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Title

Community cohesion in post-16 education : principles and practice

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Abstract

Background: This paper is the product of a two year investigation into the contribution of post-16 education to community cohesion. The investigation took place between 2010 and 2012 and was funded by the University Centre at Blackburn College in England. Fieldwork was undertaken in three East Lancashire colleges and focused on students aged between 16 and 19 years. Purpose: The aims of the paper are to identify the nature of community cohesion initiatives in East Lancashire?s post-16 sector and to establish the extent to which these initiatives are successful in uniting students from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The paper discusses student attitudes towards community cohesion and the role of further education colleges in shaping these attitudes.m Sample: The data were collected from nine in-depth interviews with college lecturers and managers and from a questionnaire survey of 355 students. The research was conducted in two further education colleges and a Roman Catholic sixth form college. All three colleges were overwhelmingly dual-ethnic, with white and Asian students making up the majority of the college populations. Design and methods:

The methods used throughout the investigation were threefold: (1) a review of the literature on the role of further education colleges as agents of community cohesion, (2) nine semi-structured interviews with college lecturers and managers, and (3) a closed-response questionnaire distributed to 355 further education students.Results: (1) While all three colleges referred to community cohesion in their policy documents, there was an absence of explicit community cohesion strategies. (2) Although there was clear evidence of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in the three colleges, there was significant variation in cohesion initiatives. Most students, however, recognised the importance of cohesion and felt that, at the macro level, their colleges operated in an inclusive and cohesive manner. (3) At the more micro level, divisions between students were pronounced, evidenced by very little cross-cultural mixing either in or outside classrooms. (4) While over 50% of the survey respondents were unable to offer examples of cohesion initiatives in which they had been involved, around 45% stated that they had learnt about issues such as equality, diversity and integration during their time at college and that this had had a positive effect on their attitudes. Conclusions: The findings both support and refute the contention that further education colleges can make a worthy contribution to community cohesion. For the most part, levels of cohesion are contingent on recruitment of students from different backgrounds and on the ability of teachers and lecturers to impart positive messages about integration and social unity. At the same time, the investigation exposes a dissonance between the value that students claim to place on community cohesion and their ability and/or desire to bring this cohesion about. These conclusions have important implications for pedagogy and for the professional development of those employed in the post-16 sector..(HRK / Abstract übernommen)