levels in England.

Against a framework of English education policies focused on community cohesion over the past five years, the paper utilizes longitudinal data from four case studies of two schools (2007-2010) in a diverse community in northern England to explore practitioners' perspectives and school-level policies related to community cohesion. By exploring these case studies and the school-level approach to community cohesion, we show some of the ways that elementary schools have developed and sustained their programs and practices aimed at enhancing the family-community-school relationship as central to their mission of building community cohesion.

Social cohesion

Since 1998, research and debate on social or community cohesion has flourished (Bernard, 1999). Despite its frequent use in policy and academic texts, social cohesion is often a

vague and slippery concept to pin down analytically. In policy, social cohesion has a whole

range of uses, pointing to its economic, political, and social dimensions (Osberg & Dayton-

Johnson, 2003). It has often been used in discourse about multiculturalism and immigration,

more notably in the Canadian and European contexts. More recently, social cohesion has also

been linked to global economic growth, a view that has been adopted by international

organizations. For example, the most recent 2012 Organization of Economic and Cooperative

Development Global Development Report stressed social cohesion as a central theme for

development. Likewise, European Union (EU) policy activity often showcases cohesion

(political, territorial, and social) as central to its mission of economic competitiveness,

unification of Europe, and the increasing diversification of European societies (Commission of

the European Communities [CEC], 2000; Council of Europe, 2008).

In the academic literature, social cohesion is often used as an "analytical construct to

explain social, political, and sometimes economic changes" (Hulse & Stone, 2007, p. 109).

Among the multiple and often vague definitions of social cohesion, one of the more clearly

stated is by Green, Janmaat, and Han (2009) who characterize social cohesion as "the property

by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action

of specific attitudes, behaviors, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure

coercion" (p. 19). Jenson (1998) argued that social cohesion, rather than a goal to be reached,

was instead a process requiring "a sense of commitment, and a desire or capacity to live together

in harmony" among individuals (Jenson, 1998, p. 1).

One of the key contributors to social cohesion is education. According to Heyneman

(2000), social cohesion benefits from education in three aspects: First, education establishes

public knowledge about social contracts among and between individuals and the state; second, he

identifies schools as the places where students are provided with the context in which they learn

about the appropriate behavior for upholding social contracts. It is in schools where students

gather experiences in negotiating with people, solve problems, and encounter opportunities. He

stated,

> [T]he principle rationale, and the reasons nations invest in public education, have
>
> traditionally been the social purpose of schooling... The principle task of public
>
> schooling, properly organized and delivered, has traditionally been to create harmony
>
> within a nation of divergent peoples. (p. 177)

Lastly, Heyneman assumed that education provides citizens with an understanding as to the

consequences of breaking social contracts.

It is noteworthy that social cohesion ideals and practices differ between European

member states, which has an impact on the emphasis placed on the role of schools. Green et al.

(2009) categorized three main types of social cohesion. One type is termed the social market,

which is typically associated with France, Germany and Austria and emphasizes political

participation at the national level. Typically, a strong belief in solidarity is accompanied by a

single common identity, common culture and civic virtues. A second type is social democracy,

illustrated in the Nordic countries, in which values of equality, fairness, collectivism, and

solidarity are emphasized, as well as the development of cooperatives and social movements.

The second type of social cohesion aims at reaching high levels of democratic participation and

decision making in everyday life both for local and national level decisions. Lastly, there is a

liberal type with an emphasis on values of freedom, rights and responsibilities, in which

individualism and competition are stressed. This type of social cohesion is typically found in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland.

"Social" or "Community" Cohesion?: A policy framework in England

Ratcliffe, Newman, and Fuller (2008) argued that social cohesion "is both broader and more inclusive than community cohesion. It effectively acknowledges the presence of intra- as well as inter-'community' divisions" (p. 15). In the UK, however, there has been a strong tendency observed to favor community cohesion rather than social cohesion (Worley, 2005), which, on the contrary, is very popular in official EU political discourse. Over the past decade, English policy has emphasized community cohesion in order to build understanding, belonging, manage diversity, and counter issues of marginalization and vulnerability. As one of the first leading examples, the Denham Report (2001) proposed that "community cohesion should be made an explicit aim of Government at national and local levels" (para. 3.16). Likewise, in the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions (2004) report advocated for community cohesion, which embodies a common vision and sense of belonging, the appreciation and value for diversity and difference, similar opportunities provided regardless of background, and the development of relationships between diverse groups (Hulse & Stone, 2007). Following Cantle's (2005) book on issues of community cohesion and race, government strategies began to make explicit the link between community cohesion and racial and ethnic diversity, exploring "how different communities and places in England are getting along, and what more might be done to bring people together" (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2006, p. 3).

Strong association of community cohesion with ethnicity (especially black and minority ethnic groups [BME hereafter]) and faith (especially Islam) in English policy discourse and media (cf. Green et al., 2009) largely results in an oversimplification of community cohesion. As the last decade witnessed a certain degree of radicalization in terms of street violence and terrorism, the reaction of politicians has been strongly characterized by a defensive tendency and to some extent also an attempt to address the so called "Muslim question." The official discourse has an impact on public opinion, and indirectly on what happens in schools. As an example, pupils in elementary and secondary schools were asked for their associations with word "community cohesion" and replied that they refer it to citizenship, multiculturalism, faith, and race/ethnicity. In fact, "more than three quarters [of the research cited] mention each of these [words]" (Phillips, Tse, Johnson, & Mori, 2011, p. 8). Furthermore, secondary school pupils do associate the issue of "community cohesion" with violent extremism (39 per cent) or radicalization (34 per cent) (Hetherington, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, it is not surprising that policies targeting community cohesion are often narrowly focused on racism and anti-bullying strategies as well.

The narrow focus on cohesion has two implications. It has brought a degree of social fragmentation to mainstream media and policy and it also deceitfully links the reasons with the results. That is, that ethnic diversity is thought to be the only reason for social disintegration in the UK, which is not entirely true. In many studies, researchers show that system and income inequalities rather than ethnicity or diversity itself hinders community cohesion (Becares, Stafford, Laurence, & Nazaroo, 2011; Letki, 2006; Ratcliffe, Newman, & Fuller, 2008). As areas of deprivation in the UK often overlap with ethnically segregated enclaves, a lack of community

cohesion is frequently attributed to diversity, which results in an oversimplification of a much more complex relationship. Lastly, there is frequent association of cohesion with migrants in general and with refugees or asylum seekers in particular. It is striking that, upon all above-mentioned reasons, social or community cohesion is usually perceived in terms of reaction to migration, ignoring the fact that the poor conditions of migrant families are often also shared by working class White British families.

Using a definition by Alan Johnson (Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2007) community cohesion is described as:

> working towards a society in which there is a **common vision** and **sense of belonging** by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar **life opportunities** are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community. (p. 3, bold in original)

In the above definition, community cohesion is a desirable and positive idea, and brings attention to three fundamental features. First and most importantly this term points both to citizenship rights and responsibilities which emphasize a strong contribution from all people living in England. It encourages meaningful interaction between citizens and the state for the benefit of all. The second important element of community cohesion is related to the overarching local focus. The neighborhood is considered a key site for the construction of cohesion, close to the individual and important particularly to people of diverse backgrounds. It is a place where diversity is experienced in everyday life (Amin, 2002). The local level is relatively well defined,

easy to understand, appears as an area of potential influence, and also a sphere of attachment (Batty, Cole, & Green, 2011). Whereas citizens are skeptical of their influence on national policy, the local level is seen as more "manageable" in its accessibility. Lastly, schools, as the primary institutions in the formation of citizens, are considered key players in providing "similar life opportunities" to all; therefore, schools are seen as main sites for building and contributing to community cohesion.

Such a vision of community cohesion places a considerably heavy duty on English schools, challenging traditional curriculum, management, and governance. In policy statements, schools have been considered the responsible institutions for managing the growing ethnic and social class diversity within communities, and reducing marginalization. Effective in 2007, the Education and Inspections Act (2006) mandated that the governing bodies of maintained schools promote community cohesion. The government (DCSF, 2007, p. 7) also published non-statutory guidance for schools on best practices in promoting community cohesion, including the following:

1. Teaching, learning and curriculum: Helping children and young people to learn to understand others, to value diversity whilst also promoting shared values, to promote awareness of human rights and to apply and defend them, and to develop the skills of participation and responsible action – for example through the new "Identity and Diversity: Living together in the UK" strand within citizenship education.

2. Equity and excellence: To ensure equal opportunities for all to succeed at the highest level possible, striving to remove barriers to access and participation in learning and wider activities and working to eliminate variations in outcomes for different groups.

3. Engagement and extended services: To provide reasonable means for children, young people, their friends and families to interact with people from different backgrounds and build positive relations, including: links with different schools and communities; the provision of extended services; and opportunities for pupils, families and the wider community to take part in activities and receive services which build positive interaction and achievement for all groups.

The responsibility on schools to promote community cohesion links closely with the duty on schools to support overall care for young people and in particular the "making a positive contribution" and "achieving economic well-being" in Every Child Matters outcomes. In addition to guidance, standards for the promotion of community cohesion and performance frameworks were established. Beginning in 2008, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the leading agency charged with inspecting and regulating educational services and providers in England, began to inspect the contributions of schools to promoting community cohesion. This lasted until 2010, when Members of Parliament (MPs) stated that schools would no longer be evaluated on their efforts to promote community cohesion (Shepard, 2010). Similarly, funding streams to support these efforts have been largely uneven.

Against an international and European policy community which has continued to emphasis social cohesion as the linchpin in solving a range of political, social, and economic problems, English policy has similarly highlighted community cohesion as a key factor in managing societal diversity and issues of marginalization, particularly in deprived areas characterized by "super-diversity" (Vertovec, 2005). Indeed, English policy-makers' attention

has been increasingly placed on the role of schools in contributing to community cohesion; yet, there has been a lack of reliable policy frameworks for developing long-term strategies and programs of community cohesion. Schools are often left to set their own priorities and strategies for community cohesion, and provide their own funding for programs. As a result, the efforts of local schools remain largely detached from national policy frameworks and moreover, the very success of community cohesion policies and practices at the school level are highly dependent on principals and teachers. Nonetheless, in this paper, we contend that schools are indeed likely places for building mutual respect and bridging differences. We can learn from positive practices of some schools which, despite the disconnect with national policy, have managed to sustain a policy of localized community cohesion.

Context of study

In this paper, we report on a study that focused on a school involved in learning projects with surrounding communities, developing the integration of social and educational interventions that, in turn, fostered social inclusion and empowerment. All of the names of schools and cities have been replaced by pseudonyms.

The School

Lakeside Avenue School is divided into two separate school buildings: the infant school (ages 4-7) which also houses a nursery school (taking children aged 3-4), and the junior school (ages 7-11). They are both state maintained foundation schools and each school has its own principal. The number of students on roll in 2011 at the infant/nursery site was 284 and at the junior site, the number on roll was 311. At both sites, there are an above average number of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but who are without a statement of

Special Educational Needs (SEN). As a consequence, the schools have established close working

relationships with the local government support services. Although located in two separate

buildings, there is a tight, community-driven relationship between the Lakeside Avenue Schools

and teachers, and administration work closely together. For the purposes of this paper, we

examine both schools together as one cohesive school system.

Social and Economic Characteristics

The Lakeside Avenue schools are very diverse, inner city schools in the Midlands region

of the UK. The schools are located in the neighborhood of Callaton, with a population of just

over 40,000 according to the 2001 census. Callaton is a socially and economically deprived

neighborhood, which has suffered for many years from long-term economic disadvantage. As a

result of economic shifts away from manufacturing, the neighborhood has experienced long-term

unemployment and faced challenges of overcoming poor housing, poverty, drug abuse, crime,

health issues, learning difficulties and exclusion. According to the Office for National Statistics

(2007), the deprivation indices for individual neighborhoods, ranks Callaton as one of the most

deprived areas of England. As one measure of socio-economic status, in 2011, a total of 26% of

pupils at Lakeside Avenue Junior School and 29% of those at Lakeside Avenue Infant School

were eligible for free school meals which is higher than the national average (17%).

The community of Callaton is also a socially and ethnically diverse neighborhood, with a

majority of British-born residents of Pakistani, Indian and African-Caribbean origin. The school

intake reflects this diversity, with a higher proportion of students from minority ethnic

backgrounds than the national average. In 2010-2011, the percentage of students of ethnic

minority backgrounds at the infant school was 88%, and the percentage of BME students at the

junior school was 82%. At both schools, the largest represented minority ethnic group is made up of students of Asian heritage.

Educational Achievement

The Lakeside Avenue schools are successful; the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 contextual value-added (CVA) measure is 100.8, which signifies that the school is performing better than similar schools across the UK. CVA is a statistical means of assessment of the effectiveness of a school, by measuring pupils' progress using their test and examination results. In the most recent Annual Performance Review (2011) report for the junior school, the CVA score is over 101, signifying that the school is in the top 5% of all similar schools across England. There were also major gains in Level 4+ attainment across English, mathematics, and science content areas, according to the most recent SATs results.

In the infant school, according to data for Key Stage 1, all pupils are performing significantly higher than expected and improving relative to schools nationally in key academic subjects of English, mathematics and science. Minority ethnic students (particularly of Asian-Pakistani origin), students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and students with Special Educational Needs are all performing significantly higher than expected and improving, relative to schools nationally. For the junior school, children aged 7-11 are achieving scores in excess of the national average for English, math, and science.

<div align="center">Research Design and Methods</div>

This study was part of a large-scale, cross-national EU-funded Sixth Framework Program project, Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education (Includ-ED). The Includ-ED project was a mixed methods study that comprised both survey and case study

strands. The longitudinal aspect of the project, on which this article is focused, involved research teams from five European countries (Finland, Lithuania, Malta, Spain, UK). To ensure comparability, data were generated and analyzed by country-level teams according to a rigorous data collection and analysis protocol (Includ-ED, 2009).

The methodological approach of the study came from a critical communicative research perspective, which included three primary elements (Includ-ED, n.d.). First, the research process involved interactive dialogue between researchers and "social actors" around current knowledge within the scientific community and the experiences actors have daily. Second, given the focus of the research, which included the study of the lives of social actors, the intent was to involve these actors in a direct and active way in the research process. This included traditionally excluded voices, such as women and migrant groups. Finally, the analysis within the project was aimed at the identification of strategies and components linked with social inclusion and those which lead to social exclusion. Each of these elements had an impact on the data collection and analysis methods employed.

We draw on data generated collectively (over four academic years) and preliminary analysis of principal, teacher, pupil, and parental level data, as well as data collected from representatives from external organizations, which allowed the combination of context-specific factors over four rounds of fieldwork. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with three school professionals, including members of the teaching staff and administration who were involved in key school-level initiatives aimed at contributing to community cohesion. Our sample also included five representatives of the local government, such as representatives of the schools' governing bodies and Children's Services in the City

Council. Five interviews with representatives of community organizations participating in the school were conducted, including projects and organizations that aimed to further build the family-school-community relationship. In addition to interviews, we collected daily life stories with pupils and family members. The questions were largely open-ended and reflective, allowing for a semi-standardized and communicative approach to a standardized interview. For all interviews, participants were selected according to a maximum validation sampling strategy, which allowed for the widest variety of individuals to be represented in the project, by gender, ethnicity, and religion, and in the case of pupils, age, and ability (Includ-ED, 2009). In these daily life stories, many of the participants were women. Roughly half of these participants were either first or second generation immigrants of Asian-Pakistani heritage. Finally, we conducted five communicative observations at the junior and infant sites, which included sites where interaction took place between family members and the school. During each of these observations, we took detailed field notes.

Together, the interviews, daily life stories, and observations provided a rich and multi-dimensional picture of community cohesion by integrating a range of perspectives, observations and included a contextual perspective based on level of disadvantage of school intake. The in-depth accounts over the course of three years were particularly useful for highlighting the dynamics of family and community involvement in schools and the broader contributions that education can make to building community cohesion. In contrast, one of the notable weaknesses of the study was the potentially small sample size of interviewees. One of the issues with studying schools in disadvantaged areas, which have developed innovative and sustainable ways of planning and delivering teaching and learning, is that they are often over-researched and it can

be difficult to recruit (and retain) a sample of teachers and parents. In order to counter this problem of research fatigue, the UK team decided to focus on an infant/nursery and junior school (rather than a primary school) which shared the potential burden across two sites and which also enabled greater access to key personnel involved in the strategies leading to increased inclusion and cohesion. As a result, the team managed to retain the necessary sample over a four year period.

The data generated through the above qualitative sources were first transcribed verbatim. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants, all identifying characteristics were removed and names were removed and/or replaced by pseudonyms. A code was assigned to each transcription, according to project guidelines (Includ-ED, 2009). The team developed a Code of Conduct, which adhered to ethical guidelines developed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2005). This covered issues such as participation, consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study. Having gained ethical approval, the principals were provided with information on the ethical procedures of the project. Each participant in the study was provided with a written description of the project and, if they agreed to participate, was asked to sign a consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded.

A grid was utilized to analyze transcripts, which were coded according to different forms of family and community involvement. The analytical grid was organized into a series of rows and columns, each used to codify specific selections obtained from the transcripts. Based on the theoretical framework of the study, different forms of community involvement were identified in the grid. These included family and community education, decision-making processes in the school, curriculum and evaluation, classrooms and learning spaces, and others. Within each of

these categories, the research team identified transformative and exclusionary practices, and differentiated academic and non-academic implications of each (Includ-ED, 2009, p. 56). In the next section of the paper, we focus on three areas of the findings: The schools' efforts to build cohesion through parental and community participation in school activities, family and community education classes, and cohesion between school and community roles.

Findings

In the discussion that follows, we organize our findings around three major themes. First, we explore the ways in which community cohesion was linked to increased family and community participation in the school. Second, we examine the use of family or community education at the school sites as a form of community cohesion. Lastly, we discuss findings related to cohesion between school and community roles. Together, these findings suggest that although government initiatives targeting community cohesion at the national level have steadily increased over the past five years, the real impact lies with local level system actors who embody and enact community cohesion. Indeed, one of the most striking results of our research relates to local school level initiatives. The principals and school staff of both schools were fully convinced and determined to increase parental and community members' involvement in the school and through this improvement to enhance community cohesion in the surrounding area. They prepared and implemented a variety of programs focused on families and the community, often targeting migrant families and in particular, women. As a result of prioritizing the school-community link and the broader importance placed on the role of the community in the learning process, the philosophy of education is one of lifelong learning, thought to lead to improvements in well-being and social status of local families. The schools also seemed successful in their

conceptualization of community cohesion. The school staff in both schools tended to avoid a narrow understanding of cohesion limited only to actions targeted at ethnic minorities. Instead, they prepared an organized and rich repertoire of programs and encouraged all parents and community members to contribute. In this way, community cohesion was not considered a "side effect," but rather through a balanced strategy undertaken by the schools, community cohesion appeared to be a tool to obtain their goals of higher academic achievements for all students, greater equality in achievement results, and improvements in children's behavior.

The school embodied an open-door policy for parents and community members. The most recent Ofsted evaluation of the school stated that learning often takes place outside of the school and classroom into the local community. Ofsted also stated that Lakeside Avenue schools are known for community involvement. There are a number of ways that the community and family members are brought into the school. For example, the schools hold parents' evenings for parents to attend once a term on literacy and numeracy, and at the culmination of each school year, an annual report is sent home with each child which parents are invited to comment upon. To bridge the gap between the infant/nursery and junior schools, parents and family members of Year 2 children (age 6 and 7 years) are invited to attend a meeting at the junior school as part of the induction process.

Teachers and members of the management staff at both schools discussed this open-door policy and the importance of communicating with all families despite the language barriers:

So once you get the ethos right where parents feel happy… And I think that that's supported our school in being a very popular school…So it's, we're doing something

right because you know they do want to come here, they trust us, they like what they

see… They feel at home. (Teacher, Round 3)

Well we're a very, very welcoming school, this door is never closed, parents come in and

they speak to members of staff. We have several staff who are bilingual, so as far as

there being a language barrier it isn't really an issue here, although we have got one or

two families from Libya at the moment and we haven't got a member of staff who speaks

Arabic. But we have got children who speak Arabic, so – and we haven't got, we've only

got one pupil who is Polish, so that's caused us a few problems. (Principal, Round 2)

At the infant/nursery school, the principal believes that the open-door policy, although geared

towards the physical school environment, sends an important message to the families of students

and wider community. She stated,

Parental engagement for me is about not making judgments on our parents, [it's] making

them feel welcome in the school… Our school philosophy ethos if you like is this is not

my school, this is not my staff's school, it's the community school. So I don't lock the

doors, parents bring their children into the class, they can have a face to face with the

class teacher first thing in the morning if they want to. (Principal, Round 3)

Based on this open door policy, the majority of parents bring their children not just into the

school, but also into the classroom, which provides opportunities for informal parent-teacher

interaction and family engagement in the school.

Through the activities described above, the schools were successful in fulfilling a

difficult public mission related to the delivery of knowledge about citizenship and social

contracts, the context of social negotiations, and understanding of consequences of breaking

these contracts (Heyneman, 2000).The presence of various ethnic minorities at school has created conditions to practice these skills on an everyday basis.

Using Family and Community Education as a Strategy for Cohesion

There were several programs for family and community education which were adopted by the Lakeside Avenue schools. The Adult Minorities Breaking Educational Restrictions (AMBER) program was one example of these and aimed to create effective communication with ethnic minority parents through bilingual workers. Education classes were arranged by the AMBER worker, including adult training courses in computers and technology, English, health and beauty, parenting skills, and confidence building classes. In the infant/nursery school, this program was discontinued in 2008 due to lack of physical space and staffing issues. The junior school, however, continued to benefit from the AMBER program where a variety of education courses were offered to parents and family members including language courses, English courses, confidence building and assertiveness courses, computer and ICT courses, and adult numeracy (author reference removed). These courses were held at the school, in specific classrooms set up for this purpose. Often, the classes were small, no "more than eight people per class, but I think it was quite intensive" (Teacher Round 1). With the eventual loss of funding to the AMBER program, the junior school decided to continue funding for a coordinator for family and community education, allowing them to maintain such courses.

Some of the family and community education, which falls under this perspective of involving parents for the improvement of children's education, is aimed to improve parenting skills in order to improve learning that occurs at home. One key area is the building up of soft

skills, such as confidence. From a local government perspective, the development of soft skills among parents is a key area to the development of children's education and overall well-being:

> Anything that can help parents be more confident in developing their children's understanding of reading and writing is going to be very important over time, and developing pleasure, you know parents understanding that actually this is not a chore, this is something that is pleasurable and interactive. (Teacher, Round 2)

Linked to soft skills is early childhood education, which has received increased attention in recent years. The overall goal of these efforts is to target specific parenting skills in family and community education programs with the aim of making "parents as partners in their children's early learning" (Teacher, Round 2).

Benefits for individual adults and children. Through participating in family education courses, parents were able to improve their children's literacy and numeracy skills. Family members took a greater interest in helping children with their studies at home and engaging more in learning activities with their children, which had a positive impact on children's academic achievement. As a coordinator of family learning at Lakeside Avenue stated, "if parents are really interested in what [their children are] doing and helping them at home, it just raises standards" (Staff member, Round 4). Following courses, parents felt more capable assisting children with homework and in other learning activities. One of the long-standing participants in family education courses at the junior school felt that she had learned the importance of spending time with her children through helping them with their homework, and felt that she learned certain skills to enable her to be able to assist her children in learning activities. She stated, the courses

helped me as well because I'd spend time with them and understand what I'm actually

teaching them and make sure that I'm teaching them the right things…both of my

children, the older ones, were struggling with maths and then there was a literacy and

numeracy course that helped me to help them. (Parent, Round 2)

She went on to state that through the family education courses, she had learned the

importance of reading with her children. She stated, "with my other two, when they were

younger, I didn't do much reading with them…but as with [my youngest child] I've just

continued reading" (Parent, Round 2). She believes that this practice has had an impact on her

youngest child's academic success, particularly in literacy. One mother, who participated in two

computer classes at the junior school stated that through her course, she was more confident and

able to work with her children on the computer at home: "we bounced off each other, as they

learned new things at school, they would show me and if I learned something new than I would

show them how to do it" (Parent, Round 1).

For EAL parents, ESOL family education courses have been significant in helping them

to be able and feel confident to support their children's literacy and English skills. One mother

stated that she was "now able to help her children with their homework in IT, literacy and

numeracy" (Parent, Round 4). An increase in confidence was thought to be one of the biggest

impacts of family and community education. For some of the mothers of students who left school

at an early age and lack personal confidence, family courses through the school have a particular

significance. One of the mothers stated,

having left school at the age of 14, I didn't have any confidence and I had some personal

family issues as well…when I had my children, I didn't have support from [any family],

but accessing the AMBER courses has just led me to where I am today. (Parent, Round 2)

Following her enrolment on this course, she has gone on to earn her National Vocational

Qualification Level 3 and is employed full-time. The confidence, satisfaction, and empowerment

that she has gained through family education courses and the personal and professional

opportunities she has had because of these courses has made her a positive role model for her

children. She explained that her children "are proud of me, they're proud of the way I've turned

out and how I can sit in meetings and talk…I drive myself when I go to pick my daughter up,

she's quite proud of me that I can drive to pick her up" (Parent, Round 2). Similarly, for another

mother, her confidence has improved since enrolling in family education courses, which has

affected her children. She also left education at a young age for marriage and after taking

numerous family education courses at Lakeside Avenue, has also earned a National Vocational

Qualification Level 3 and is employed at the school. She stated,

> when we got married at 16, we didn't know you could still study, it was like when you
>
> leave school that's it, you're finished, but I've said to my kids you still can get a degree
>
> when you're 40, 45, so it's never end of studies. So [my children are] quite proud of
>
> that…They want me to do more. (Parent, Round 4)

Benefits for the school and community. School professionals noticed that with greater parental

involvement, children's motivation and enthusiasm for learning was enhanced:

> it's not a case that we've got to push them, they're actually doing the pulling, they're
>
> wanting to learn and I think the parental involvement encourages that. You see the parent

is far more aware by coming into school about what we're doing here and so when they

take homework away with them, they can have more input into what that homework is

about and how often it's supposed to come. (Principal, Round 1)

Children, whose parents participate in family learning activities, experienced an improvement in

their child's behavior. A school staff member described one example:

we had a pottery course and a child was having a lot of problems at home with mum,

being very rude, disrespectful to her mother and badly behaved generally…the mum

came on the pottery course with this little girl and they worked together and…they were

interacting with each other, working on the clay model together, and I've not heard any

problems since. I think the child was craving attention and it gave the child the mother's

attention, undivided attention because they were asked to work as a pair on this project.

(Teacher, Round 2)

The participation and one-to-one time in a family learning activity helped improve the child's

relationship with her mother, but also improved her behavior in school.

As a result of family education courses, parents in the community felt greater ownership

of the school and was "beneficial not only to the children but to the whole atmosphere of the

school and to the community" (Staff member, Round 4). Participants highlighted the importance

of these courses for Asian women in the community. One of the coordinators noted that "a lot of

our women since they've started the English class have got the confidence to now start driving

lessons…it's a big goal they want to achieve," which allows them greater independence (Staff

member, Round 3). For some of the parents for whom English was an additional language, the

courses were helpful to become acquainted with other parents and advance their English

language skills:

> a lot of Asian people in the school, when they're mixing with other people, they get more
>
> confident in their ability, if they're not very good at speaking English or writing English,
>
> when they've been doing the computer courses it's really helped them and they've been
>
> talking to native English speakers as well, so it helps their vocabulary. (Parent, Round 1)

Likewise, participants reflected that for many female Asian family members and community

members, the school had also become an important resource and outlet. For one parent, who

moved from Pakistan to England at a young age for marriage, the school had become an

important space in the community. Her family would not allow her to take classes at any of the

local colleges; however, the school was considered to be a non-threatening, safe place in the

community, and convenient for her as the primary person taking the children to and from school.

Staff members were also aware that parents who enrolled in family and community

education were more likely to become involved in other aspects of the school. From the

perspective of administrators, staff, and teachers at the school, family and community education

courses helped to build and strengthen the relationship between parents and the school. As one

professional in the school stated,

> I think the parents that have been involved they have felt a lot closer to the school
>
> because a school can appear to be a bit daunting, but when they've got an open invitation
>
> to come into the school building, then they feel more comfortable about that, and it's
>
> sometimes about stepping over that threshold. (Principal, Round 2)

Through involvement in family education courses, familiarity with parents was an added benefit

for schools

> by actually making more strong connections with parents, when it comes to finding
>
> parents to come swimming with us, to the swimming pool on a regular basis or on trips,
>
> you're far more able to pick the phone up [and call individual parents] because we've got
>
> that more personalized relationship, you feel better placed to ask people who you know
>
> better than to ask complete strangers. (Principal, Round 4)

The coordinator stated, "I've seen attitudes change for parents who have been coming to those

courses, there is a kind of ownership of the school which wasn't necessarily there before, they

feel a part of it" (Teacher, Round 3).

> Through the family education courses, the school also provides a social outlet for parents,

helping to provide parents with social contact with other parents from different ethnic

backgrounds, thus building community cohesion (Principal, Round 2). Through participating in

family and community education courses, parents were able to meet other members of the

community and other families. The courses helped with community cohesion, as well as assisted

the integration of ethnic minority or recent immigrant communities with other communities. One

parent stated,

> before I would speak to parents but not know them by name etc., but now if we meet
>
> outside school, we'll say 'oh hello are you ok? etc.' and you get to know different people
>
> and then their friends will speak to you as well… When you've got children of different
>
> races in the school, it does help the parents come together. (Parent, Round 1)

Through the expanded opportunities of mutual contact and cooperation, and the resulting

relationships formed between the parents and school staff, the school was able to develop a

strong network of social relations which otherwise would not have been possible. Community

cohesion is significantly related to social exclusion as many of the families struggle with the

financial hardship and social isolation; therefore, through the benefits of parents in their formal

and non-formal education, they were able to gain additional "hard" skills either confirmed by

official certificates and increased job opportunities, or in the area of soft parenting and

confidence skills. Both of these sets of skills gained through family and community education

influenced the situation of parents in the local community and their sense of belonging and

ownership of the school and the local community. Parents who met at school first and got

acquainted were able to use these contacts elsewhere. Specifically, some mothers of ethnic

minority backgrounds were especially successful in overcoming social isolation. For some of the

parents who participated in the courses organized by the school, important gains were made in

the area of self esteem and confidence, which they later attributed to increased participation

within the local community, the school, and enhanced employment prospects. Lastly, some

parents spoke directly about the link between family and community education at the school and

their increase in ability to participate more fully in their children's learning. In turn, by reaching

out and involving parents and community members into school activities, the schools were

successful in development strong neighborhood networks.

Cohesion between School and Community Roles

In the UK, family and community involvement in schools is typically organized formally.

There is a school governing body (which is mandatory for all maintained schools in England and

Wales), comprised of elected community members, parents, school staff, and representatives of the local authority. The school governing body is charged with making general decisions about the school, curriculum, as well as other issues. Parents serving on the governing board have an important role in facilitating discussion and communication between the formal governing body of the school, and the community and family members.

Lakewood schools experience difficulty in recruiting parents to serve on the governing board. At the junior school, there were not enough parents interested in serving on the school governing body and, as one local government representative stated, the process of becoming a parent governor is "highly democratic but a bit, perhaps not as responsive as it could be" (Organizational member, Round 2). Work commitments also may prevent individuals from the position, particularly for many of the fathers who work third shifts throughout the night or for mothers who are looking after large, extended families. Another limitation for the parent governors is the conception that it is necessary that the elected parent governor role be filled by an individual with a degree of education (Principal, Round 1).

There was also a need for diversity on the school governing board which was significant for providing positive role models for the students. The school council at Lakewood had the opportunity to come and speak with the school governing board. In this opportunity, "if they didn't see themselves replicated in the governing body then yeah that might have an impact" (Teacher, Round, 1). The diversity of parent governors is an area that is monitored by the local government:

> there's a team leader for school governors…they do very extensive ethnic minority
>
> monitoring in terms of governors and have made very specific efforts to target ethnic

minority communities and to involve them and to encourage them to become governors

and appoint members of ethnic minority groups to governing bodies. (Organizational

member, Round 2)

Although there is not enough space to discuss them here, there were roles that parents had aside

from the school governing board. For example, on issues related to religion, curriculum and

school trips, parents do regularly voice their opinions to the school. There were also many

parents who served as daytime and lunchtime supervisors, and as teaching assistants.

Conclusions: Challenges and Strategies

In this article, we attempted to reflect on local school practices of community cohesion

against the growing European and national policy framework for social and community

cohesion. Community cohesion has become a strategic term and also target for social policy not

only in the English and UK contexts, but also in other European countries. "Life opportunities

available to all" becomes a contemporary mantra repeated frequently by politicians at local,

national, and European levels. With this mantra comes mounting pressure now placed on schools

to help build social or community cohesion as a mechanism for dealing with increased societal

diversity and raising academic achievement for all students.

Through an exploration of the juxtaposition of national policy in England with the actual

situation of a two local schools, some interesting conclusions have emerged. First, despite the

difficult and often changing landscape of national policy, the schools explored were able to

respond constructively to the contemporary challenges of increased diversity within their local

communities; yet, many of the participants of this study reported that the lack of a consistent

funding stream related to community cohesion policy results in an unstable strategy for

developing community cohesion at a local school level. School staff consistently stated that efficiency of the activities undertaken by the schools, such as education courses for parents, English language learning courses, and common activities for parents and children would increase if information about funds, irrespectively of the source, were shared in advance and if there were a clear national policy agenda.

The findings support that involvement of parents and families in young people's education helps to build school-family-community relationships and more broadly helps to foster community cohesion. In the research, we show that as parents are key factors in the academic achievement of students, schools are encouraged to reach out to parents and families (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein et al., 2002; Sheldon, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005); yet, the findings also indicate that immigrant parents tend to participate less in schools than their native-born peers, often experiencing more barriers to school involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009). Epstein et al. (2002) offered six ways of involving parents in schools, including parenting skills, communication between home and school, parental volunteering in school, guiding family learning at home, involving parents in school governance, and lastly, extending and strengthening the family-school relationship by also integrating and drawing supportive resources from the broader community. Each of these types was demonstrated within the practices of both schools in the study; however, one of the key ways in which the two local schools included in this study succeeded in building trust and involvement of all families was to initiate and carry out a range of family education courses and common activities for families and children outside of normal school hours, integrating support and resources from the broader community.

The schools designed courses to reach out to various groups within the community in appropriate ways, particularly Asian women. Despite the trend in school practice to focus only narrowly on "parenting skills" of immigrant parents, there was a broader focus on skills development in key academic areas, including mathematics, literacy, English language learning, and information and communications technology, as well as softer skills such as confidence-building. Through these family education courses and activities for families and children after school hours, the school was transformed into both a resource and a meaningful site within the neighborhood for community engagement, particularly for immigrant women. In many instances, women of both immigrant and native-born backgrounds met and developed relationships, and often supported one another in achieving within and beyond the offered family education courses.

The programs implemented by the school staff were at the beginning of a reactive character. Dynamically changing demographic situation of the area, large immigrant inflow, and low level of the academic achievement were push factors of the new strategy elaborated by the school. The main target of the new strategy was focused on the improvements of school results and at the same time cooperation with parents; therefore, introducing community cohesion as a driver for activities has been a process rather than an overall aim. On the one hand the new challenges had arisen and, on the other, strong correlation between parental involvement and academic achievements had been identified. School staff was also strongly encouraged by the official policy of the British government and local authorities to follow this direction. Official policy has been considered as a guideline in the development of the projects targeted at parental involvement of hard-to-reach groups; however, policy introduced at the national level is not

sufficient in order to produce satisfactory effects in particular schools. Strong commitment of school leadership and staff, as well as their work to match school policies and practices to the specific needs of the local community, appeared to be necessary conditions for success. To that end, focusing on parents and their involvement in school, including as adult learners, helped to improve overall academic achievement but has also seemed to enhance community cohesion.

The methodologies utilized within this project provide a rich source of data upon which to explore these issues. From our data, we suggest that implementing strategies relating to stronger community cohesion at this stage of the education process, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may provide a valuable transition experience before they enter the secondary phase of their education. Attendance by parents and families at school should help children from all backgrounds begin to feel more comfortable in formal educational settings and develop relationships and interaction skills with peers and adults; they may also help prepare the parents for the next stages of their children's schooling.

The overarching themes that emerged in this study are not so very different from themes that have been highlighted in other research in this area (Sheldon, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2011), such as the importance of parental activity within the learning context, and the role of family and community education. In this study, we have seen how the structure of the provision and practices can positively influence the way in which individuals from a variety of backgrounds can overcome cultural and ethnic barriers to form a more cohesive community; however, although the schools were found to be successful in terms of improvements in community cohesion overall, there are still a number of issues to be addressed.

First, the desire for community and family activities to be organized and run by the school often conflicts not only with concerns over availability of space, but also on regulations put in place by schools and government to ensure school safety (e.g. CRB, fences, locks and CCTV). These regulations often make the building of trust between families, local communities and schools difficult. This is significant, as building of trust is considered an important element of the social life, especially in the case of inclusion of ethnic minority families to the host community (Coleman, 1988). Second, there are factors of gender in which some parents are considered more acceptable and desirable parents to involve in the school. Gender stereotypes were shown in the difference in trust between male and female parents and their motivations for getting involved in the school.

Despite these serious challenges, the findings illustrate that there are some strategies that schools may consider useful in overcoming these barriers. These strategies include a questionnaire to parents, continued meetings between school personnel and families, sustained programs of family education, the extended schools movement, and the continuation of parents' evenings, particularly those that directly draw on the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of parents and provide families with a sense of ownership in the local school. Encouragement of parents to get involved in school needs to be a powerful message, one that reaches beyond simple rhetoric and mission statements. The range of strategies and opportunities present in the schools included in this study embody a solid message to parents and local community members that their contributions to the school are valued and help to build the necessary trust in the school-family-community relationship.

Acknowledgments

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