The study explored the politics of Britishness in a large culturally diverse English secondary school. It examined the dominant view that social disharmony is connected with minority groups’ failure to assimilate with mainstream ‘British’ (read White/Anglo) culture. The study challenges narrow and racialised understandings of nationhood and strengthens the warrant for continued critical examination of how the politics of Britishness are playing out in schools.

KEY POINTS

1. In the UK unprecedented levels of diversity are linked with social disharmony and a lack of affiliation with ‘Britishness’.

2. Teachers at one culturally diverse school expressed this view despite the school being a socially cohesive and harmonious environment.

3. It is important to recognise and challenge the racialised assumptions that underpin some teachers’ constructions of Britishness.

4. An inspirational conception of Britishness will not focus on narrow ideas but rather on relations that foster social harmony.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

1. Assumptions about what constitutes or doesn’t constitute Britishness or national identity must be subject to ongoing critical examination.

2. These assumptions as they are taken up and played out in schools must be recognised and critically examined.

3. Schools must foster inclusive understandings of Britishness that embrace diversity and acknowledge multiple ways of connecting with British society.

4. Relations of positive citizenry in schools must be recognised as forms of Britishness that will lead to social cohesion.
THE RESEARCH

The research presented findings from a broader case study of ‘Hamilton Court’ – a large multicultural secondary school in England. This study showcased productive approaches to addressing issues of diversity and equity in schools and involved in-depth interviews with a small number of key personnel (who were responsible for equity) and students from a variety of year levels. During these interviews (which sought to explore the participants’ thoughts about: the school and its climate; staff and students; teachers and teaching; and aspects beyond the school), issues of Britishness and cultural diversity and their links with both supporting and undermining social cohesion became topics of conversation.

Unlike most schools in Britain, 90% of the students at Hamilton Court are of Black or ethnic minority background. Many of the students (approximately 40%) are of Indian heritage – identifying as Sikh (20%) or Hindu (25%) and a large proportion of students identify as Muslim (40%). The school is situated in a borough that has been at the forefront of debate about community disharmony amid broader concerns that rising levels of diversity are increasing social segregation and conflict. In contrast with these concerns, staff and students described the school as highly cohesive and harmonious. This was particularly apparent in students’ positive views of difference and their many inter-cultural friendships. It was also apparent in how staff described the school as a ‘safe environment’ where, in one teacher’s words, students felt ‘safe to express themselves and to be themselves without fear of being seen as different’. Indeed, the school’s diversity was seen as contributing to, rather than detracting from, social cohesion.

Despite these positive impressions, there were strong concerns expressed by a number of (White/Anglo) staff about students’ lack of connection to ‘Britishness’. These staff tended to see students’ ties to their minority culture as undermining their loyalty to Britishness and British culture. The following comments from the Head of Teaching and Learning highlighted these concerns:

“I mean there are some children who don’t know what day Easter or Christmas Day falls on [and] when it comes to — say England will play India in the cricket, children will support … their native parents or their grandparents. It is a strong affiliation there … even though they were born here… so there is a really strong tie to where their family comes from… I think the children are first and foremost Indian, Afghani, whatever it is, Pakistani, first and foremost that nationality or whatever, rather than British.”

For these teachers, students’ disconnection with these British symbols and others (such as England’s role in the Olympics and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee) signified their lack of citizenship and their lack of integration into British society. Moreover,
such disconnection was seen as generating division and conflict – in the words of the Head of Special Needs, as ‘dangerous’ and polarizing:

“I think it’s dangerous because I think groups of people are polarizing … I think that’s dangerous… we’ve certainly got children here, and I can think of a boy that I’m closely involved with in Year 11, and really he doesn’t have a life outside of his family, the Gurdwara and school… he doesn’t listen to the British news, he doesn’t know what’s going on in society… when he goes home his life is around the Punjabi language and he doesn’t watch British television… he doesn’t speak English at home, and he has no British identity and no sense of citizenship, and I do see that.”

The study found the presumptions expressed by some of the key teachers at Hamilton Court to be highly problematic in at least three ways:

- They conceptualised Britishness in narrow and racialised ways;
- They understood loyalty to minority culture as incompatible with loyalty to Britishness;
- They associated a lack of connection to ‘Britishness’ with social disharmony and greater connection with social cohesion.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

The concerns expressed by some of the teachers at Hamilton Court are consistent with broader public anxieties in the UK that associate social division and conflict with a lack of connection to British national identity. These anxieties may be warranted to the extent that they reflect alienation and disenfranchisement. What is not warranted are narrow and racialised ideas about nationhood that pit minority loyalties against loyalties to Britain and presume these loyalties will foster conflict.

A more positive alternative to these ideas is understanding Britishness as a ‘form of relationship’ (Parekh, 2009, p. 33). This enables a focus on the kinds of relations that will lead to social cohesion and unity. At Hamilton Court these relations were reflected in the students’ positive accounts of their multicultural and multi-faith friendships and in their freedom to express their cultural difference without fear. In this highly diverse but inclusive environment, constructions of contemporary Britishness were clearly at play. While many of the students may not connect with some of the symbolic elements of British culture and tradition, they did seem to be connecting with and taking up important ways of relating that are imperative to an inclusive version of Britishness.

Rather than attempting to pin down or define Britishness as a set of essential values or qualities that all must ascribe to, understanding Britishness as a way of relating acknowledges the multiple ways in which minority groups are connecting with British society. Such forms of integration do not view minority group difference and loyalty as separate from and counter to a sense of Britishness but as part of a national community.

The concerns about Britishness expressed by some of the teachers at Hamilton Court were at odds with the realities of social cohesion at the school. To be sure, these concerns were not voiced by all of the staff interviewed, nor do they resonate with the views of many teachers in other research. Notwithstanding, they do reflect the ongoing...
anxieties expressed in public discourse about Britishness in the UK. It is fair to say that such anxieties about national identity are impacting on how some teachers are approaching issues of Britishness in schools. That the teachers in the study expressing these views were from White Anglo backgrounds strengthens Modood’s (2007) contention that the real political challenge in generating a sense of national unity and cohesion in Britain lies in changing attitudes amongst the White British. With this in mind, and considering broader teacher uncertainty about addressing these issues, there is a warrant for continued critical examination of how the politics of Britishness are playing out in schools. Such examination needs to foster a broad, inclusive and dynamic understanding of Britishness that embraces diversity and recognises the many forms of national identity that lead to social cohesion.

FURTHER INFORMATION

FULL ARTICLE

FURTHER REFERENCES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Amanda Keddie is a Research Fellow at The University of Queensland. Her research interests and publications are in the field of gender, cultural diversity, social justice and schooling. She has published extensively in these areas.

Amanda Keddie
a.keddie@uq.edu.au
+61 7 336 59029
The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, 4072

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