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Exploring Citizenship and Community in Education in England

Introduction

‘Community’ and ‘citizenship’ are centrally important means by which we characterise society and establish mechanisms for societal improvement. Whereas the previous chapter was deliberately broad-brush in its efforts to identify key issues that apply across countries, this chapter synthesises what empirical data principally (but not exclusively) from England suggest about young people’s sense of, involvement in, and barriers to, community with reference to what schools can do to promote understanding and participation.

The issue of community is clearly of central significance for policymakers and academics (e.g. Giddens 1991, 1994). Blair (1997–2007), Brown (2007–2010) and Cameron (2010–present) as UK prime ministers have all asserted the primacy of community, and it has for many decades been regarded as a vitally important matter for schools. The work of Henry Morris in relation to Cambridgeshire Village Colleges (Rée 1973), the establishment of the Leicestershire community comprehensives (including high-profile schools such as Countesthorpe), and the focus in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Midwinter 1973) of schools such as Abraham Moss Community School in Manchester all attest to the emphasis on community. Although many authors have discussed the complexity of community and its attendant controversies (e.g. Heater 1999) – and so there is recognition that it is not a panacea for social problems – this emphasis on community and expectations of schools in relation to it is unlikely to change in the future. As such it is important to consider what research evidence we

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have about the sorts of engagement that are occurring, who is taking part and why they do so, how might engagement be encouraged and what can schools do to contribute to that process.

Parameters for this narrative synthesis were based on a systematic literature strategy focusing principally on empirical studies but also including outcomes of scholarship and policy initiatives principally published in English since roughly the end of the 1990s (to include the publication of the Crick Report, QCA 1998) to 2011, for students aged 11–18 in England (but not excluding reflection on other contexts), with key word searching (‘community cohesion’, ‘citizenship’, ‘citizenship education’ and ‘youth community engagement’) of databases (e.g. British Education Index (BEI), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), PsycINFO, Social Policy and Practice, CERUKplus) and with some flexibility for the inclusion of other relevant work. Searches were undertaken principally in January and February 2011. We structured our lines of narrative and synthesis around the lines of enquiry outlined below.

What is ‘community’? Does the literature tell us much about how young people define ‘community’?

There is no unanimously accepted definition of community cohesion despite – or, perhaps because of – it being a long-standing focus of government policy over many decades. While there are many non-empirically based publications about young people and community engagement, there is only a relatively limited amount of research that explores the perceptions of young people.

In England the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF 2007) provided an official definition which seems still to be broadly accepted:

[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. (p.3)