

**Written Evidence from Dr Emily Murphy, Newcastle University, Dr Lindsey Cameron (Kent University), Dr Jocelyn Dautel (Queen's University Belfast) and Lorien Jasny (Exeter University)
[CCI0041]**

Who We Are?

We are an interdisciplinary team of academic researchers from six universities across the UK. We apply our diverse expertise to answer the following question: **How do children contribute to local community cohesion?** In this submission of evidence, we present findings from the 'Beyond School Gates' project, a two-year research project funded by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation as part of their Understanding Communities programme. 'Beyond School Gates' provides new insights into the precise routes through which children contribute to community cohesion, through their social networks, their experiences and their developing social cognitions, and how this contribution can be enabled by schools, parents/carers and public spaces.

Our research from this project directly informs the call for written evidence on community cohesion, particularly the questions:

- How should community cohesion be best approached in schools?
- What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?

What Did We Do?

We partnered with twelve schools in three towns in the Northwest of England: Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston to assess children's contributions to community cohesion. Our study included surveys of 444 children aged 9-11 and 181 parents/carers, interviews with 109 children, and 230 pieces of creative work by children as a way of understanding experiences of community cohesion. We included interviews with 57 local stakeholders to better understand how they conceptualise children's contributions to community integration in the context of local council initiatives, community groups, and schools.

Key findings

1. Children between ages 5-12 are a major, yet significantly underrepresented, group that contribute to community cohesion.
2. **School is a key site of social mixing within communities**, where children form diverse friendship groups, and expose members of their larger social networks (e.g. parents and carers) to these diverse groups, strengthening community bonds.
3. **Schools are a site of social mixing for parents**, providing safe, meaningful opportunities for parents to connect with others from diverse backgrounds.
4. Policymakers and stakeholders lack a 'clear vision' for working with children ages 5-12, despite significant evidence of the major role children play in supporting community cohesion.

5. The role of schools as a community hub is not sufficiently acknowledged by the Department for Education, nor are their sufficient resources for schools to carry out this work.

Children and community cohesion

1. Children contribute to community cohesion in a number of ways, including through their developing friendship networks. When asked about the factors that shape their friendship choices, children overwhelmingly felt that similar interests or hobbies trumped other potential factors such as ethnicity or religion. While places of worship were sites of belonging for children, they valued friendships made in other community settings, including school and football clubs.
2. Children identified potential barriers to community cohesion, such as the lack of perceived safety of local neighborhoods or parks, which were attitudes shared with their parents and carers. While some of our data indicates that parent and carer attitudes shape those of children, the reverse is also true making it essential to approach children as a distinct community group when tackling issues related to community cohesion.
3. In addition, children cited wellbeing, which we use here to refer to mental health including temporary periods of sadness, as one major barrier to fostering community cohesion. When children feel weighed down by worries, often in relation to significant life challenges, they cannot participate as easily in efforts to foster community cohesion. New policies, such as the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, tackle some of these barriers, yet continue to marginalise children's voices and experiences.

The School is a Site of Community Cohesion

Our research with primary schools in the North West of England highlighted the significant role of schools in supporting community cohesion in local areas by supporting social mixing across difference (here we refer to different backgrounds such as ethnicity and religion).

1. From a young age, children are highly receptive to social learning, forming values and attitudes that influence their interactions with others. Schools, in particular, serve as a vital setting where children learn to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds and play an active role in shaping inclusive communities.
2. The research revealed a significant positive correlation between ethnic diversity in a school and the diversity of children's friendship groups. That is, children grasped the opportunities available to them to form meaningful, high-quality relationships with others from a different background to themselves. This is important, because research has shown that friendship between members of different social groups is a cornerstone of social cohesion, but even in children it is less common and more difficult to maintain.
3. Schools provide valuable opportunities for children to meet peers from different backgrounds, including ethnicity, culture, language or faith. Our study found that in-class friendships were more diverse compared to friendships formed outside of school. (63% of friendships in the classroom were with children from different backgrounds vs 42% of friendships with their classmates outside of school).

4. For many children school is the ONLY site where children can consistently engage with children and families across difference. Schools have a vital role to play in providing children with a chance to meet others who are different to themselves.
5. These relationships can have a ripple effect on children's wider social networks, in particular parents and carers. Children and parents told us school provides opportunities for parents to expand and diversify their own networks. Most parents agreed that school was a way for them to meet people who were different to them and who they would not otherwise meet.
6. In schools that are less diverse, programmes and activities that are embedded in school can contribute to positive relationships across difference. This can be a result of resources provided directly by the school or as a result of partnerships with external programmes (e.g. The Linking Network's Schools Linking programme).
7. In creative work mapping journeys through their communities, children identified safety and wellbeing as two significant barriers to forming friendship groups across diverse communities. This reflected parent and carer concerns about the safety of sites that typically act as community hubs, such as parks and green spaces.
8. This places pressure on schools, where time and resources are already restricted, to support children in their role as contributors to community cohesion.

How Schools Support Social Mixing Across Difference

1. **Creating connections among parents:** We found that even brief interactions during school drop-off and pick-up were important to parents/carers and helped them to make connections across difference. These connections were further strengthened where schools provided events and provision of clubs and activities for children and their families.
2. **Modeling social mixing:** Children are keen observers of the interactions parents and carers have with other families within school and interpret from these interactions their parents/carers level of comfort with difference, which in turn impacts on their own perceptions of and comfort with social mixing.
3. The extent to which schools foster and support relationships between parents/carers makes a difference for children in terms of how they go on to experience and develop friendships with others, including children who are different from them.
4. This extends to school programmes and activities that generate conversation about community and belonging (e.g. The Linking Network's Schools Linking programme). The creative work produced by children as part of these programmes and activities underscore how schools can act as community hubs and bring children and their families together for more reasons than formal education.
5. Clubs and activities in after-school programmes provides one means of shaping children's belonging outside of school hours, and our interviews with school leaders show that some schools take the role of these and other programmes for fostering community cohesion very seriously, even putting school resources into this.
6. Schools have a significant amount of knowledge about ways to support community cohesion. However, they still face tremendous barriers in terms of time and financial resources.

Best Practices of Schools as Community Hubs

1. Schools who partner with arts-based programmes provided children with opportunities to explore their feelings and experiences about community belonging. The creative work resulting from these activities provides significant insight into the effectiveness of existing infrastructure within schools that promotes and supports community belonging, as well as areas where schools can improve. For example, in original artwork created as part of a creative programme co-produced by the British Library and The Linking Network, children identified key themes that were supported by other data across the project: namely, the importance of school for solidifying friendships as well as opportunities to connect with friends in other public spaces, including libraries and parks.
2. In their creative work, children also identified the importance of intergenerational bonds and particularly the role of cultural identity as a key source of pride. Schools that embrace and support these cultural differences play an important role in rebuilding trust for historically marginalised groups (e.g. South Asian or Gypsy, Roma, or Traveller), including parents and carers who may have felt unwelcome in school in their own childhood.
3. Focused work on friendship and relationship building, as well as providing children with more opportunities to initiate and strengthen friendships across lines of difference, will support stronger more diverse friendship groups in school (and beyond).
4. Parents and children cited school events focused on their child's learning (e.g. school assembly, class visit, class celebration) as being an effective and enjoyable opportunity for parents social mixing across difference.
5. Despite these examples, not all schools have the ability to carry out this work, and in these instances, outside support from experts in community cohesion can give schools the confidence to embed activities that support community cohesion in their day-to-day activities.

Challenges and Barriers for Schools Supporting Community Cohesion

1. A review of the Curriculum and Assessment system in England is currently being carried out by a review committee chaired by Professor Becky Francis CBE. While the committee defines curriculum broadly to include 'inclusive' practices adopted by schools, there is a risk that the contributions schools make to community cohesion will be less visible due to the scale of this review.
2. We agree that a broad approach to reviewing the current educational system is needed to acknowledge the role schools play in supporting community cohesion and, within them, the role of children in strengthening community bonds. However, steps to ensure that the role of schools in fostering community cohesion is needed. As we acknowledge in our written evidence, we also need to be aware of children's contributions to community cohesion within a school context, which are easily lost within larger national reviews which are intended to capture the work of educators.
3. Further reforms to current education strategies are needed to provide schools with much-needed resources to meet national curriculum demands while carrying out their role as a community hub for local children and families.

4. Similarly, more attention to how local stakeholders and policymakers assess who shapes and contributes to community cohesion is needed. A clear plan for working with and engaging children and acknowledging their role in contributing to community cohesion is essential, with the school being one obvious site to focus on as a starting point.

Final Recommendations

It is clear that schools present a significant opportunity to support community cohesion, and that many schools are already contributing resources to the implementation of programmes and activities that support the development of friendships across difference for children and their families. However, more work is still needed. We suggest the following:

- Local policymakers and stakeholders develop a clear vision for working with children in middle childhood (5-12 years old) and reflect on ways the services they offer can support children in their contributions to community cohesion. At this stage of development, children are highly receptive to social learning, forming values and attitudes that influence their interactions with others. Schools, in particular, serve as a vital setting where children learn to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds and play an active role in shaping inclusive communities.
- Recognize and strengthen schools' role in community cohesion
- **Provide Targeted Funding and Resources for Schools.** Schools require additional time, funding, and support to effectively carry out their community-building role alongside their educational responsibilities. Investment in extracurricular programs, staff training, and partnerships with community organisations will enhance schools' capacity to promote social integration and belonging.

As part of our study, we developed a flowchart to aid policymakers and practitioners, including those within education, as they seek to address our key recommendations. This can be found in the full report for Beyond School Gates. We are also happy to introduce members of the Committee for this Call for Evidence to key partners and stakeholders in our project, who combined represent a wealth of knowledge on community cohesion in our key target areas in the North West of England and even more broadly across the UK. The contact information for our corresponding author, who can facilitate introductions if requested, is included in the appendix below, along with more details about our project team.

Appendix

***Dr Emily Murphy** is a Senior Lecturer in Children's Literature at Newcastle University. She has published widely on the role of children's literature in shaping children's citizenship practices, including within educational settings. Her latest publication, co-produced with Dr. Helen King for a special issue in *Archives & Records*, underscores the historical role of English schools in forming inter-racial friendships among children and fostering a wider sense of social justice through the introduction of global events through school reading. Dr Murphy can be contacted for more details about this report of written evidence or for contact information for external partners and stakeholders who informed the data underpinning our research at emily.murphy@newcastle.ac.uk.

Dr Lindsey Cameron is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Psychology at the University of Kent. Her expertise is in children's social development and peer relations in diverse contexts. Using intergroup contact theory as a framework, her research focuses on uncovering the psychological levers for developing positive attitudes across lines of difference, and encouraging 'confidence in contact' (Turner & Cameron, 2016) through meaningful interactions. She collaborates with schools and charities (e.g. The Linking Network, One Globe Kids, the National Holocaust Centre & Museum) to develop and evaluate interventions to bring communities together, create new connections, and challenge stereotypes.

Dr Lorien Jasny is an Associate Professor of Computational Social Science at Exeter University. She investigates how social networks both enable and constrain communities and collective action.

Dr. Jocelyn Dautel is a Reader in the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast, a Fellow of the George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security, and Justice, and directs the Kids in Context Research Centre. Her research focuses on how children and adolescents develop social cognition—navigating relationships, interpreting social information, and forming identities—using cross-cultural and mixed-methods approaches in diverse and divided societies. Jocelyn collaborates with schools, youth organizations, and cross-community initiatives to ensure her research addresses real-world challenges and supports local communities. She has secured over £1 million in funding to advance inclusive education, reduce inequalities, and promote peacebuilding worldwide.

January 2025