

The Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion
Written Evidence Submitted by Dr Emily Murphy (Newcastle University) and Dr Lindsey Cameron
(University of Kent) on behalf of the Beyond School Gates research team

Key Questions

- **What interventions promote building community, community cohesion, community strength and shared stories?**
- **What role should the Government play in building community, cohesion, community strength and shared stories?**
- **Looking to the future: How might national and local bodies and government policy better respond to barriers to stronger community**

Who We Are?

We are an interdisciplinary team of academic researchers from six universities across the UK. We apply our diverse expertise to answer the following question: **How do children contribute to local community cohesion?** In this submission of evidence, we present findings from the 'Beyond School Gates' project, a two-year research project funded by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation as part of their Understanding Communities programme. 'Beyond School Gates' (www.beyondschoolgates.org) provides new insights into the precise routes through which children contribute to community cohesion, through their social networks, their experiences and their developing social cognitions, and how this contribution can be enabled by schools, parents/carers and public spaces.

Our research from this project directly informs the call for written evidence on community cohesion, providing new evidence relating to:

- How young people define community cohesion and strong communities
- Children's contribution to community connectedness, cohesion and resilience.
- What children say about barriers to community cohesion
- Policy and practical interventions that could amplify young people's contributions to community cohesion

What Did We Do?

We partnered with twelve schools in three towns in the Northwest of England: Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and Preston to assess children's contributions to community cohesion. Our study included surveys of 444 children aged 9-11 and 181 parents/carers, interviews with 109 children, and 230 pieces of creative work by children as a way of understanding experiences of community cohesion. We included interviews with 57 local stakeholders to better understand how they conceptualise children's contributions to community integration in the context of local council initiatives, community groups, and schools. Currently, we are also working with three of the original schools who participated in our research to develop a co-created animation with children, which reflects their stories about belonging within their communities.

Key findings

1. Children between ages 5-12 are a major, yet significantly underrepresented, group that contribute to community cohesion.
2. **School is a key site of social mixing within communities**, where children form diverse friendship groups, and expose members of their larger social networks (e.g. parents and carers) to these diverse groups, strengthening community bonds.
3. **Schools are a site of social mixing for parents**, providing safe, meaningful opportunities for parents to connect with others from diverse backgrounds.
4. **Safe, free, public areas, such as parks, and children's clubs** support social mixing and are essential for community cohesion.
5. Policymakers and stakeholders lack a 'clear vision' for working with children ages 5-12, despite significant evidence of the major role children play in supporting community cohesion.
6. The role of schools as a community hub is not sufficiently acknowledged by the Department for Education, nor are their sufficient resources for schools to carry out this work.

What are children saying about community cohesion?

When asked about what makes them feel connected or like they belong to their local community, children identified several key factors:

1. Parents Matter
2. Schools Matter
3. Public Spaces Matter

Parents Matter

How children perceive their parents' views of other members of the community shape their willingness to develop friendship groups across difference, especially outside of

school. Children's friendship networks across difference are shaped by their parents'/carers' beliefs and values. Children will hesitate to mix beyond their familiar social networks if they believe their parents will not approve. Children also shape their parents'/carer's interactions with community members based on their hobbies/interests. In one interview, for example, a boy described how his dad developed a friendship with his friend's dad after the boy joined the local football club. This prompted the child's dad to join the club as a coach and enabled the two fathers to become friends. In surveys, one child explained how parents being friends helped to deepen friendships, as this gave the children more opportunities to meet and play with each other. The reciprocal relationship between children's friendship networks and activities and those of their parents'/carers' is therefore vital to understand when thinking about issues related to community cohesion.

Schools Matter

Schools are a fundamental space for providing opportunities for community integration, often providing the only opportunity for social mixing for children. Schools have an important role to play in gaining trust from parents'/carers' who faced historical racism in the UK, particularly when those experiences took place in school. Knowledge of deeply rooted issues affecting trust relationships can remove some of the barriers to community cohesion work within schools. In this respect, community cohesion work that takes place in schools is vital, as it provides opportunities to invite parents/carers into school and rebuild these trust relationships, as well as provide children with a more positive experience that departs from historical narratives of community division (e.g. racism). Children seemed at ease with opportunities to engage in activities that support community cohesion in schools and spoke positively about school as a valued part of their community. In surveys, parents appreciated opportunities to socially mix in the school environment, citing pick up and drop off times as important moments for participating in this social mixing. More resources for schools to identify areas where they can strengthen discussions around difference and aid in trust building and students' sense of belonging (e.g. support for programmes that enable these discussions across difference such as the Schools Linking programme by The Linking Network).

Public Spaces Matter

Hyper-local public spaces that are welcoming provide alternatives to school for community cohesion. Children appreciate feeling like 'family' or that these spaces are a 'home' away from home. Children frequently mentioned free public spaces as important sites for making connections across difference, particularly in public parks and streets. Football clubs and places of worship also featured as important sites of belonging for many children in the local community. Parents trust hyper-local services and activities and access them more readily; these are sites of potential when it comes to community cohesion, as the perceptions of parents'/carers' shape children's access to these public spaces. Larger cultural events can also act as a focal point for community cohesion. In surveys, we found that parents/carers and children valued similar public spaces. For

example, they talked about the importance of having a ‘community feel’ with friendliness and safety mentioned as two key components that contributed to this feeling of connectedness. Both children and parents/carers also valued ‘quiet’ and ‘calm’ spaces, such as local parks, which not only provided spaces for supporting mental health but also provided opportunities to mix across difference.

What children are saying about barriers to community cohesion?

Children were clear about some of the barriers that made it harder for them to feel connected or like they belong to their local community. In order to remove these barriers, it is important to remember that:

1. Safety Matters
2. Culture Matters
3. Wellbeing Matters

Safety Matters

Parents/carers and children need to perceive community spaces as ‘safe’ in order to use them for social mixing. When it comes to fostering community cohesion, children were clear that any spaces designed to support local communities must be perceived as safe. In surveys and creative artwork submitted by the children participating in our research project, children repeatedly identified safety as one potential barrier to social mixing. In an interview, one child explained how his neighbourhood was not as safe, and therefore school and the local park next to it were the only places he was allowed to socially mix with his friends. Other children expressed a desire to engage in street play, but because their parents or carers did not see this as a safe place to play they were discouraged from doing so. As discussed in the section on public spaces, public parks and streets were common areas identified as places for children to socially mix across difference (e.g. culture) in ways that support community cohesion.

Culture Matters

Children’s sense of their cultural identity shapes how they connect to their local community and interpret their experiences of community cohesion. While children spoke positively about their culture, they were clear about the role this played in making them feel connected, particularly in cases where they had recently arrived to a town or to the UK as a whole. Children valued opportunities to spend time with those with similar cultural beliefs, as well as opportunities to share their culture with others. The resounding message here is that there needs to be a balance between efforts to support children in developing friendships and connections across difference and initiatives or programmes that enable children to mix in trusted or safe groups with those who share their cultural background. In interviews, children often expressed the fact that they valued having both types of friendship (i.e. friends who were similar and friends who were different), and did

not value one type of friendship more than the other. Non-secular ‘cultural’ spaces, such as football clubs, also featured as a key site for fostering community cohesion.

Wellbeing Matters

Children’s ability to form and sustain friendship groups across difference is shaped by the worries that affect their everyday lives. Children were candid about some of these worries, which included factors as diverse as bullying, illness, and home eviction. Children found welcome support in their friendship networks or relationships with trusted adults, which helped them to continue to embed themselves in their communities. It is significant that 50% of children interviewed about their creative artwork (see Beyond School Gates case study in [‘An Evidence-Based Approach to Creating a Culture of Inclusive Opportunity through Arts and Creativity’](#) from the Child of the North for more details) cited wellbeing as a critical factor that shaped their ‘journeys’ through their communities. We need to take these ‘troubled times’ (as children referred to them in these interviews) seriously to help strengthen local communities.

Policy and practical interventions to amplify young people’s contributions to community cohesion

- Support schools to be more diverse and, where this is not possible, invest in programmes that proactively support children and parents to connect with one another across difference (e.g. Schools Linking).
- Invest in schools as community hubs to help foster community cohesion.
- In the wider local infrastructure, support hyper-local community groups to connect with each other and foster cohesion across geographical divides.
- Invest in safe parks, and other outdoor play areas, close to children’s homes as a practical way to support children to contribute to community cohesion.
- Invest in local community groups, including youth groups and sports, that facilitate family connections across difference. Hyper-local provision to support connections across difference, that is welcoming, trusted and accessible, works best for engaging families.
- Community groups and services in the arts (e.g. libraries, theatres) can learn from the successes of football clubs in generating connection and belonging across children and families.

In addition to the above, careful consideration of ways to collaborate with children and young people when developing policy on community cohesion is essential. This includes:

- Strong narratives that provide context for understanding children’s stories about community cohesion: What do these stories mean to their young authors? What do they, in turn, reveal about issues of importance within the UK?
- Methods for preserving these stories and sharing them with a broader audience, and to do so in ways that give children the ability to shape these publicly shared narratives. **As one example, our team is currently working with three schools**

from the Beyond School Gates research to develop a co-created animation, with children having the opportunity to feedback on the script and storyboard for the animation, as well as agree on material to share in case studies for our project website.

- Schools also need to know how much creative activities that influence community cohesion matters, both for children and for impacting policy and practice that shapes children's lives. We found partnerships (like those through The Linking Network and the British Library) provide one means of doing this.

Our Research Team

Dr Mona Sakr (PI) is an Associated Professor in Education Studies/Early Childhood Studies at Middlesex University. Her research focuses on policy and practice in early childhood education, leadership and leadership development, creative and arts pedagogies, as well as digital pedagogies. She is currently leading an investigation on quality provision in the baby rooms (for children aged 0-2 years) in English nurseries as part of a project funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Dr Emily Murphy (Co-I) is a Senior Lecturer in Children's Literature at Newcastle University. She has published widely on the role of children's literature in shaping children's citizenship practices, including within educational settings. Her latest publication, co-produced with Dr. Helen King for a special issue in *Archives & Records*, underscores the historical role of English schools in forming inter-racial friendships among children and fostering a wider sense of social justice through the introduction of global events through school reading.

Dr Lindsey Cameron (Co-I) is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Psychology at the University of Kent. Her expertise is in children's social development and peer relations in diverse contexts. Using intergroup contact theory as a framework, her research focuses on uncovering the psychological levers for developing positive attitudes across lines of difference, and encouraging 'confidence in contact' (Turner & Cameron, 2016) through meaningful interactions. She collaborates with schools and charities (e.g. The Linking Network, One Globe Kids, the National Holocaust Centre & Museum) to develop and evaluate interventions to bring communities together, create new connections, and challenge stereotypes.

Dr Lorien Jasny (Co-I) is an Associate Professor of Computational Social Science at Exeter University. She investigates how social networks both enable and constrain communities and collective action.

Dr. Jocelyn Dautel (Co-I) is a Reader in the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast, a Fellow of the George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security, and Justice, and directs the Kids in Context Research Centre. Her research focuses on how children

and adolescents develop social cognition—navigating relationships, interpreting social information, and forming identities—using cross-cultural and mixed-methods approaches in diverse and divided societies. Jocelyn collaborates with schools, youth organizations, and cross-community initiatives to ensure her research addresses real-world challenges and supports local communities. She has secured over £1 million in funding to advance inclusive education, reduce inequalities, and promote peacebuilding worldwide.

Dr Charlotte Haberstroh (Co-I) is a Senior Lecturer in Education at King’s College London. She is a comparative social policy scholar by training and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Meg Henry (Co-I) is Co-Director of The Linking Network, an organisation that provides support and resources to local areas delivering schools linking and intergenerational linking programmes. The organisation also develops resources for the classroom to embed their work across the curriculum and focuses on helping schools support community cohesion through their programmes.

Additional members of the research team included Dr Helen King (Newcastle University), Dr Ronke Adeyoku (University of Kent), and Dr Magdalena Dujczynski (Middlesex University).

***Additional reports and case studies will be posted to our project website (www.beyondschoolgates.org) in Summer 2025**, which build on the advice set out in this statement of written evidence.