

Citizenship education, communities and multiculturalism

By Audrey Osler

Education and Community

Since 2001, there have been various claims that multiculturalism has failed in Britain, from both the left and right.



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Schooling has long played a key role in shaping attitudes towards the nation. By setting education policies alongside differing discourses on multiculturalism, we can better understand the meanings attached to citizenship and community in Conservative and Labour thinking and policy-making.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government attaches particular importance to the role of communities in guaranteeing the nation's well-being. It draws on Prime Minister Cameron's concept of the Big Society to encapsulate its key ideas.

At first sight there appears to be a degree of policy continuity with the community cohesion agenda pursued by the previous New Labour government. However, a closer examination of the discourses and policies adopted by Prime Minister David Cameron and his predecessors Tony Blair and Gordon Brown also reveals some significant differences in their government's approaches to citizenship and belonging.

Citizenship education became an entitlement in 2002 under New Labour. It initially commanded broad political consensus, since it built upon an earlier 1990 Conservative initiative. Citizenship education also attracted the support of teachers, since with its emphasis on political literacy, social and moral responsibility and community involvement, it permits a degree of freedom in curriculum planning and allows students to focus on the local community and to engage in learning through activities beyond the classroom.

The citizenship curriculum's foundational document, the Crick report, acknowledged the long-standing diversity of the UK and its constituent nations, but avoided debate about other forms of diversity, with only a passing reference to the multicultural nature of Britain. It thus failed to discuss unity and diversity in a multicultural democracy. Instead Crick stressed the overarching notion of community.

From this departure point, citizenship education became part of a wider New Labour project addressing community

cohesion. In the summer of 2001, one report identified a virtual apartheid in the northern city of Bradford while another, which examined violent disturbances in a number of northern towns, claimed that distinct religious and ethnic communities were living parallel lives and failing to develop social bonds. Following the 9/11 attacks, and again after the July 2005 London bombings, education came under greater public scrutiny. Were schools preparing young people to live together in a multicultural society?

The Labour government defined community cohesion as the development of a common vision among all communities; valuing people's diverse backgrounds; making available similar life opportunities to all; and sustaining and developing strong and positive relationships in schools and communities. Special funds were made available to support projects bringing people together from different backgrounds. Official guidance advocated school-linking, nationally and internationally, so that students would develop a better understanding of other cultures. Despite these initiatives, cohesion policies existed without reference to on-going inequalities in educational outcomes, as reflected in systematic differences in school exclusion rates and examination results between ethnic groups. The focus was on celebrating diversity, not on exploring power relations or inequalities.

It was really only after the 2005 London bombings that political interest developed in teaching about ethnic diversity as part of citizenship education. The Ajegbo review of the citizenship curriculum was commissioned, in direct response to official concerns about terrorism and a desire to promote Britishness, shared values and patriotism, through citizenship teaching.



Vision. David Blunkett, Education Secretary in Tony Blair's first government, introduced Citizenship as a statutory subject in school. Crown copyright © The Home Office

Ajegbo's recommendation of a new strand on "identity and diversity; living together in the UK" was adopted in the revised 2009 curriculum, which linked citizenship education more closely to history and the promotion of a strong British national identity. Following long-established patterns, minorities were linked in this discourse to social instability, separation and, in the case of British Muslims, to the new threat of international terrorism. By focusing on citizenship as the vehicle by which race equality in schools might be promoted, the government avoided introducing concrete measures to address racial justice in educational outcomes across all ethnic groups

In this respect the curriculum built on Crick, assuming minorities need to learn how "we" behave and understand "our" way of doing things. Integration was presented as a one-way process. Relatively weak messages about an inclusive British identity, promoted through the curriculum, contrast with negative portrayals of migrants from both media and government relating to immigration, naturalisation and asylum and with equally negative portrayal of British Muslim populations.

The 2009 curriculum builds on an approach advocated by Gordon Brown in 2006, emphasising Britishness, patriotism and British history. Brown referred to a loss of national confidence, coinciding with the end of empire, claiming:

"To address almost everyone of the major challenges facing our country – [including], of course, our community relations and multiculturalism and, since July 7th, the balance between diversity and integration ... even the shape of our public services - you must have a clear view of what being British means, what you value about being British and what gives us purpose as a nation."

Moreover, Brown expressed concerns about diversity and integration, linking these to terrorism and the July 2005 London bombings. His rhetoric called for unquestioning national loyalty and the teaching of British history as a grand march forward to liberty and democracy. In so doing, it overlooked the need for critical thinking in the history classroom.

Since 2010, with the formation a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the school curriculum is under review, and it is not clear at the time of writing whether citizenship education will remain compulsory. This seems ironic, given Cameron's focus on the Big Society and his emphasis on community initiatives which are intended to replace cuts in local government services.

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Cameron's critique of multiculturalism seems directly related to the Conservative desire to reduce the role of the state and promote small government. First in 2008 and then again in 2011, Cameron attacked "state multiculturalism", claiming it undermines community. He claimed that initiatives to promote multiculturalism divide people by ethnicity. He thus ignored the reality that Britain has never had extensive state-sponsored multicultural policies, such as exist in Canada, which require that society's structures and institutions accommodate different groups on the basis of equality.

There is an interesting prelude for today's debate from 2006, when, towards the end of his premiership, Blair reasserted the importance of multiculturalism in education after other leading Labour ministers claimed that multiculturalism had gone too far. Blair did not address racism and discrimination embodied in institutions. However, he did state the importance of multicultural understanding as a basis of society.

Today, the political initiative has changed hands to the other side of the political spectrum. Across Europe, there is a developing discourse that multiculturalism has been a failure. Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed that multiculturalism in Germany has "failed utterly" despite the lack of evidence that Germany has introduced significant multicultural policies. My response to Mrs Merkel and to Mr Cameron is that what hasn't been tried cannot be said to have failed.

Education represents one area where multicultural policies are indeed assumed to have been applied. Schools in England have for several decades accommodated moderate adaptations of school uniform in order to respond to students' religious beliefs. The hijab, banned from French schools in 2004, has long been accommodated in schools in England as well as into the uniforms of the UK police and military. But allowing for restrictive religious practices is not conducive to a multicultural outlook. Moreover, comprehensive multicultural education policies addressing institutionalised inequality and exclusion have not been supported by any UK government. It was only in specific local authorities that multicultural curriculum policies were introduced and these were short-lived. The multicultural project was piecemeal and incomplete. Despite this, education remains an on-going site of struggle in shaping the future social and political nature of

British society.

Existing inner-city regeneration projects depend on partnerships between government, voluntary organisations and community members, rather than leaving community members to go it alone. The rhetoric of the Conservative-dominated coalition government includes the central idea of fairness. Minimally, fairness necessarily acknowledges that each individual is entitled to equal dignity and equal rights. Yet Conservative rhetoric suggests that some are deserving, while others are not. Cuts in services hit poorer communities harder than more affluent ones.

The coalition government plans to introduce a series of measures which ignore the research evidence. These reveal that in the Big Society, fairness will not necessarily be extended to children. The most severe punishment a child can experience is to be excluded from school.

There is a decades-old pattern of black students being over-represented amongst the excluded. Most permanently excluded children never return to full-time mainstream schools. Exclusion moves a child's problems from the school into the community and sometimes, literally, onto the streets. It is too frequently the first step on a path leading to prison. Yet most excluded children are not dangerous, violent or abusive, as might be assumed, but are punished for "persistent disruptive behaviour". This category is based on subjective judgements and covers a wide range of misdemeanours. The 2011 Education Bill proposes to retain the right of an excluded student to appeal against an unfair decision, but remove the right of reinstatement, regardless of any injustice which has occurred.

There has been little official recognition that a sustainable and cohesive society is directly related to a sense of belonging predicated on equal access to educational goods. Efforts to promote the Big Society which ignore the material disadvantages of specific groups, deep institutional inequalities between learners, and a continuing attainment gap between different ethnic groups are, at best, compromised. At worst, they breed cynicism and disengagement. Failure across the political spectrum to discuss endemic racism and disadvantage within schooling compounds these problems.

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The coalition's curriculum proposals suggest that a rejection of "state multiculturalism" might mean in practice. Education Secretary Michael Gove has criticised the "passing political fads" of the school curriculum. We can only guess precisely what he means. However, it seems unlikely that the proposed

slimmed-down national curriculum will include global understanding or the study of identity and diversity in a multicultural society. For Mr Gove, Black History Month and Holocaust Memorial Day may well be passing political fads. Such initiatives remain important, precisely because the areas they address are not yet fully embedded in the curriculum.

As I have argued elsewhere, citizenship education implies a critical understanding of the individual's experience and position in society, in structures and processes of change. It implies empowering young people to engage in a wider struggle of realising human rights for all.

Since we live in a multicultural society, it cannot be asserted that multiculturalism has failed. What is needed is an understanding of multiculturalism founded in policies which enable all to participate in and engage with society and its institution on the basis of equality. Only when learners are equipped to transform society can it be asserted that citizenship education has the potential to support social cohesion. And only when this ambition is realised will it be evident that young people are fully prepared to participate in the Big Society.



The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, visiting Durand Academy with Education Secretary Michael Gove, 24 Nov 2010. Crown copyright © The Cabinet Office