Building a Sense of Community: Children, Bodies and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

The word 'community' is currently back in fashion in the UK, particularly relating to concerns over social cohesion between different ethnic and religious groups in urban localities. Schooling provision, particularly of a faith-based nature, has become entangled within these debates, but there remains a clear lack of research about what actually happens within schools to facilitate or deter the development of social cohesion. Drawing on two qualitative case studies, this chapter will focus in on the embodied processes that occur within schools to build a sense of belonging and togetherness among children. It will examine the inclusive or exclusive nature of such processes within a Community primary school and a Catholic primary school context. The way in which the two schools engage with their wider community will also be considered, along with the implications for social cohesion debates.

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Biographic Information

Peter Hemming is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Child and Youth Research at Brunel University, working on an AHRC/ESRC funded project on religion and youth. His PhD was completed at the University of Leeds in the School of Geography and School of Sociology & Social Policy and was entitled "Religion and spirituality in the spaces of the primary school: social and political explorations". Peter's research interests include children and young people, religion and spirituality, education spaces, community and citizenship, emotional geographies and qualitative and mixed-method approaches. He is also a former primary school teacher.

Introduction

Over the last few years, communities have become the focus of a range of government policies and initiatives in the UK, particularly regarding the development of social cohesion between different ethnic and religious groups (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). These interventions have partly been a response to the 2001 riots in English Northern cities such as Bradford and Oldham, where anti-Muslim rallies organised by the Far Right led to violence between White and Asian youths. Debates about interfaith community relations have also impacted upon education institutions, for example through the recently introduced legal requirement for all English schools to demonstrate their commitment to promote social cohesion. This policy can be understood as an attempt to calm concerns that faith-based schools, in particular, may be guilty of contributing to ethnic and religious division through their selection procedures (Ouseley, 2001). Geographers have also started to recognise and investigate the spatial aspect of these debates, such as the extent of ethnic segregation in school neighbourhoods (e.g. Burgess *et al.*, 2005) but there has, as yet, been a marked lack of research on religion and social cohesion issues *within* educational spaces.

In this chapter, I draw on qualitative research to contribute to the above debates, specifically through a focus on the institutional spaces of primary (elementary) schools. I begin by offering a theoretical discussion on bodies, rituals and belonging to build a foundation for the arguments made in the chapter, followed by a brief outline of the research study from which this chapter draws. Next, I examine some of the ways in which the primary schools in my study encouraged social cohesion and a sense of community with particular reference to the role of embodied practices. The significance of embodied identities for inclusion or exclusion in these practices are then explored. Finally, I go on to illustrate how these processes interconnect with the wider localities and some of the implications of this for the social cohesion agenda.

Bodies, Rituals and Belonging

Over the last decade or so, geographers have begun to eschew the traditional Cartesian dualism of mind and body and the prioritisation of thinking over doing, to accept the body as both a significant entity within space but also as a legitimate space in itself for

geographical enquiry (Longhurst, 2001; Valentine, 2001). This has led to an engagement with the more embodied aspects of human life, such as emotions, affect and practice (Anderson, 2006; Davidson & Milligan, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Simonsen (2007) has called for a 'geography of practice', which acknowledges the role of somatic experience in constructing meaning and relating to other people and our environment.

Recent work on citizenship and national identity has begun to explore the embodied nature of collective belonging, for example through the role of affective musical experiences for fostering nationalist sentiments (Wood, 2007). Geographical research on nationalism has also emphasised the importance of embodied ritual for creating a sense of togetherness. Sharp (1996:98) draws on Bennington and Renan to argue that:

> "The nation is created not through an originary moment or culturally distinct essence but through the repetition of symbols that come to represent the nation's uniqueness. National culture and character are ritualistic so that every repetition of its symbols serves to reinforce national identity. […] Each drawing of maps of nation-state territory, each playing of the national anthem or laying of wreaths at war memorials, every spectatorship of national sports events and so on represents this daily affirmation of national identification" (1996:98).

Similarly, Viroli (1995, cited in Turner, 2002:49) has expressed the view that shared rituals, along with a common culture and landscape, are essential for enduring national identities and commitments.

The importance of embodied rituals for 'social cement' is not a new idea or concept, as ritual was central to Durkheim's analysis of the social function of religion for society. Durkheim (1915, cited in Turner, 1991:45-52) used his study of aboriginal Australian totemism to show how symbolic religious practices and rituals, and the emotional states that are influenced by them (collective effervescence), can work to re-establish and cement social relationships within collectives. This analysis emphasised practice and action more than other accounts of religion (e.g. Weberian) that focused solely on thought and belief (Turner, 1991).

Neo-Durkheimians such as Mellor & Shilling (1997), have suggested that current sociological thinking has tended to neglect the importance of collective and individual embodied experiences of the sacred. They argue that religious practice, and the influence of religious practice, remains central to the cementing of social relationships within modern Western societies. At the scale of the community, Paolone (2011, in press) has examined how embodied rituals in a central region of Italy serve to teach young citizens membership of their local community through the enactment of symbolic processions. In this chapter, I will examine the role of both religious and secular rituals in building up a sense of embodied community in the primary school.

Study Outline

The data in this chapter originates from a wider project on religion and spirituality in primary school spaces. The study was qualitative in nature and adopted a case study approach to investigate a Community primary school and a Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic primary school. Both of the schools were located in an urban area of the North of England, within multi-faith localities. The research involved a mixed-method approach including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with parents and teaching staff, paired interviews with children and a number of child-centred methods. This chapter will draw primarily from the observation and interview data. The majority of the research was focused on particular classes within Key Stage 2 (7-11 year-olds). In both of the focus classes, I worked as a general classroom assistant alongside my participant observer role but also carried out observations in the playground, hall and corridors throughout the school day.

The child and parent interview sampling strategy aimed to reflect the religious make-up of the focus classes. In the Community school, this consisted of approximately 20% non-White Muslim or Sikh, 40% Black or Mixed Race Christian and 40% White Christian or Agnostic children. In the Roman Catholic school, the figures were 5% non-White Muslim, 15% Black or Mixed Race Christian (mostly Catholic), 20% White Christian (non-Catholic) or Agnostic and 60% White Catholic children. I conducted a total of ten parent interviews in each school, mostly with just one parent but occasionally with two, and three interviews with teaching staff in each school. In the case of the children, there were eleven pairs and

one group of three at the Community school and ten pairs and one group of three at the Catholic school, in order to avoid excluding children who wanted to take part.

Embodied Communities

The concept of community can be understood in a number of ways, as highlighted by Bell & Newby (1976). They outline three definitions, including a neighbourhood community based on close geographical proximity, a collection of local social and political systems and institutions, and a body of individuals with close personal ties and obligations towards other members. Wellman & Leighton (1979) prefer to separate the concepts of neighbourhood and community, arguing that traditional community collectives based in geographic localities have become increasingly dispersed across space. This position is extended by Castells (1996), who maintains that we are now living in a network society, shaped by new technologies, where people exist within webs of social connections and interactions.

More recent definitions of community therefore emphasise the existence of common values and bonds between people, in contrast to neighbourhood and territory (e.g. Smith 1999). This way of thinking about community is relevant for educational institutions, in their attempts to create a distinct character or culture based on a community of shared values and mutual goals (Sergiovanni 1994). Collective identities in schools are often built on factors such as language, culture and religious and ethnic identity. Hall *et al.* (2002) give the example of supplementary religious schools as contexts where shared identity and belonging are of real importance for pupils and parents. Cohesive communities may also be formed through somatic as well as discursive processes, but little has been said about the role of embodied practices for building a sense of togetherness in educational space.

In the schools in my research, embodied practices and rituals played a major role in building a cohesive school community and a sense of belonging. Both of the study schools used rituals and practices of a non-religious nature on an everyday basis. These included whole-school assemblies, where lines of children would file into the hall, sit in rows and listen to stories and announcements from the teachers, and whole-school events such as sports days and talent contests. Singing was also a time when children would come together and take part in a collective musical act. The daily ritual of 'Wake Up! Shake Up!'

(www.wakeupshakeup.com) was an aspect of school life where children took part in physical exercises together on the playground or in the hall, to the sound of popular dance music. Classroom rituals including taking down chairs from tables, calling out names to the register, and sitting down together on the carpet, all worked to create a feeling of familiarity and community.

> *It was also quite interesting watching the school take part in 'Wake Up! Shake Up!' to 'It's Raining Men' on Thursday morning. The whole school came together in the hall and all took part in moving and dancing together in a big corporate, corporeal event (Research Diary Extract, Catholic School).*

These ritualistic events were a daily part of children's lives in school and they referred to them in the paired interviews, such as Aisha below, who mentioned singing and the daily 'Wake Up! Shake Up!' whole-school activity.

> *INTERVIEWER:*
> *Do you ever do singing in assembly or do you ever have prayers, or do you ever think silently?*
> *AISHA (Asian Muslim Girl, Community School):*
> *We don't have prayers, but we, like, sing when we get there.*
> *INTERVIEWER:*
> *You do have singing? What kind of things do you sing? Oh you mean when you're walking in?*
> *AISHA:*
> *Yeah when we're walking in and when we're sitting down. Mr. W, at the end, the head teacher takes a song, like 'Wake Up! Shake Up!', when everybody's tired and all that, we stand up and sing 'Wake Up! Shake Up!'. Like in the morning you sing a song.*

In addition to the non-religious rituals outlined above, the Catholic school was able to draw on a range of religious rituals for community building, (see also Paolone, 2011, in press). These included class prayers, which were rhymes that the children knew off by heart and chanted four times a day; class worship, which entailed children sitting together on the carpet around a lighted candle; assemblies, which contained religious stories and prayers;

and services or Mass, which were led by the local parish priest. The prayers in particular were very embodied as they involved chanting in unison as well as making the sign of the cross at the start and the end of each prayer. These religious practices were a major part of daily life in the Catholic school, in contrast to the Community school, where religious rituals were very rare.

The morning started with the usual prayer, and I reflected how the whole event was completely embodied, from putting hands together, closing eyes, disappearing into that spiritual place, and making the sign of the cross at the start and the end of the prayer. The words were as follows:

"Father in heaven you love me, you are with me night and day,
I want to love you always, in all I do and say,
I'll try to please you Father, bless me through the day,
Amen."

(Research Diary Extract, Catholic School).

Teachers at the Catholic school were quite clear about the cohesive potential of such practices and rituals, pointing to the way that they could help in managing class behaviour. Some of the parents also highlighted this community-building aspect of religious rituals.

INTERVIEWER:
I mean with the religious side of assembly as well, do you think there are any other functions of assembly, any other things that you know, that it does apart from promoting the religious side?
SALLY (White Christian Non-Catholic Mother, Catholic School):
It's a community. It's an encouragement of belonging together. Everybody's included and not felt like they're left out, you know, people can take part if they wish, you know…

One of the most striking examples of togetherness was the way in which teachers in the Catholic school told children that Jesus would always listen to their prayers when more than one of them was praying together. This idea was reflected in some of the interview

quotes from children at the Catholic school, but also from a number of children at the Community school, who referred to the few occasions when they had prayed at school.

> *INTERVIEWER:*
> *Right ok. What about when you do prayers in assembly, do you enjoy doing those?*
> *NATHAN (White Catholic Boy, Catholic School):*
> *Yeah.*
> *QUINTON (White Catholic Boy, Catholic School):*
> *Yeah.*
> *INTERVIEWER:*
> *Yeah what do you like about that?*
> *NATHAN:*
> *You're talkin', you know you're talkin' to God and it says if there's more than one or two people, if there's two or three people, Jesus will be there prayin' as well.*

The rituals and practices at the Catholic school went hand-in-hand with more discursive ideas that emphasised the existence of community in school. This was reflected in the way that teachers and parents talked about the community feel of the school and the fact that many of the Catholic children came from families with long histories of attending the school. The concept was also explicitly discussed with the children in assemblies, where their membership in the local community was considered alongside being part of God's community. The extent to which all children were full members of these embodied school communities will be the focus of the next section.

Inclusive Communities?

Earlier in the chapter, I referred to Smith's (1999) concept of a community of common values and bonds. Often these common social bonds are produced through appeals to an 'imagined community' at the level of the nation, neighbourhood or institution, that promotes an idealised and romanticised notion of sameness and similarity (Anderson, 1983; Rose, 1990). Consequently, Young (1990) discusses how the ideal of community can result in the elevation of unity and homogeneity over diversity and difference, and hence the

exclusion of individuals who do not 'fit in' for whatever reason. In the context of education, faith schools can sometimes create clear boundaries between their school community and wider society in order to effectively promote spiritual values (Valins, 2003). However, the changing religious make-up of English society has meant that some Christian schools, in particular, are increasingly experiencing more religiously and ethnically diverse intakes (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007). This raises the question as to how far non-Christian pupils can be fully included in an 'imagined community' constructed on common Christian beliefs.

In my research, the concept of community in the two study schools implied both processes of inclusion and exclusion. Smith's (1999) community of common values and bonds was much more apparent in the Catholic school than the Community school, partly because of the emphasis placed on it as part of the school's religious ethos, but also because of the high frequency of religious rituals enacted on a daily basis. Although the Catholic school did demonstrate a stronger sense of togetherness through those aspects discussed, children who were unable to take part in the religious rituals inevitably experienced a certain amount of exclusion, despite the school's efforts to include them. Pupils in this category (such as Ahmed below) did not necessarily view this as a problem, but it did serve to mark them as different in the context of these daily religious rituals. Similarly, Smith (2005) found in his study that assemblies and collective worship in primary schools were times where religious differences were reinforced through withdrawal or separate worship. In the Catholic school in my study, children from minority religions were only included in the non-religious rituals such as 'Wake Up! Shake Up!' and singing practice, when the songs were more secular in nature.

INTERVIEWER:
Ok, what about singing? Do you like singing the songs in assembly?
CRAIG (White Catholic Boy, Catholic School):
Most of them, 'cos we don't do a lot.
AHMED (Black Muslim Boy, Catholic School):
It depends what they are. Some of the songs I don't like singing, some of them I do, and some of them I can't sing 'cos I'm a different religion, and some of the things they say inside there, I can't really say.
INTERVIEWER:

Oh so how do you know, do you know which one's that you're meant to be singing?

AHMED:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. Is that just decided before you go in assembly?

AHMED:

Yeah, and if I can't say something, I just won't sing.

INTERVIEWER:

Right so you know which one's you're meant to sing and which one's you're not?

AHMED:

Mmm.

In contrast, the Community school did not engender such a strong feeling of community and togetherness, as comparative use of religious rituals would not have been appropriate in that context. However, the school's emphasis on inclusion as part of its school ethos did mean that children could take part in the majority of events and rituals, unlike in the Catholic school. A good example of this was the school talent contest, and the Key Stage Two Christmas nativity, which although Christian in nature, was generic enough to allow children from other religions to take part (see diary extract below). The only exception was the Key Stage One Christmas nativity, because it was held in the local church and some Muslim parents, in particular, felt uncomfortable about their children attending a church.

The class went down to the hall for [the Key Stage Two Christmas performance], which was again, an all singing and dancing, costume-laden event. The set was in front of an enormous cross on the wall, covered in flags from different nationalities. The cast was multicultural and the choir and narrators certainly had children from minority religions amongst them, including Muslims and Sikhs (Research Diary Extract, Community School).

Although embodied rituals helped to develop a cohesive community and a feeling of togetherness, they also had the power to exclude when they were grounded in a particular religious faith. The resultant community dynamics in my study schools were significant for

making sense of the way that both schools engaged with their surrounding neighbourhood localities and the implications for building social cohesion on a wider scale. It is to this issue that I turn in the next section.

Wider Communities

Although writers such as Wellman & Leighton (1979), Castells (1996) and Smith (1999) have adopted definitions of community that emphasise common interests and networks over neighbourhood and territory, Larsen et al. (2006) argue that social relationships are still formed and constituted by embodied practices. Real life encounters and pre-existing social connections and traditions are often much more important than digital communication technologies for developing communities (May 2002). Such arguments encourage a re-engagement with the actual physical meetings and practices that take place to develop social collectives, many of which occur within and around neighbourhood institutions. For example, Witten et al. (2003) point to the role that schools play in developing and maintaining social and community networks within their localities.

Both of the schools in my research did engage with their local neighbourhood communities to a certain extent, through events and community outreach projects. Even if merely acting as loci for local social networks, the embodied practices and meetings that occurred within and around the schools were important for contributing to the development of a wider community. Acts of engagement with the local neighbourhood community included taking children to distribute food to the needy at Harvest festival and organising pupils to entertain elderly people at a nearby venue. The study schools also offered breakfast and after-school clubs to local families, invited parents in to school events, and contributed to local festivals and projects. In one of the parent interviews at the Community school, Mona explained some of the other ways in which the school engaged with the local neighbourhood community.

> *INTERVIEWER:*
> *In your knowledge, is the school active in the local community?*
> *MONA (Asian Muslim Mother, Community School):*
> *Yeah I mean I guess so, because, though I've not done anything it that area, I*
> *know that Sure Start, I've seen a few mothers carry the stair guards […].*

INTERVIEWER:

Oh right.

MONA:

They were being dispensed here at school for mothers, very inexpensive ones, so very affordable for mothers and I think it means a lot.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh so to stop the children, those guards to stop smaller children going down the stairs?

MONA:

Yes those ones were being sold. And also I think every Monday they have fruit and vegetables that are sold on the campus at reasonable prices for people who can't afford to go to the supermarkets…

The type of community present within each school was also important for making sense of the relationship between the institutions and their wider religious communities. The Community school had some informal links with the local Anglican Church and the vicar occasionally took assemblies in school but there were no formal ties with the Anglican community. In contrast, the Catholic priest from the local parish took a central role in services and events at the Catholic school, and parishioners would attend class services and Masses, as well as other religious events in the school building. The Community school was therefore able to focus more on providing for the surrounding neighbourhood community, where as the Catholic school focused more on providing for the local Catholic community. The links with the Catholic school and parish tended to result in more parental involvement than in the Community school, but often engaged Catholic parents more because of their religious character.

INTERVIEWER:

What would you say the school's role is in the local community?

HEADTEACHER (Female Catholic, Catholic School):

[…] We definitely need to be more a part of the parishes that we serve. So we do through sacramental preparation, that sort of thing, get involved in the parishes, we do have services that the parishioners come in and spend time with us, so we need to be seen as part of the parish community and active members of the parish community. We have, we do collections at Christmas,

sorry at Harvest that we give, go round to the local community, it's picked up by the church people and they pack it up and take it round to the needy in the community. […] One of the things we are doing at the moment, I've put in a bid to the national lottery to develop a peace garden, which would be built on that side of the school, and we hope to invite lots of groups, other faith groups to use it, because it will be designed for small meetings and prayer groups and that sort of thing, reflection. So we're starting to sort of branch out into the community, but it's quite difficult because we're next to the community school…

In summary, although both of the schools were in the business of engaging with their local communities, the ways in which they did this were very different. The type of communities that existed within the institutions themselves also closely reflected the kind of relationship that they maintained with their wider localities. These differences had important implications for concerns about social cohesion between different ethnic and religious groups and these will be explored in the conclusion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the processes that took place within two particular primary schools to promote a sense of community and belonging. This feeling of togetherness was achieved through the repetition of embodied rituals, routines, practices and events and occurred in a non-religious sense in both of the schools. However, the Catholic school was also able to draw on a wide range of religious rituals for community building, leading to a more tightly knit but less inclusive collective, particularly for those children who were from minority religious backgrounds. In contrast, the Community school took a much more inclusive approach that, because of the fewer rituals used, resulted in a slightly weaker sense of togetherness. This pattern was repeated through the ways in which both schools engaged with their wider communities. The Catholic school focused more exclusively on the local parish community, where as the Community school had more of an inclusive responsibility towards the neighbourhood community. These processes again highlighted the importance of embodied meetings and practices for making sense of the concept of community.

These findings have important implications for the social cohesion debate introduced at the start of the chapter. The British Government currently remains committed to the role of religion within the education system and is keen to stress the place of faith-based schools in promoting social cohesion between different ethnic and religious groups (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007). While it is certainly the case that some faith schools may be able to work towards developing social cohesion, for example through the encouragement of positive encounters between children from different backgrounds (Hemming, 2011, in press), this research has shown that religion also has the potential to exclude. In both institutional space and the wider locality, the Catholic school in my study was much better placed to facilitate a sense of belonging amongst members of the Catholic community than forge networks and connections between members of different communities. Put another way, the Catholic school was better at bonding social capital than bridging social capital (Flint, 2007; Putnam, 2000).

By this, I do not wish to suggest that faith-based schools necessarily work against the development of social cohesion, as I have shown evidence to the contrary elsewhere (Hemming, 2011, in press). The nature of the qualitative case-study approach in this study means that it is not possible to make generalisations about faith schools or community schools and the enormous diversity in the state school sector also militates against drawing conclusions of this kind (Jackson, 2003). However, what this study does show is that a naïve assumption that faith schools are good for promoting social cohesion, as current Government rhetoric appears to suggest, may well be misplaced. The situation is certainly much more nuanced than this and more research is urgently required to unravel some of this complexity.

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