

Report - Social Cohesion

The social cohesion group has been running since September. There are 10 students participating from years 7 - 11 selected from the school council these students are from a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds. However, the school, Wildern, is not particularly ethnically diverse, the majority of its intake being white, middle-class due to the suburban catchment area. The partner school Wildern has been working with, Cantell, was chosen due its wider ethnic diversity.

The aim of the project has been to research and explore into the ideas of diversity, experience of difference and how to achieve social cohesion. The pupils set their research objective themselves after workshops with John Lace from Hampshire County Council. They consulted David Bond, a representative from Hampshire County Archives to widen their research to include historical perspectives on difference. Research into the media's portrayal of difference was also conducted in weekly sessions after school. Initially, these weekly meetings were conducted independently at each school, however, after 2 months the pupils met for the first time to decide on their final research focus.

The first meeting of the pupils was conducted as a 'learning walk'. The groups visited each other's school and spent the morning in lessons with a 'buddy' from the other social cohesion group. These enabled them to experience daily life in those school surroundings. In the afternoon the pupils discussed their aims for the project and decided their research methods. The groups wanted to narrow the focus from 'difference and diversity' to 'stereotyping and difference'. This enabled them to use their findings from their analysis of the media - they were particularly interested in how newspapers manipulate their readers - and also address the issue that as teenagers they felt they were often negatively stereotyped. The pupils initially had a little trouble relating to each other, especially the older students. Some expressed that they felt insecure in a different school environment and clung to their own school identity rather than bonding as a group. Some pupils had negative preconceptions about the other school - a view that was reinforced by some parents, from Wildern, who requested that their pupils were removed from the project. The divide between the groups was compounded by their opinions on the concept of difference. The Cantell group, an ethnically diverse school with pupils from a broader range

of socio-economic backgrounds, felt that difference was individually determined by personality, not along lines of race or class. They were also more comfortable talking about race. Wildern pupils were generally uncomfortable labelling different ethnic groups as they were unsure of the appropriate language to use. They were also more likely to group people as different due to their race or class.

As the project progressed, the groups became closer despite working largely independently. Both groups distributed questionnaires, designed by the pupils themselves, and analysed the findings. Reactions to the questionnaires from both schools were mixed. Some parents at Cantell were uncomfortable with the discussion of race and requested their children no longer participate in the project. The two groups met again in February to prepare for the conference. There was a marked difference in their attitudes towards each other once they felt a joint sense of purpose. The older pupils became much more engaged once they realised the conference was looming and their leadership helped to motivate younger members of the group. The conference itself was an excellent motivating force for the group, especially because they were presenting to adults and felt that their research was taken seriously. The pupils were articulate and comfortable explaining their views and research in the workshops that followed. Notably, the teachers needed to volunteer very little support. This was an indication for us that the project was student-led as they no longer needed any scaffolding but could fluently interpret their own experience through the prism of their understanding of difference gained from the project.

Recommendations:

Due to the fact that the social cohesion project was a new initiative, many of the decisions made were last minute. Organisation was difficult; small administrative issues, such as booking a minibus, at times threatened to derail the project. Liaising between the two schools was often hard due to the packed timetables of the teachers involved. In future, learning walks and trips need to be booked into the school calendar at least a whole term in advance.

The pupil-led nature of the project meant that planning was only possible as the pupils developed their own research. However, this also meant that the teachers involved had to take a large amount of responsibility for determining the structure of the social cohesion project as a whole. An outline, in terms of what needed to be included and achieved, would have

been useful at the start. It would also have enabled us to have booked trips to faith communities and involve parents more in the research process.

The future of the project:

The pupils will use their research findings to design recommendations for the whole school improvement plan (this was done in tandem with Cantell). Underpinning the project has been the rights, respect and responsibilities agenda and the social cohesion group is now preparing to gain the UNICEF accreditation as a rights respecting school.