

## Written evidence from The Linking Network [CCI0045]

### Introduction to TLN

**Who am I? Who are we? Where do we live? How can we all live well together?** These are crucial questions for children and young people in the UK as they negotiate an increasingly complex society. A key driver of stereotyping, misunderstanding, fear and prejudice is lack of contact with people different to us. To build community cohesion we need to support our young people to learn about their own and other people's identities, develop understanding and create connections across difference.

The Linking Network (TLN) is a national education charity, based in Bradford, designed to fulfil this need: it is dedicated to tackling prejudice and building community cohesion by supporting schools, children and young people to build meaningful connections across all forms of difference, mainly through our Schools Linking and Intergenerational Linking programmes. Our network of Linking Schools spans **25 Local Areas** across England from Bolton to Luton to Kent, allowing us to reach over **800 classes in more than 550 schools, positively impacting 28,000 children, young people and their communities each year.**

### What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

#### Segregation

1. We live in an increasingly diverse world. However, British society faces worrying levels of segregation (Casey Review, 2016). There are many local areas of the UK where opportunities for interacting with others across social groups (ethnicity, race, religion, socio economic backgrounds, rural/urban) can be low.
2. Importantly there is a need expressed among our communities for more social mixing: A public consultation in Bradford (The Social Kinetic, 2018) found people thought reciprocity, interculturalism, social mixing and economic opportunity are important to living a fulfilling life across the district. However, many expressed they didn't know where to start.
3. Worryingly, *'the school age population is even more segregated when compared to residential patterns of living' and 'a lack of mixing can: reinforce ethnic segregation, increase community tensions and risk of conflict.'* (Casey Review, 2016). The reality is that across the UK there are children and young people growing up in isolated and segregated schools and communities where there are limited opportunities for sustained social mixing and for developing positive relations with others from different communities (Broadwood et al., 2021).

#### Divisive messages and attitudes

1. At the same time, discourse in the media and society has become increasingly divisive, more fearful and quicker to blame others.
2. *'All conflict is about the same thing, no matter where it is, it's about difference... and so respect for difference is... the first and deepest principle of peace.'* John Hume, Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, 1998. The UK riots in summer 2024 showed the work needed on building understanding and respect across difference in our country.
3. Schools, especially in areas where communities were directly affected, remain aware of the serious negative impact of the disorder on pupils' sense of belonging. This is something we have addressed in our training sessions as we meet teachers across England this year.

#### Need for positive experiences of difference at an early age: value of social mixing in schools

1. When our earliest perceptions of people who are different to us are negative then anxiety and fear shapes our encounters later in life (Wölfer et al., 2016). On the other hand, if we have early experiences of new and

different people that foster curiosity, encourage understanding and are joyful, we carry these experiences with us, and they shape our life-long expectations of belonging for ourselves and those around us.

2. It is critical that these attitudes are developed at an early age (Broadwood et al., 2021). Primary and early secondary are optimal ages for embedding understanding and respect for difference and developing positive identities as children's social attitudes are more malleable and open to change.
3. Schools are ideally positioned to provide children with an opportunity to develop positive attitudes to difference, through education and supporting diverse friendships, but they can be constrained by the extensive national curriculum and assessment, which can limit time for building social relationships and exploring diversity in a meaningful way. (Leman & Cameron, 2017). Furthermore, many schools do not have the benefit of a diverse pupil intake, meaning providing such opportunities to experience diversity is even more challenging.
4. The Linking Network provides pupils with an opportunity to explore identity, experience diversity and build meaningful connections across difference.

*'It is vital that we continue with the Schools Linking programme as it is one of the very few opportunities that students living in Leicester and Leicestershire have to engage with those who are different from them. The city of Leicester has been **troubled by a significant rise in online hate crime and negative messaging and sentiments towards different communities**. The School Linking programme provides a **vital opportunity** for young people to realise that we have far more in common than what divides us.'* Leicester Schools Linking Programme Local Facilitator

### **What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?**

There is already a strong network of schools and local authorities that are working together as part of The Linking Network to improve community cohesion through Schools Linking and Intergenerational Linking. The Linking Network applies a tried and tested model that has national backing and is rooted in local communities with a focus on the specific cohesion challenges experienced by each area. There is potential to scale this work to more schools and new Local Areas of the country so that more children and young people have the opportunity to explore their identity and embrace difference in their communities.

It is important that we prioritise and give time for experiences that foster positive attitudes to other social groups, build children's confidence in navigating diverse environments, and encourage children's understanding of their own and others' identities (Cameron & Turner, 2017). This can be achieved by creating opportunities for positive, meaningful interactions across difference, in primary and in secondary school, and below we outline evidence-based arguments to support this recommendation:

1. Research tells us that social mixing, defined as meaningful interactions across difference, is 'the most effective prejudice-reduction strategy available, and provides a strong foundation for resilient, inclusive communities' (Broadwood et al, 2021)
2. Extensive psychological research has shown the positive impact of social mixing on children: children who have more meaningful and positive interactions with others who are different to them (e.g. their classmates, peers, friends, but also through books and TV) have more positive attitudes to difference, stronger empathy for other social groups, reduced anxiety and more confidence in future interactions across difference (Turner & Cameron, 2016).
3. The Casey Review (2016) recommended that to create more cohesive and integrated communities, government and local authorities should prioritise creating opportunities for cross-group friendships among young people to improve social mixing, and specifically recommended Schools Linking as one part of a wider integration strategy.

4. Crucially, psychological research has shown that childhood attitudes towards difference are more open to change, compared with adults, are more influenced by social interactions, and can continue into adulthood (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011).
5. Early positive encounters with difference may make us more resistant to stereotypes and prejudice: evidence suggests early experiences of difference, carefully structured and scaffolded to ensure positive learning, could inoculate young people against future negative messages and stereotypes (Paolini et al., 2014).
6. School is the best and sometimes only opportunity children have for meaningful interactions across lines of difference. The British Academy and Nuffield Foundation funded research 'Beyond School Gates: Children's Contribution to Community Integration' found that children's social networks in school are significantly more diverse than those out of school (Sakr et al., 2024). For some children school represents the best (and in some cases only) opportunity they have for meaningful interactions with others who are different to them. They also concluded that in less diverse schools it was vital that opportunities for meaningful interactions across difference were introduced through exchange programmes such as The Linking Network.

### [How should community cohesion be best approached in schools? / What examples are there of best practice which has positively impacted community cohesion?](#)

There are many approaches schools can and often do take to positively impact community cohesion. Key approaches include: thoughtful **curriculum design** that fosters understanding and respect, ensuring representation and building a living understanding of the stories that make up our local and wider communities over time; **family engagement** that builds a sense of belonging and trust; **ongoing training for all school staff** related to community cohesion, empowering them to challenge prejudice and help all pupils thrive; and **wide ranging provision that broadens experiences of difference** through visitors, visits, assemblies, books, subject content and programmes. At The Linking Network we offer schools resources, training, guidance and Linking programmes that support them with their approaches to community cohesion. This includes rapid support in response to emerging challenges that may arise due to the local, national or global context. We share more detail about our Linking programmes in the sections below:

#### **Create positive contact between people from different backgrounds.**

1. There is strong research evidence that meaningful, positive contact between people from different backgrounds can reduce prejudice and increase trust and understanding between groups, leading to a greater sense of togetherness and greater confidence in future interactions across difference (e.g., Turner and Cameron, 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).
2. This is at the heart of The Linking Network's work; to create more cohesive communities by giving children and young people opportunities to experience positive intergroup contact, develop new levels of understanding of others, and gain confidence in meeting new people who may be different to them.
3. This is achieved mainly through two programmes delivered in schools, and embedded in the school curriculum: **Schools Linking**, where children from two schools that differ in important ways (e.g. demographic, rural vs. urban) are linked over the course of an academic year, and **Intergenerational Linking**, which brings young people and older people together.
4. Both programmes involve a series of carefully designed and structured sessions, facilitated by teachers, and supported by our team, to build real connections, and explore our key questions of who we are, and how we live well together. Our work is made possible by our vibrant network of local area facilitators, schools, cultural and community organisations, teachers and other partners from across the country.
5. The Linking programmes have a strong focus on social action, which is at the heart of strong, resilient communities (Broadwood et al., 2021). Research shows that children who take part in social action before

they're 10 years old are more than twice as likely to keep participating in the community (Arthur et al., 2017). *'However, many primary age pupils, their schools and their communities are missing out on the benefits youth social action has to offer.'* (Tejani & Breeze, 2021)

6. A joint paper from the Belong Network, British Future and the Together Coalition in response to the 2024 UK riots (Rutter et al., 2024) highlighted the lack of opportunity amongst many children for sustained contact with peers from different backgrounds. This is a challenge because *'bridging social contact helps to reduce stereotyping, prejudice and threat perceptions, thus building greater inter-group trust and shared identities'* (Christ et al., 2014).
7. The paper goes on to recommend that: *'all school and college students should have the opportunity for social contact with peers from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds. Schools and colleges should be able to decide the approach they want to take. This might involve linking classes in schools where the intake is different – an approach used by The Linking Network.'* (Rutter et al., 2024)

### **Linking is active in 25 Local Areas across England – Local Ownership, National Backing, High Scalability**

1. In each of the areas that offer a local Schools Linking programme, identified because community cohesion is a priority, a local partner organisation receives capacity-building funding from The Linking Network (TLN) to facilitate our locally adapted programme, connected to our experienced national organisation in a hub-and-spoke model; TLN in Bradford as the hub and local areas as the spokes.
2. The model of "local linking with national backing" affords a truly local approach rooted in the unique context of each locality, harnessing local knowledge and responding to local challenges and opportunities. Together with our 25 local area facilitators, we train and equip teachers and provide them with comprehensive, high quality, easy to use resources. This makes our programmes cost-effective and highly scalable.
3. The scaling of the programme nationally since 2008 to its reach to 25 areas in 2025 has been catalysed by philanthropic and central Government funding (DfE, 2008-2010; MHCLG and DfE, 2017-2023; and MHCLG, 2023-present) and enabled by TLN's diverse funding model with schools and local authorities also contributing towards the costs of Schools Linking. As stated in answer to a previous question, there is potential to further expand Schools and Intergenerational Linking within the areas we are already active in and into new areas of the country that are facing community cohesion challenges.

*"We have participated in the programme for the first time this year, as part of our ongoing focus on improving the cultural, religious and diversity education of our children. The understanding, empathy and ability to have open discussions about culture and religious diversity has drastically increased both in children and staff." Headteacher, Stockport.*

### **Linking: A strong evidence base and continued learning**

1. The Linking Network programmes have been developed over the last twenty years using a strong evidence base. We have also built in a number of evaluations of key psychological and educational outcomes for participating schools including through regular teacher surveys and observations. We set out highlights from some of our formal evaluations below.
2. An independent research report, commissioned by the Department for Education to examine approaches used in schools and colleges to promote social integration (Hewstone, 2023) summarised The Linking Network's impact as follows: *"Robust evaluation showing positive impact on many aspects of pupils' skills, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours, including respect for others, confidence that they could mix with children from another group, broadened the social groups with whom pupils interact."*
3. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities commissioned IFF Research to evaluate Schools Linking (2022) and identified the following impact on primary pupils as a result of participating in a Schools Linking Programme (as assessed by their teachers): 83% were more respectful of other young people from

different backgrounds; 79% felt a greater sense of belonging to their local area; 71% were more motivated to work with other young people in the local area to improve the neighbourhood. Schools Linking was found to have *'a positive effect on pupils...particularly improving pupils' confidence in meeting young people of different ethnicities, religions and economic backgrounds, and improving pupils' understanding of different races, religions, and cultures. Linking also had a positive influence on young people's sense of belonging to the local area'*.

4. *'Contemporary schools linking relates to far more than ethnicity and seeks to foster dialogue and greater mutual understanding around a wider cluster of expressions of difference, including faith/belief, social class and urban, suburban and rural communities. These two factors reflect the ongoing development of TLN and its approach to schools linking and place it in a strong position to foster dynamic patterns of social cohesion in the coming years.'* (Shannahan, 2018)
5. A recent observational study of Schools Linking (Cameron, 2024) reported that: *Schools Linking develops children's social skills, builds bonds across communities, and opens children up to crossing lines of difference. Children embraced the opportunity to interact with children who were different to them. Throughout the Linking day children explored similarities and differences between themselves and their linking partners with openness and ease, including questions around religion, identity, and language. Shared experiences, such as watching a play, creative work and dance, created a sense of 'togetherness', building bonds across the linked schools, as well as encouraging cooperation and teamwork'*.
6. Participants themselves tell us how creating meaningful interactions through Linking improves understanding across difference:
  - o *'Linking makes you less likely to prejudge people and [helps you] understand some people's cultures and make new friends.'* Secondary Linking pupil
  - o *'I always thought that older people would be really judging of people our age, but they weren't and that was a really nice surprise.'* Secondary Student
  - o *'I had an idea about what teenagers were like, but they are all so lovely. I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't taken part.'* Older person
7. The impact on pupils' understanding and confidence in contact through Linking is visible in schools: *'Pupils show respect for people from other backgrounds and learn how important it is to treat everyone equally. Pupils are keen to talk about their links with a school that serves pupils from a culturally diverse community in the local area. Pupils enjoy the different activities that they do together with pupils from the partner school, to help them understand about different people in modern Britain.'* Colden Primary Calderdale Ofsted Inspection Report, December 2022

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