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## **‘People at the heart of our processes’, a case study of how nursery school and children’s centre promotes community cohesion**

### **Abstract**

This article reports on a doctoral case study of how an English integrated nursery school and children’s centre fulfils its legal duty to promote community cohesion. The provocation for the enquiry 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 current accountability frameworks.

**Key Words:** Community cohesion, site of attachment, rehumanising schools

Word count 8535

### **Introduction**

Four years ago I attended an education conference on the theme of equalities and diversity. The profound sentiments expressed by the keynote speaker Rosemary Campbell Stevens, struck a chord. Her frank and life affirming narrative opened with poignant insights on her experiences as an immigrant child to the UK in 1950s. The grim picture she painted of her arrival was matched with equally disconcerting details of the subsequent challenges she faced as a teacher, working with underachieving, often

low aspirational, disadvantaged children. Her rhetoric was well pitched; using the potent backdrop of social justice, she presented trenchant criticisms of the neo-liberal forces within our contemporary educational arena, which she denounced for the negative and dehumanizing impact they had on our pupils and society. As she concluded her passionate oratory she urged the audience to use their privileged position as educators to: pick up the gauntlet; to make a difference; and to work resolutely to ‘rehumanize’ schools. Social justice, she argued, might then be achieved.

Inspired to take up the challenge, I endeavoured to reify Campbell Steven’s vision and to envisage what the role of ‘rehumanising schools’ might entail. Renowned for its humanistic principles and strong social pedagogical tradition, I was drawn to the Scandinavian educational model for support in distilling this somewhat nebulous concept. Danish author, Sommer helpfully encapsulates the essence of humanistic education as ‘...the acceptance of others in their own right and respect for the individual’ (Sommer et al 2010:12), where, ‘the more or less implicit goal is to build mutual relationships with other people’ ... ‘espousing an ideology with special considerations and accommodations for minority groups’ (Sommer et al 2010:13). These definitions emphasise how people and their interdependent relationships are at the heart of the educational process and, as such, align with the argument presented by Nussbaum (1997) for schools to be reformed along humanitarian lines. Schools’ priorities, Nussbaum argues, should include the development of students’ capacity for genuine concern for others, both near and distant, and the promotion of ‘narrative imagination’ where children learn to understand what it’s like to be in the shoes of others (Nussbaum 2010:95).

Motivated to anchor this new source of inspiration into a test bed of social reality, I sought a suitable research focus – one that could be investigated and

foregrounded for its potential in realising such humanistic principles. An ideal educational context immediately presented, namely, the duty placed on English schools to promote community cohesion. This duty was introduced in the Education and Inspection Act (2006) and was made legal for all English maintained schools from 2007. On the face of it this social duty appeared to be centrally concerned with matters of a ‘humanistic’ nature. Unlike the raft of other English educational strategies introduced in the same era, this initiative did not seem bent on working towards narrowly defined measurable outcomes. Its remit appeared broader; giving schools permission, and enshrined through law, to extend their social responsibility beyond the school walls to incorporate the needs of the wider community. It is worth noting that guidance on the duty makes clear that ‘community’ includes: the school community; the community in which the school is located; the UK community and the global community (DCSF 2007). Underpinned by what were surely humanistic principles, and endorsing the need: to develop a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities; to value the diversity of people’s backgrounds; to ensure that people from different backgrounds had similar life opportunities and that strong and positive relationships were developed between diverse communities<sup>1</sup>, initially, this duty appeared to me to be a potential conduit to bring ‘humanity’ and the quality and equality of human relationships to the fore of the educational arena.

However, my previous experience of working to fulfil the duty to promote community cohesion in two schools could be described as somewhat impoverished, with schools’ actions in this domain seeming tokenistic. Curiously, my experience here appears to be consistent with some of the findings of a review of literature on schools

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<sup>1</sup> The four strands of a ‘cohesive community’ as defined in Guidance on Community Cohesion (2002)

actions taken to promote community cohesion (Dyson and Gallannaugh 2008). This scoping map revealed that the majority of studies on schools' actions taken to promote community cohesion described interventions involving one-off actions or longer-term programmes of recurrent events. Significantly, the recommendations for future studies included the need for detailed qualitative case studies with a specific focus on schools' actions, which were 'embedded' in policy and practice. The need to focus on the under-represented context of the early years was also highlighted.

This gap in the literature informed my methodological decision to conduct a case study on the approach taken by an inner city maintained nursery school and children's centre towards community cohesion. Designed to address the research question, 'How might an early years setting promote community cohesion?' I selected a setting renowned for its excellent work with the local multi-ethnic community it served<sup>2</sup>. The rationale for this choice was grounded in the assumption that a deconstruction and analysis of the setting's community cohesion programme would generate a dataset, which would reveal characteristics of an embedded (as opposed to a tokenistic) approach towards community cohesion. Whilst I assumed the dataset in itself would be of intrinsic interest, given the setting's solid reputation in this field, it would also be used to substantiate the central thesis relating to the importance of community cohesion work as a conduit through which to rehumanize the educational arena.

In order to contextualise schools' duty to promote community cohesion, a brief overview of the community cohesion agenda is now offered. The legal duty for English maintained schools to promote community cohesion was introduced in response to civil disturbances, which took place over a two-week period in 2001 in a number of northern English towns (Burnett 2004). Government-commissioned research into the cause of the

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<sup>2</sup> The school has received outstanding judgments from the schools' inspectorate Ofsted in this area

'riots' revealed a break down in cohesion within the predominantly white and Asian communities, caused by a lack of shared vision and principles (Cantle 2001, Home Office 2004; Ouseley 2001; Robinson 2005). Investigative research reported on how the two communities were effectively living 'parallel lives'; a neutral term, deliberately chosen to reflect how community members had not deliberately moved away from each, they had simply remained in or developed separate spheres (Cantle 2005).

The civil unrest or 'riots', gave birth to the community cohesion agenda; a social policy development, regarded as having superseded multiculturalism as the UK's new framework for governing race relations (Worley 2005). Ted Cantle, England's 'father' of community cohesion, apportioned blame for the perceived failures of multiculturalism on the focus placed on controlling behaviour and promoting equality rather than on the tackling of underlying attitudes and values (Cantle 2008).

The focus on community cohesion, with the emphasis placed on promoting shared belongings, offered a fresh alternative to earlier multicultural policies. Focusing the policy lens on communities also reconciled with the growing empirical base which pointed to the importance of community as a core setting for many of the processes considered to shape identity and life chances (Castells 1997, Fukuyama, 1999). With the spotlight on the transformative power of communities, a plethora of community cohesion publications, plans and strategies were implemented by central and local government. Schools were just one of many policy realms to be targeted; others included employment, youth and community work, health, law and housing. Spearheaded by the Home Office, this comprehensive response marked an increasing awareness of the imperative for a more contemporary approach to address the raft of socio-political and cultural challenges, arising from the UK's growing ethnic and cultural diversity (Cantle 2001).

Since the 2001 riots, against a backdrop of the international war against terror and threat of extremism, the imperative for community cohesion agenda has remained steadfastly on the public policy makers' agenda. Sustained by increasingly hostile constructions of asylum and immigration (Worley 2005), London bombings in 2007, further riots in 2011; the imperative for schools' community cohesion work is all the more pressing with growing numbers of British teenagers being radicalised and choosing to leave their communities to fight overseas.

Before presenting selected findings of the qualitative case study, attention will first be paid to key interrelated constructs integral to the community cohesion discourse. This conceptual foundation is designed to support understanding of the aspirational status placed on cohesive community sites such as schools, to not only improve race and faith relations and positive identity construction, but also other areas of potential human conflict such as intergenerational conflict, gender inequality and homophobic behaviour; all of which can compromise levels of cohesion. This discussion will be followed by a brief consideration of the purpose of education to support the view that community cohesion work can offer an antidote to the dehumanising effects of the market wreaked on schools.

A central criticism directed at contemporary society emanates from the construct of 'otherness'; an entrenched and hegemonic worldview, deemed to privilege the 'majority culture' at the expense of other less powerful 'minority cultures'. MacNaughton (2005) interprets this damaging social concept as 'us/them'. Conveyed in another way, otherness is a political configuration, used to exclude or 'other' particular groups of people. Echoing this post-structuralist stance, Bailey and Gayle (2003)

provide useful insights on its nature by highlighting the reliance on binary oppositions to create and then legitimate practices of exclusion and inclusion.

Gundara (2002) posits that the normative rhetoric of some multicultural polities has actually led to whole communities becoming designated as 'other' groups, joining the raft of binary oppositions which include majority/minority, dominant/subordinate, belongers/non-belongers, winners/losers. Peters (1999) adds 'citizens/ non-citizens or aliens' to this list. He problematizes how 'citizens', who have been granted rights by Western democracies, are privileged over those 'non-citizens' such as those seeking asylum or refugees, described unfavourably as 'aliens'.

Lumby and Coleman (2007) contribute to the discourse by explaining the processes experienced by humans encountering those who are different to us. Premised on deterministic origins, they explain how humans are genetically hardwired to be favourably predisposed towards those who are genetically similar. They argue, 'we may find it easier to trust if perceived similarity leads us to believe the behaviour of another is predictable' (Lumby and Colman 2007:33). Lumby and Coleman, consider the scope for anxiety when entering into communication with individuals we do not know. This anxiety stems from uncertainty as we cannot know how another will feel, think or behave and we cannot explain why they do. Gudykunst (1995) explains how this anxiety can create a bias in information processing; the more anxiety we experience, the more likely we are to interpret behaviours, which conform to our preconceived notions or stereotypes. Where behaviours are inconsistent with our expectations, these are often not recognised. Stone and Colella (1996) highlight the dangers of stereotyping, arguing that once a stereotype is assigned we process information in a way that sustains and strengthen the concomitant labelling. Any evidence to the contrary is filtered out and this helps to reduce further uncertainty and unpredictability.



### ***What are schools for?***

The duty to promote community cohesion creates a further dimension to the debate on the purpose served by educational organisations. Interestingly, Green and Preston (2001) argued optimistically that the focus was beginning to shift away from the school as a vehicle to advance a nation's economic status and was moving instead to the community and its renewal - with the impact on education on social inclusion. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) are not quite so generous in their appraisal. They denounce neo-liberal ideology, which promotes the image of the educational organisation as an enclosure for producing measurable outcomes; ones, which might ultimately support the economic success of the nation. Their sentiments resonate with the concerns raised by Ball (1994), regarding the normative 'performativity' culture within schools. On a similar vein, Bates (2007) suggests that the pursuit of the goal of efficiency, accountability and control has contributed to the disreputable history of educational administration, to the detriment of other values such as community, democracy and social progress.

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) stage robust resistance to the values, assumptions and beliefs embodied in a 'modernist' view of the educational domain, favouring alternative discourses which promote the status of the school as a site for 'ethical practice' as opposed to one of 'technical practice'. Central to their reconception of the function of education is the need for members of the school community to act ethically; a mode of behaviour, they explain which is 'based on interaction with and attentiveness to others, not derived from a predetermined ethical code.' The alternative approach to ethics presented here is fundamentally relational; essentially about how people relate to each other, with the relationship to 'otherness' as a central preoccupation. This philosophical stance echoes that of Baumann's, who considers responsibility of the 'Other' to be a primary challenge of postmodern morality: 'to take a moral stance means to assume responsibility for the Other. We are, so to speak, ineluctably –

existentially – moral beings: that is, we are faced with the challenge, which is the challenge of responsibility for the ‘Other’ (Baumann 2001).

Such post-structuralist positioning complements the trenchant argument foregrounded by Morrison on the need to re-consider the moral purposes and actions of schooling and of leadership (Morrison 2009). She challenges leaders to move on from inward-looking personal reflection, denounced as ‘emotional navel gazing’ to a more outward-looking orientation, where practical steps are taken to address social injustice. On a similar vein, Gorard (2005) acknowledges the wider socio-cultural milieu in which educational organizations are located, and he too, endorses practical measures to address social injustice.

We have to demonstrate convincingly what practical difference educational management and leadership makes to anything other than itself. (Gorard 2005:155)

This transformative imperative chimes with Murphy’s (2002) call for educational leaders to act as ‘moral stewards’, whose actions should be anchored in issues such as justice and community.

### *The Research Context*

The nursery school opened in 1931 and was the first purpose built nursery in the city. In 2007 the setting was also designated as a children’s centre; a status, which enabled them to offer a range of extended services through other agencies such as health worker, social worker, counsellor and a small team of family support workers. The setting is located in an urban district within walking distance of the city centre. A high proportion of the families attending the setting is reliant on benefits and many are jobless. Although the demographics changes year on year and throughout each year, the ethnicity breakdown of the children and community groups attending the setting at the

time of the research was 40.0% white British, 5.4% White other, 6.3% Black Caribbean, 0.4% Black African, 5.4% Somali, 13.8% Pakistani, 0.8% Bengali, 2.9% Indian, 12.6 Dual heritage, 4.2% mixed other, 7.6% other. A total of 32 languages are spoken within the setting. There are 137 three and four year olds on role and 62 two year olds.

### *Methods*

A range of data gathering methods was deployed over a four-month research period. 14 one to one interviews were conducted with members of the staff team; these were semi-structured with open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives on the community cohesion work carried out in the setting. A community focus group was held to which all community members were invited. To strategically focus the discussion, the 12 participants who attended were asked to analyse the work of the setting in relation to the definition of the four strands of a cohesive community and to offer concrete examples of actions carried out by the setting linked to each strand. This process was also carried out with the staff members during dedicated staff meeting time. Documentary evidence was gathered such as newsletters, school policies, governors' minutes and photographs of displays. A total of 17 half days were spent observing within the setting.

The data were analysed through a grounded approach with open-ended inductive coding carried out on the dataset; this process identified a total of 23 interim themes. The next stage of the data reduction process involved seeking similarities and distinctions between categories. This generated five overarching data themes; selected evidence for each is presented below. Throughout the data analysis process member checks were carried out with the senior leadership team, with discussions held on the accuracy of the interpretations.

## ***Data Themes***

### *Continuing Professional Development (CPD) embeds community cohesion work*

The school ran a robust CPD programme. This provides a valuable framework and foundation in which to embed and enhance the community cohesion work. The research data below amplify the nature of the programme, illuminating its key affordance as a vehicle to foreground and challenge non-inclusive assumptions and attitudes and to help members value and appreciate the diversity of people's backgrounds.

As part of the induction process each new member of staff and governor participates in bespoke intercultural training. In addition, the school operates a regular cultural understanding programme; open to all community members and designed to deepen intercultural knowledge and understanding. A teacher provides an insight into how such regular cultural experiences are followed by opportunities to reflect and discuss:

*Recently we've visited a mosque, a gurdwara and a Polish church, and had a talk from someone who has a prominent position in that place. We then have professional dialogues, time for reflection and feedback on our own learning.*

The following comments made by a teacher suggest the amount of time devoted to the cultural programme is commensurate with the value placed on it:

*It's defined, it's timetabled in, so the setting is saying, 'we think this is important and we're going to create this time where nothing else is going to happen except this.'*

A number of interviewees acknowledged the importance of a 'safe' forum in which to discuss, and potentially challenge prejudicial and non-inclusive cultural attitudes and assumptions:

*If you set up a situation where it's safe - actually this space is safe for you to ask why do people in this culture do that? Why do they do this in that culture? If you take away the threat, cos the difference and tensions that those subjects create, make people feel all sorts of things, all sorts of negative things, like reticence and threatened... (Senior leader)*

Interestingly, although the staff group are able to meet together as one large group, when exploring sensitive subjects, the group split up into smaller groups and then reconvene, feeding back to the whole group at the end. This flexibility was found to have a positive influence on the setting's community cohesion work in that it enables individuals to express and explore contentious opinions, which they might not necessarily be comfortable conveying in a larger group. The head teacher explains how the practice of staff asking questions, for example, around the nuances of diverse cultural practices is valued. She acknowledges how a lack of correct terminology can inhibit people's confidence, militating against frank and honest dialogue. To counter these potential difficulties, a climate of openness is sought which empowers people to ask any question, whatever it may be. She explains:

*We really try to promote that feeling of openness so that as a member of staff you don't feel you're asking a stupid question, you know when people don't want to say something because they don't know the right word to use 'do you say mixed race or dual heritage?' What we really try to do is make staff feel comfortable*

A teacher explains how frank and open discussion can enhance intercultural understanding:

*Even if you've had just a few who have had that open discussion about why some Asian young children have their heads shaved completely soon after they're born... they might think, 'ooh why do they do that? that's not very nice' but when you're sat in a discussion group and you've really understood why, then that one white person can tell their friend and they can tell their friend. It's all about understanding, isn't it... deepening understanding?*

### *Practical actions to embrace diversity and difference*

*They're saying, 'This is the world we live in and we can only get stronger by working together and learning about each others' differences' (Parent interview)*

As a means of promoting community cohesion, the setting takes concrete steps to embrace diversity and to promote a positive attitude towards difference. Practical measures reported here include: removing linguistic barriers to communication; pedagogical work around social identity; and a curricular programme on food and festivals.

To engage, support and value the contribution of non-English speaking families, the school uses volunteer 'living translators', who are available to translate documents into community languages. Where possible, interpreters are deployed during home visits to support non-English members who may experience communication barriers. A teacher explains the rationale for the linguistic support:

*It's about showing people you respect them and enabling them in all the various ways we do to feel and know that they're important and respected, so if we possibly can, on home visits, when we first meet people, we take somebody with us who can interpret so they're not rendered dumb or effectively stupid by not being able to say much.*

The setting actively encourages its members to learn different languages, with curricular time allocated for children to experiment with key phrases and songs from different languages. Work carried out in this domain extends beyond the classroom. Resource packs are offered to families; for example, a central display was noted to contain a resource bank of key phrases in different languages, inviting members to have a go at learning some new words and phrases.

Within the nursery classrooms, persona dolls are regularly used to encourage children to view difference in a positive light. In an observed session a realistic looking doll was introduced as a provocation for understanding the diverse configuration of families attending the setting. The doll, named Nadia Malik, who had an Asian appearance, was introduced to the children; with attention drawn to the address written on a letter she had received from her grandmother. Details were given about where Nadia lived and with whom. This engaging start was followed by an invitation for all children to share details about their home address and with whom they lived. Although some were more confident and articulate than others, each child shared some facts about their home and the make up of their family. This constructive process enabled a collective picture to emerge of the diversity of family compositions. As each child shared their personal circumstances, the teacher responded with supportive comments, such as 'that's right, some families don't all live together' and at the end, concluded the informative session with, 'well Nadia's learnt a lot about all the different families we have.'

During this powerful session children imparted personal information relating to their diverse home circumstances, for example, one child commented on how his parents did not live with him and several described how they lived with one parent. As an observer, I was touched by the skill and empathy demonstrated by the staff who, through their affirmative, and sensitive comments, supported the group to understand how the traditional nuclear family was just one of many possibilities for family groupings; all of which were equally valued. I interpreted the session to be a gentle but highly effective vehicle through which to acknowledge, respect and ultimately strengthen the developing social and cultural identities of each of the participants.

A senior leader describes how the school deploys persona dolls as a vehicle to develop pride in children's ethnic heritage. A senior leader passionately conveys the rationale for this work:

*I think it's really important – children who have parents from different ethnic backgrounds, often with different skin colour find it really difficult to work out who they are and that's a very common one ... we do year on year the whole emphasis on where are you from? Why are you this colour? Why is your hair this colour or this texture? That's a real feature of every classroom and it's absolutely vital – you're giving that child a really important piece of equipment in understanding themselves and valuing themselves, knowing who they are, you want to make children feel strong in themselves so that if they do have abuse shouted at them down the street or when they go onto primary school ( a lot of them will have) and they get 'oh why do you look like that? they'll know they can say, 'actually it's not fuzzy, this is why it is and I'm this' and they feel confident strong enough and can say to someone who they are and why they are like that.*

The setting recognises the centrality of food to all cultures and capitalises on its potential as a resource through which to celebrate and embrace diversity. In an observation children were playing with a number of large pestle and mortars, grinding away at a range of different spices. The odour released was rich and potent and could be smelt from outside the classroom. This experience was considered to develop the children's olfactory sense but more importantly it presented as a potential vehicle through which to lay down positive foundations for when such smells might be encountered in the future. As Ceppi and Zini (2003) suggest, the deepest and most direct emotions are associated with smell and the perception of odour has strong evocative potential. For these children, who were introduced to these smells in a safe, relaxed and positive context, they may well have positive associations in the future.

*They celebrate food from different continents, they make it a really positive experience, they're not just going through the motions (Parent)*



As the above quote implies, the value of food is recognised and embraced at the setting. Food is regarded as a unifying resource, as a point of entry or a means to bring diverse groups together to develop intercultural understanding. A number of activities are planned throughout the year, which rely on parents and carers sharing food. A senior leader explains the benefits:

*We do loads of activities through food... because food brings people together so well, whether it's when we start with our Eid party... sharing food that's always a great starter for conversation... it's finding that common denominator and then facilitating and supporting parents to know and understand more about each other.*

### **The setting develops and sustains inclusive patterns of relating**

The setting was found to facilitate the fostering of a network of positive relationships between its diverse members, with relational work considered to be at the heart. During the staff interviews I voiced how I had consistently noted the appearance of positive relationships between staff and parents/ carers and invited the interviewees to reflect on what they personally did to help achieve such an outcome. All the interviewees responded confidently and without hesitation, along the following lines:

*I try and take as many opportunities as possible to talk to them (Nursery nurse)*

*As much communication as possible, trying to make parents feel at ease*  
(Practitioner)

A teacher identified how the handover time at the start and the end of the day was valuable in that it enabled the breaking down of barriers, particularly with parents who lacked confidence. She explains:

*... we try to use it to the best of our ability, you've got some parents who are not so confident... so we try to find some commonality, we talk about the weather or whatever and that just breaks down little barriers and makes them feel they can make contact and talk*

A number of interviewees recognised the central importance of a non-judgmental approach in the development of relationships:

*It's about knowing your parents, building those relationships, knowing what they're about and where they're coming from and trusting parents – it's about trust and not making assumptions... but if you don't invite them in and make them feel at ease building up those relationships how are you going to get to know them, how are they going to be able to trust us? ... It's about trust (Teacher)*

A teacher explains how the high level of contact enabled staff to develop a level of knowledge of the child and family, which would not be possible in another professional role such as that of health visitor; this daily contact crucially helped build trust into the relationship and equally importantly, a sense of belonging. She explains:

*One of the good things about this professional role, as opposed to say health visitor or social worker, who also work with vulnerable families, is that we see people every day or twice a day so we do actually build up relationships of trust, which is very important*

The emphasis placed on finding time and the avoidance of rushing social interactions was identified by a parent as a key contributory factor in the building of positive relationships:

*They do seem to spend time well, time with the children, time with the parents and because these interactions aren't rushed I believe relationships develop well (Parent)*

As suggested above, families, who are physically attending - regularly dropping off and collecting their children at the nursery classes, or participating in the range of family support sessions, will have opportunities to build relationships with the staff group and other community members. One of the many groups I observed was a

smaller, more intimate group, specifically targeted at vulnerable female Asian women. The group was set up for two reasons; firstly, as the setting was aware that very few Asian women were accessing the universal groups such as 'Stay and Play' and, secondly, in response to a growing awareness of the need to provide additional support to vulnerable female members of the Asian community. The outreach worker explained how she was able to draw on the support of a key individual who literally rang round every Asian family 'on the books' and gently encouraged them to attend the group. Acting as a 'bridge' between the setting and the more vulnerable community members, this individual was one of three 'linkers' (Gilchrist 2009) I encountered who shared similar attributes, namely a secure knowledge of the local area, a high community profile, an understanding of the cultural background of some harder to reach community members, and an ability to communicate with non-English speakers in languages such as Urdu and Punjabi. Inviting the women to initially attend a much smaller group was seen as a strategic way to develop their confidence, with the aim that they might eventually join the larger group, open to all community members. Having made initial contact over the phone the key individual prepared them for what they might expect during the group session and was then there to welcome them and provide emotional support when they arrived.

The medium of children's play was another contributory factor in the building of positive relationships between different groups. When I began observing the children's play, I made a note of the ethnicity of the children in their chosen play interactions. After a while it became apparent there was no obvious pattern in terms of grouping, with children consistently playing in mixed cultural/ethnic groups. Interestingly, these intercultural relationships were not perceived to extend beyond the classroom to the same degree, with interviewees highlighting how cultural barriers still militated against

children from different backgrounds playing together out of school. A parent explained how, in spite of inviting the whole nursery class to a birthday party, children from certain ethnic groups did not attend. A member of staff suggested that the non-attendance was rooted in parents' anxieties over the type of food that might be served. This assessment was echoed by another member of the staff group who explains:

*We had a birthday party organised by a white child, actually dual heritage, and he'd invited the whole class and I spoke to our Pakistani, Somali families, saying you've got to go, you've got to go and a lot of them were... hmmm and I said it's next door you know the area well and they were saying what type of food would there be there... would they have vegetarian food, or will they have halal food and will they eat the wrong type of food? So it's not that they don't want to come to the party but there are barriers...*

### ***Ideologically motivated leadership***

The senior leadership was found to be a contributory factor in creating and sustaining the socially inclusive model operating at the setting. Throughout the interviews, the head teacher presented as politically and socially aware. Her significant repertoire of knowledge and understanding of the community cohesion agenda paid dividends in terms of the confident and authentic manner with which she approached the duty to promote community cohesion. This manifested in the emphatic manner in which she expressed forthright views on the importance of community cohesion in schools, describing it as fundamental and key. The head teacher describes how she welcomed the introduction of the duty to promote community cohesion and lamented the fact it was no longer evaluated within the Ofsted inspection framework.

The pursuit of socio-politically grounded ideals did not appear to be the sole preserve of the head teacher. Several of the senior leadership team made ideological

statements relating to the morally compelling nature of their social responsibility. As the following comments illustrate, the staff members appear to possess similar, socially minded attributes, which represent a concern and commitment to support and protect all members of their community, particularly those who are vulnerable. A practitioner explains:

*There's something also about the historical nature of what nursery education is which is about helping people – quite small fragile little people to develop and become whatever they can be, which lends itself very well to a more social political way of looking at society that we need to help all groups so that they can become what their potential might be*

Interview data reveal consistency in the senior leadership team's commitment to 'protect' members who might suffer from non-inclusive assumptions or behaviours. To this end the team explained how they were prepared to hold 'tricky conversations'. The following two examples which warranted challenge relate to the areas of gender and sexual orientation; two out of the Equality Act's eleven protected areas. In one case, a family did not want a male practitioner changing their child's nappy. In another case, a parent felt strongly that somebody who was not heterosexual should not be working at the setting. A teacher outlines the protective approach taken:

*I did say he was entitled to his views but actually this is a centre that serves everybody and we have agreed to carry on having these difficult conversations with him.*

## **Discussion of findings**

These data themes are linked to key theoretical and conceptual constructs within the community cohesion and broader discourse; a process which identifies the following

three interrelated principles on which the setting's community cohesion approach is based.

### ***Connecting with the self***

*The price for a serene, respectful encounter with the other is the engagement in an encounter with oneself (Ramadan 2010:45)*

A number of the study's findings appear to resonate with Ramadan's perspective in that they intimate a relationship between critical self-examination and the quality of our response towards others. This premise is predicated on the fundamental principle that as individuals we will be better positioned to connect with other community members, if we have connected with our own set of assumptions, values and beliefs we may harbour. The setting's cultural awareness programme, which relies on collaborative and dialogic practices, is designed to transform individual attitudes, as verified by a senior leader's comments:

*It's about shifting attitudes, but very slowly so that people can become more inclusive – it's something we really work at*

By inviting individuals to regularly participate in intercultural dialogue, the setting is affording its diverse members an opportunity to consider, or at least, encounter divergent worldviews, or alternative ways of framing the world. As such, this transformational social context, created at the local level, presents as a forum or space for 'possibilities of inter-culturalism' (Amin 2002:2), where 'meaningful interchanges' can take place and where 'cultural horizons' (Gutman 1994:9) can be expanded. Through the encouragement of pragmatic discussions, the setting is facilitating its participants to come to terms with, or gauge the nature and integrity of their own ontological position. Without the self-referential focus these discussions rely on, a critical awareness of one's perspectives could be reduced; potentially leaving

unchallenged and static, non-inclusive, stereotypical and monist worldviews which can privilege certain groups at the expense of others. Left unchecked, such potentially prejudiced worldviews could undermine community cohesion on the basis of the holder's inability to appreciate and value the diversity of members' backgrounds.

The heuristic aspect of their work, which helps members to connect with 'the self' manifests as a concrete illustration of how to address underlying attitudes and values – a central component in what Cattle (2005) refers to as the imperative for a national democratic framework to tackle the fear of difference. Anchored in the vision for social justice, this 'moral' (Murphy 2002) dimension of their work aligns with the passionate pleas of (Ramadan 2010) whose writings on humans' quest for meaning urges self-knowledge and the need to examine our own conscience as a prerequisite for peaceful encounters with others. Interestingly, Ramadan maintains that as humans 'we are not born open-minded, respectful and pluralist'; an assertion which adds weight to the importance of the setting's work in developing these human capabilities.

### ***The setting acts as a 'site of attachment'***

Examples were provided of how the setting challenged non-inclusive behaviours, by holding 'tricky conversations'. These measures provide evidence of how the setting strives to recognize and respect the distinct identities of its community members; in essence, taking steps to ensure members' 'protected characteristics' are actually 'protected'. This responsive dimension of their work, grounded in the legislative requirements of the Equality Act (2010), and manifesting in the inclusive patterns of social relating established by the setting, contributes to its political identity as a 'protective site' or 'community haven'. This designation is premised on the perceived, underlying socially-rooted affordance operating within the site, which enables its

diverse members to experience security and a sense of belonging or affiliation; a process which arguably helps to reduce social exclusion, contributing to the sense of cohesion.

The setting's recognition and responsiveness towards the distinct needs of people from all backgrounds points to an anchorage in the principles of attachment theory. The father of attachment theory is John Bowlby, whose seminal research sheds light on the integral relationship between early emotional attachment and subsequent mental health and well-being (Bowlby 1953). According to Bowlby, children develop an 'internal working model' of relationships. This internalised model serves as a psychological template; one which subsequently regulates expectations that basically other adults will behave towards them in a manner similar to their parents.

An application of these attachment principles to the findings around the setting's 'protective' affordances, lends support for the claim that the organisation as a whole collectively presents as a 'site of attachment'. This designation is predicated on the basis of the diverse and culturally sensitive staff group, who through their non-judgemental and responsive interactions, support community members to establish meaningful emotional bonds or ties with the site. These attachment ties are instrumental in building a sense of belonging and, are arguably born out of feelings of trust; engendered through the positive, responsive and authentic interactions experienced. Consistently positive relationships were evidenced between community members and staff. Over time, these, 'non-rushed' interactions, experienced on a daily basis and built on a foundation of trust and security, arguably have the potential to impact the configuration of the internal working model of individual community members, giving rise to subtle changes in terms of projected expectations for other people's behaviour (including members of their community). The enhanced expectations towards other



people could well include increase levels of social trust - given the robustness of the model of trust the individual is drawing on. In a sense the setting is establishing inclusive patterns of social relating which can be sustained and perpetuated by community members into the community and beyond. Interestingly, the first link in the chain of inclusive relating can be tracked back to the sensitive and supportive working relationships (or bonds of trust) forged between staff members, whose own internal working models of relationships might be enhanced as a consequence. A practitioner explains:

*The way we look after the children does extend to staff – it's important to have a really good relationship with the people you work with, to feel well supported by each other.*

Crucially, the sense of attachment developed through responsive relationships is not reduced to just one single group or 'to the supposed supremacy of one ideology' (Ramadan 2010: 71) but is fostered for all groups, regardless of background. I suggest this pluralistic model of belonging or membership is based on, and encourages multiple forms of reference, thus feeding into the strand of community cohesion 'there is a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities', and sending clear messages that the site is a shared social space belonging to all. This commitment is expressed succinctly in the following comment made by a teacher:

*It's that respect and understanding here that everybody is equal; there's no one group of children, no one adult, no one thing that's more important than anybody else.*

### **Plurality of cultural capitals**

In social integration discourse, the position of schools is described as complex in that they 'straddle the private and the public realm' (Parekh 2006: 202). Based on this

evaluation one might deduce that the cultural constitution of schools is equally co-constructed from both realms. Drawing on my own experience as a primary school teacher, I argue the values of white, middle class teachers heavily influence the cultural constitution within many primary schools. This, of course, does not constitute a problem in itself. A problem only arises when the worldviews and values of the former become entrenched and when they are asserted over those of the families they serve. This potential dominance is highlighted by Marsh (2003). Problematizing the sovereignty of school-based literacy over home-based literacy, Marsh draws attention to the dynamic of 'one way traffic', a phenomenon which places an expectation on the family to orient themselves towards 'schooled literacy practices' (Heath 1983). This literacy-based example serves to highlight how schools can distance themselves from those families who do not 'sufficiently' orientate themselves in the direction of the school and who may subsequently find themselves at a disadvantage by virtue of their parallel existence to the organisation.

Insights drawn from the findings suggest that the setting does not place an expectation on families to move in a unilateral fashion towards the setting, but instead, advocates a culturally-sensitive dynamic of two-way traffic, or 'a flow in both directions', characterised by the setting's recognition and incorporation of the cultural practices of the home into those of the school. To illustrate, at induction, all parents are encouraged to complete a form, detailing any cultural events they celebrate so that these can be incorporated into the curriculum for all to enjoy. Use is made of software, which encourages families to take photos of their home environment; these are then made into learning resources. Regular intercultural events such as Book Week, present as a conduit with which to draw on the cultural capital of families, as they are invited to

share their knowledge of stories in different languages and cultures with the rest of the setting.

These collective practices reify the psychological movement made by the staff to socially and culturally connect with their families they serve. I interpret these embedded practices to be rooted in an appreciation and legitimatisation of the plurality of cultural capitals available at the setting. By engaging in this disparate ‘community of practice’ Wenger (1998) members have the opportunity to learn about the variance of cultural capitals that exist, whilst also gaining access to a pluralistic frame of reference, which makes explicit the equal value placed on all cultures. This frame of reference or social template is mediated by staff interactions, as well as by the setting’s physical environment, with stimulating and thought provoking displays, resources and cultural artefacts reflecting global perspectives and divergent lifestyles. Such reifications essentially make explicit what is valued by the setting and thus might be perceived as functioning as ‘grappling hooks’ (Claxton & Carr 2004) or ‘tokens of possible selves’ (Cross & Marcus 1994) which learners can project into the future as possible positive identities. In this context rather than ‘grappling hook’ to support future outcomes, the metaphor of ‘social mirror’ might be more appropriate - for its inherent affordance in validating and strengthening members’ identities at the present time.

## **Conclusion**

The findings have illustrated how the setting’s commitment to foster inclusive relationships forges ‘bonds of trust’; it is this critical social product, which helps members to experience a sense of ‘shared belonging’ or affiliation, integral to cohesive living. The core construct of affiliation, derived from ‘feeling of equal worth to others’, is regarded as one of the most important human capabilities; the pursuit of which makes us truly human (Nussbaum 2000:82). Schools, as shared human sites, are ideally placed

to create and sustain a nurturing socially cohesive context where staff, children and their families, can learn to experience affiliation and other such human capabilities (Sen 1993). A significant obstacle to educational institutions, keen to pursue this ‘person-oriented and community-orientated’ Quicke (1999: 3) ambition, presents in the form of the exacting and narrow nature of the accountability framework in which they operate. Schools may find that the significant efforts needed to meet the performativity demands divert attention and scant resources away from other broader social responsibilities, such as the challenging of negative assumptions harboured towards others. If we are serious about schools’ capacity to contribute to social justice, then the integrity and status of this distorted and hegemonic framework needs to be subjected to concerted and rigorous challenge. An ideal outcome of this challenge would be a rebalancing – which would see the accountability framework weighted towards the needs of humans as opposed to those of the market. This case study provides valuable and reassuring insights into the strategic efforts made by one setting at the local level to work to this end. The empirical evidence presented represents a grass-roots approach to both community cohesion and social transformation. I suggest this commitment, which manifests in everyday pragmatic actions, now needs to be matched by an equally rigorous top-down commitment from social policy makers to rehumanize the educational arena.

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