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Teaching and Learning about Community Cohesion: UK Perspectives

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Introduction

In my contribution, I will contextualise community cohesion in relation to schools and education policies in England. In particular I will focus on our project work at the University of Nottingham's School of Education and how the contact between students at Nottingham and KIE has helped both participating students and lecturers to think more about the whole area genocide education and through this the promotion of community cohesion.

I have taught in UK schools for 13 years and have worked for the past 10 years in universities working in the area of initial teacher education with a research interest in Holocaust education. I work in the UNESCO centre for comparative education.

My starting point is a basic one: in many parts of the world education and politics go hand in hand – the UK is no different and certainly over the last 30 years there has been a politicisation of education in ways that we have not previously seen which I want to describe in somewhat more detail briefly.

Politics and Education

In the 1980s, Thatcher was a world renown British prime minister and she is often talked of in terms of revolutionising Britain. At the heart of this was a key emphasis on the individual and having people less dependent on the state. She famously said in the 1980s:

'There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families.'

Indeed, during her time in office Thatcher's policies had a massive effect on communities throughout the country and the ways that people saw their fellow human beings. Thatcher's thinking can probably be best summed up by the following quote by herself:

'No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.'



Britain was doing very well in terms of economic developments, but you could ask whether we were a happy society and at ease with ourselves. This has led us to a situation today with David Cameron, the current leader of the Conservative Party in Britain talking about the need of 'broken British society' to be mended. He describes this as the biggest challenge facing the UK. In the same vein, he refers to the current situation of high crime rates, drug abuse and teenage pregnancies and says that there was 'something "deeply wrong" and "long-term generational change" was needed.'

One could add to this picture of Britain being a dislocated society. Some might also argue that there is a religious divide in Britain which is also reflected in Islamophobia, links to Muslim fundamentalist terrorism and parts of British cities effectively considered to be ghettos.

Some commentators would also claim that there is also an ongoing and deepening class divide. For example, you will find people homeless on the streets of most of our major cities, whilst there has been a culture of extreme wealth at the same time. You could also argue that there is a generation problem with increasing lifestyle differences and perhaps a growing divide between the old and the young which could be illustrated in its most extreme form by old people being attacked by some disaffected and disturbed youths. You could add to this that there is a job culture on the streets of Britain's cities and that there are increasing levels of drug abuse among young people.

On the political spectrum, there is also a growth of a political far right party in the UK, the British National Party (BNP), which is reflected in their recent election successes.

I realise that I am caricaturing the extremes of British society to a certain extent and I would want to stress that to a very large extent Britain remains a 'green and pleasant' land in which to live. However, politicians have realised – as Caeron's words suggest - that there is a need to fix British society. One of the key strands in this re-working of British society is education. Tony Blair came to power in 1997 saying that his government would focus on 'Education, education, education' and so there have been a range of strategies introduced in schools to try and deal with this fragmentation of society.

Education and the Citizenship curriculum

One way that the government began to tackle these social problems referred to earlier was through the introduction of a citizenship curriculum.

I will only provide a very short overview of the citizenship curriculum. It was introduced in September 2002 into secondary schools. Schools are required to deliver citizenship education through discrete lessons or through subjects or a combination of both. There



are problems in relation to who decides what is good citizenship education. Also, schools were not sure how to deliver the curriculum and there were no specialist trained teachers. At the same time, as *The Guardian* newspaper reported on 28th September 2007 Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education), the government's education watchdog, has warned that schools are failing to ensure their pupils are politically and socially literate despite the government's determination to make citizenship lessons a key weapon in the fight against extremism.

Education for Community Cohesion

Since September 2007, there is also an official duty of schools to promote Community Cohesion'

... we passionately believe that it is the duty of all schools to address issues of "how we live together" and "dealing with difference" however controversial and difficult they sometimes seem'
(The Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review - February 2007)

In the Department for Children, Schools and Families' *Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion* (DCFS, 2007), the authors refer to Alan Johnson, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, speaking on the topic of community cohesion in parliament on 2 November 2006 as follows:

By community cohesion, we mean working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and [...] circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.

In the same guidance document, the authors state that:

Every school – whatever its intake and wherever it is located – is responsible for educating young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of cultures, religions or beliefs, ethnicities, and social backgrounds.
(DCFS, 2007: 1)

[...] schools will need to consider how to give their pupils the opportunity to mix with and learn with, from and about those from different religious backgrounds [...].
(DCFS, 2007: 1)

Through their ethos and curriculum schools can promote discussions of a common sense of identity and support diversity, showing pupils how different communities can be united by shared values and common experiences.
(DCFS, 2007: 1)



I believe these quotes illustrate how the notions of community, community cohesion and education for community cohesion are considered to be vital for the Education Ministry in the UK. I will now focus further on schools in relation to community cohesion.

Community from a school's perspective

The school community is about the children and young people it serves, their parents, carers and families. The school community also includes the people who work in the school – the teachers, the governing body of the school and the community users of the school facilities and services.

I would suggest that for schools, the term community has a number of dimensions including:

- The school community
- The community within which the school is located
- The UK community
- The global community

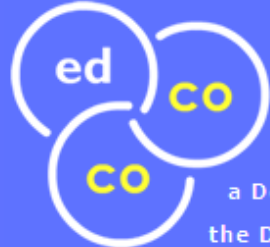
This understanding of the school community also brings with it a number of challenges. And of course, it raises questions about how to deal with community cohesion in ethnically mixed schools which reflect the community they are located in.

Teacher training for promoting community cohesion and Genocide Education

Taking into account the social and political contexts in the UK, it is clear that we need teachers who can implement these policies and develop effective strategies and pedagogies. In my view, this also requires training teachers who are not afraid to teach about and explore sensitive and controversial topics in their classrooms with their pupils.

I would consider Genocide Education to be closely linked to education for community cohesion, independent of the differing contexts that we are located in. Key questions for teachers to consider in genocide education are:

- What can we and do we want to show school students?
- What resources can we use?
- What pedagogies do we need to develop?
- At what age should we teach about genocide?
- How do we deal with differences in individual students and groups of students?
- How do we address issues concerning extreme violence as a result of genocide?
- How do we represent the victims' perspectives?
- How do we deal with the roles of perpetrators?
- How do we keep and make the topic relevant for our school students without becoming accusatory?
- How do we explore historical and moral perspectives of genocide?



- How do we empower school students to relate their learning about genocide to personal actions and ethical responsibilities and roles in their daily lives?
- How can we develop participatory approaches to genocide education?
- What are the key points that we need to start developing as part of teacher training for genocide education and promoting community cohesion?
- How can genocide education support and build community cohesion?
- Which genocides do we teach about?

Obviously, many of these questions have been discussed in the Holocaust Education literature (see for example: Abram, 1998; Adorno, 1966; Ben-Peretz, 2003; Brown, 1998; Brown & Davies, 1998; Carrington & Short, 1997; Davies, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2006; Davies, Gregory et al, 1999; Goldberg, 1996; Gregory, 2000a, 2000b; Salmons, 1998; Schweber, 2004; Short, 1991, 1994, 2000). I do not have any final answers to these questions yet, but would consider them as contributing to our learning and training processes. The international and comparative angle of our joint project also allows us as a team of teacher trainers and as groups of UK and Rwandan teacher trainees to explore how, through dialogue and sharing ideas about pedagogies and exchanging resources and looking at good practice, we can develop the teaching about genocides, so that it does have a positive outcome in terms of thinking about communities and the many aspects that should bind us all together. Finally, I want to conclude my paper with presenting briefly some preliminary findings as we come to the end of Project Year 1.

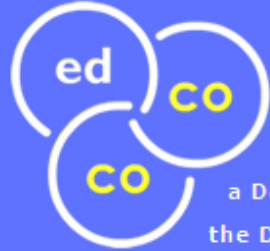
Conclusions: Some early project findings and Reflections at the end of Year 1

I will present some very initial findings based on students' Moodle interactions. We are only at the very beginning of this data analysis, but we wanted to share these initial findings with you to hear your views and suggestions for developing both our data analysis, but also our project activities further.

As part of the first activity for students we asked students to comment on why they wanted to be teachers. There was a wide range of responses, but I would like to point first of all to a more general comment made by one of the Rwandan teachers in relation to teacher roles when teaching for community cohesion and about genocide. This student writes on the Moodle website:

'S/he who does not know where s/he comes from cannot know where s/he is going.'

I think this quote summarizes powerfully why education for community cohesion and genocide education must go together. Students and teachers need to understand their past in order to build a better future for themselves and their communities. More



specifically, in relation to teacher roles, a preliminary data analysis reveals that there are more similarities than differences between UK and Rwandan teachers' views.

One difference between Rwandan students and UK students that seems to be emerging is that Rwandan teachers focus less on the role of History teaching per se, but when they mention history teaching it is considered as important as a means for development of peace and development. Rwandan students also tend to consider their role in more general and more political terms. However, these are differences in focus, they are not fundamental.

There are also a range of similarities for both Rwandan and UK students. For example, both groups of students refer to the desire to have a positive impact on people's lives, making a contribution to society, their passion for the subject of History, general skills that school students can get from learning about history such as critical thinking and analytical skills.

Both groups of students comment more generally on the function of education. For example, one of the the UK students writes:

'I want to be a teacher because I believe that all young people, regardless of social class, religion, race, gender or physical ability should have equal access to an enjoyable, rewarding education. I believe that education is the most important factor in determining an individual's position in society and a good education can equip a person to face the constant challenges that life presents. Education also prompts people to question all aspects of their lives and beliefs, which should prevent them from becoming bigoted or intolerant.'

This student clearly subscribes to a view of education as a positive force for (self-) development. I would like to complement this statement with a more critical view from a Rwandan student who writes as follows:

'School is a good channel for transmission of ideologies – whether good ones or bad ones.'

I would agree with both students, but I think it is particularly important to be aware of the potentially positive or negative role of schools and teachers. And whilst the UK student has a very noble and admirable view, it is important also to point at the potential dangers of education and the potential for misuse of education as phrased so well by the Rwandan student. I invite you to comment on these quotes in the Q&A session at the end of this presentation.

In the 2nd Moodle activity, we asked students to comment on why they should teach about genocide. In their answers, all students referred to historical and moral/ethical



reasons for teaching about genocide (which related very much to the points made by George Njoroge at this conference). However, particularly Rwandan students were more critical in the sense that they referred to the outcomes or lack of success of genocide and Holocaust Education. For example, one student raises the question:

‘How can you explain that Jewish extermination strategies are still persisting among youth in Europe?’

This is an important question to raise, and of course, one could argue that there have been successes in Genocide Education and Holocaust Education with education contributing to the building of a largely peaceful and stable Western Europe after World War 2. However, the question raised by this student remains valid.

All students thought teaching about genocide is important. As mentioned before students seem to agree generally about reasons for teaching about genocide when they refer to historical and moral/ethical reasons to teach about genocide. Moral and ethical reasons for teaching about genocide are addressed from a wide range of perspectives including personal, social, political and religious angles. One additional aspect is mentioned in particular by some Rwandan students: They repeatedly refer to feeling ‘confusion’. Our preliminary analysis seems to reveal that Rwandan teacher trainees in their schools contexts can experience a confused understanding of genocide amongst school students, but they also refer to their own confusion as teacher trainees about how to go about it and whether it is effective.

As the previous quote from a Rwandan student illustrates our findings to date suggest that there is a need to look at impact of what we do as teachers and teacher educators. We need to ask ourselves critically how effective we are as teachers and teacher trainers, how we can support and develop deep learning as opposed to superficial learning processes.

Some UK students also commented on the difficulties of teaching about the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. For example, one UK student wrote:

‘It is impossible to understand the Rwandan genocide without a knowledge about the ethnic groups within the country and their history. Yet to draw attention to these issues has the risk of creating divisionism amongst students which makes such lessons difficult for teachers. I believe that by emphasising the horror of such actions and the common humanity of people over religious, ethnic and cultural divisions, the topic can allow teachers to help foster a sense of unity rather than division.’

I would suggest that this statement offers a starting point for discussions about the complexities involved when teaching about genocide. It is also vital to explore what the really difficult issues are that new (and not so new) Rwandan teachers face in their classrooms when teaching about the genocide and how we can support them to deal with them. I also want to mention that there is widespread disagreement amongst Rwandan



project participants about the right age to teach about genocide. This was also discussed by UK students, but less categorically so.

Finally, I want to conclude with pointing at an important finding from our preliminary Moodle analysis. Both Rwandan and UK students raised the question whether they should focus on victims or perpetrators of genocide. I would suggest that it is important to do both, but am also aware that this needs to be done especially carefully and in a non-accusatory manner in Rwandan classrooms where potentially children of victims and perpetrators are learning together.

I hope that today's conference will contribute to explore further similarities and differences and to start developing pedagogies for supporting the building of community cohesion and related genocide education.



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