Taking Yourself Seriously – written evidence (CCE0144)

Contributors:
Kate Pahl, Professor and Principle Investigator of the ‘Taking Yourself Seriously’ Project, University of Sheffield

Zanib Rasool, Co-investigator and Chair of Rotherham independent hate crime scrutiny panel

Mike Fitter, Co-Chair of the City of Sheffield Cohesion advisory group and also on the management committee of ‘Whose Your Neighbour’ a voluntary organisation that promotes social cohesion across different divides.

Katy Goldstraw, Research Associate, Edge Hill University

Panni Loh, Member of the Critical Thinking Group for the ‘Taking Yourself Seriously’ Project.

Summary
The ‘Taking Yourself Seriously’ project is funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Connected Communities programme and runs from 2017-18. We are exploring artistic approaches to social cohesion in Rotherham and Sheffield, working with social cohesion community workers and artists from both areas. We use artistic methodologies to explore: the hidden histories of three generations of Muslim women; how young people can discover shared interests and passions through the arts; and the role of an adventure playground as a hub for social cohesion.

Key findings
1. History is important. People need to identify with their past in order to be responsible British citizens. Civic engagement and identity are tied to one’s history, roots, the journey of migration and things of value that migrants bring with them, their language, social practices, faith and way of being, they are all important to them.

2. Artistic approaches are important. These include approaches such as drawings, poetry, paintings and writing that open up a door to a different kind of lens, a different ‘way of knowing’ and articulating the voice of people often on the margins. Artists have a role to play in capturing events and moments in the lives of hidden communities through visual narratives, poetry and writing, and performing arts, so that we can understand better the everyday lived experience of different people. Artistic approaches allow us to consider our layered identities; they allow us to see the world through alternative lens, to view questions of identity in visual, poetic and narrativised ways that offer an alternative view of identity.

3. Dialogue and collective action are important. Society can support civic engagement by collective participatory action. Arts methodologies for social cohesion are complex, integrated and emotional. Arts methodologies empower the process of social cohesion through an alternative lens, they offer an opportunity to build dialogue and reflect alternative knowledges.

4. Social cohesion and integration do not mean the same thing. Much would be lost if we all became the same. When integration is advocated, what is frequently meant is assimilation:
“They need to learn to be more like us”. Integration means we (different social groups) bring different things to the table and we each change as a result of contact. We are strengthened by diversity and must be careful that integration does not mean assimilation.

5. **Lived values and valuing the unexpected are important.** A school or a workplace that values the diversity and the contribution of all those present, and welcomes the unexpected guest, because of what they might bring, can create and achieve and thrive. In schools and workplaces if there is a lack of diversity then a quest should be made to gain this exposure by external visits or invitations to seek the opportunity to be enriched by the experience of mixing with those different to us, to achieve social cohesion which would not necessarily mean integration.

6. **Shared values are linked to trust.** Trust and notions of shared belonging and identity are threatened when inequalities or perceived inequalities persist. Recognising and taking steps to rectify inequalities within society, creates opportunities for citizenship to be nurtured.

7. **Deprivation is a real threat.** The Sheffield Cohesion Strategic framework has a key principle: “cohesion is not threatened by diversity it is threatened by deprivation” (Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011). Deprivation is strongly linked to inequality, especially in times of austerity.

8. **Social cohesion involves co-production.** This also involves acknowledging a diversity of voices. Partnerships are at their most effective when all opposing voices at the table can be heard. There is a need to be diverse, to have conflicted conversations.

9. **Social cohesion is a process.** Building social cohesion involves spending time with people, face to face contact, having mentoring systems in place, working in partnership, listening to people, and acknowledging inequalities.

10. **Place is important, as is valuing where you live.** Framing communities within a variety of geographically anchored reference points offers an understanding of why communities feel ‘left behind.’ It does not help to describe communities as ‘deprived’; instead it is important to find out what people know.

11. **Citizenship, civic engagement and social cohesion, integration are linked concepts yet hold their own definitions.** Perhaps the link between citizenship, diversity and integration itself should be questioned. Our research suggests that valuing diversity, multiple and layered identities and complexity offers an alternative approach to integration. By embracing diversity and acknowledging peaceful conflicted ideologies, animated dialogue in schools and workplaces can be nurtured to recognise diversity and create a mosaic image of cohesive society.

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