

LEARNING AND CITIZENSHIP: PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS IN A LOCAL AUTHORITY RAISING ACHIEVEMENT STRATEGY⁽¹⁾

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SYNOPSIS

This paper discusses pupils' implicit and explicit ideas about citizenship education from a study in which children aged 11 and 14 were interviewed in groups about classroom learning and teaching, and about wider experiences of learning, encompassing community involvement, preparation for parenthood and citizenship. Pupils were invited to consider the relevance to their experiences of statements based on local authority 'raising achievement process targets'. Pupils sought to widen their opportunities to be involved in decisions about their learning and about school life. They adopted a social and moral interpretation of citizenship, however, and in spite of awareness of social problems, tended to reject the relevance to themselves of political understanding. The findings are considered at a time of renewed public commitment to education for citizenship at national and local levels.

INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Executive expresses commitment to ensuring that young people 'fully understand and are able to play their parts as citizens of a modern democratic society' (SEED, 1999, 9). However, a member of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum recently acknowledged:

A dissonance between the exhortation to develop educational initiatives which encourage in young people the development of responsibility, autonomy and active engagement as the basis of citizenship, and the absence of democratic debate ... as to what citizenship means for the people of Scotland (McGhie, 1999, 33).

This paper discusses pupils' explicit and implicit ideas about citizenship education from an interview study designed to explore pupils' voices within a local authority raising achievement strategy. Much recent public rhetoric on the theme of 'active citizenship' emphasises the civic obligations of the individual (Kerr, 1999, 5). International research studies (e.g. Kerr, 1999; Ross, 1999) confirm that British, and especially English, concepts of citizenship education refer principally to character formation, and are 'devoid of political concerns' (Kerr, 1999, 3). Parents in England interviewed by Holden endorsed a social and moral interpretation and decisively rejected political literacy as a desirable feature of the school curriculum (Holden 1999). Nevertheless, the establishment by the incoming Labour Government of the Advisory Group on Education and Citizenship chaired by Bernard Crick, indicated growing concern to address the citizenship theme. Following the Advisory Group report, (Crick et al, 1998) citizenship education is to be incorporated into the English National Curriculum from 2002. Social aims of education have thus been advanced alongside the standards agenda and the human capital accounts of education that have dominated the Blair Government's education policies hitherto.

Crick, a political scientist, has long expressed support for the goal of political literacy as an essential element in public education within a democracy, and has cited Modern Studies in Scotland as a model for addressing this within the curriculum (Crick and Porter, 1978). Definitions of political or democratic education are highly contested, but three aspects have been variously advanced by writers from Dewey

onwards (1916): teaching about political and social issues within the curriculum (as in Modern Studies courses); personal and social education in cross curricular or PSE courses; and opportunity for experiential learning of democracy by means of participation in the running of the school. All three dimensions, political knowledge and understanding, reflection on social values, and opportunity to experience a measure of democratic participation, are involved in education for citizenship. Paterson (1998, 57) emphasised acquiring capacities, such as being able to engage in democratic argument, as fundamental to citizenship. In a recent newspaper column discussing George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, Crick argues powerfully that the novel expresses:

A bitter rage that the democratic franchise, mass literacy and compulsory education had resulted not in an educated and active citizenry but rather a semi-inert mass society of subjects (Crick, 1999).

This paper takes the view that 'an educated and active citizenry', in which notions of voice and agency are crucial elements, is a more appropriate goal for the education system of a democratic country than purely economic aims. The interpretation of citizenship adopted here goes beyond that of the law-abiding and morally responsible individual. 'The citizen' is taken by us to be a participant in a polity, able to express a viewpoint and take part in decision-making for the common good.

A previous paper (Duffield and Allan, 1999) from the same research study focused on the pupils' ideas about school learning and the role of the learner, and explored the relationship between the policy culture of target setting and the goal of giving learners a voice. We turn now to the young people's perceptions of learning in school and in the wider society expressed in the data, and consider these in the light of current concerns about education and citizenship. What evidence did the research reveal of the extent to which the pupil's voice is sought and heard within Scottish primary and secondary schools?

THE RAISING ACHIEVEMENT STRATEGY AND PROCESS TARGETS

A local policy document, Raising Achievement, was presented to Stirling Council's Children's Committee in May 1998 as 'an essential component of the quality assurance policy' approved by the Committee in January 1998. This in its turn was relevant to 'the government's framework for setting targets for specific and measurable improvement in attainment by schools for the development planning period 1999-2001' (SOEID, 1998). The Raising Achievement strategy set 'process targets' (listed in Table 1) derived from How Good Is Our School? (SOEID, 1996). These were described as 'explicit descriptions of the processes that should be adopted by schools as part of their raising achievement strategy'. It might be considered that a 'process' is essentially different from a 'target' so that the phrase constituted an official device for facing in two directions at once. However, schools were also required to identify 'output targets' (i.e. targets, points they aimed to reach) for each of the processes adopted. The 'process targets' included a number of areas addressing the quality of learning and teaching, including engaging children more directly in decisions about their own learning at all levels, mentioned among the terms of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Further process areas, relating to personal and social development, covered effective citizenship, preparation for likely parenthood and involvement in the wider community. This paper focuses upon the aspects potentially involved in active citizenship: decision-making about learning, learning in the wider community and the explicit citizenship process targets.

Table 1: Raising Achievement Process Targets

Performance Indicator	Process Target
Quality of pupils' learning	Encouraging learners to expect more of themselves Improving learner self-esteem and self confidence Giving learners increased opportunities to participate in decision making about learning activities and the operation of the school Creating more opportunities for peer collaboration and sharing between learners Communicating appropriately with learners about their progress
Quality of the teaching process	Sharing with learners the reasons for allocating individuals to groups, tasks and assessment process Consulting learners about proposed organisational changes
Meeting pupils' needs	Differentiating learning experiences to suit the needs and interests of others
Personal and social development	Preparing learners for effective citizenship Ensuring that all learners are prepared for likely parenthood Involving learners in the activities of the wider community
Quality of curricular and vocational guidance	Ensuring that learners develop an interest in lifelong learning
Effectiveness of learning support	Providing appropriate support for learning for those who need it

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design built upon earlier phases of work for the same local authority. Phase One (1996-97) addressed the nature and causes of 'underachievement' in the early secondary years by means of interviews with teachers and classroom observation; Phase Two (1997-98) explored perceptions of learning, teaching and support of S1-S2 pupils and levels of attainment in the science curriculum (Allan et al, 1998).

The aims of the third phase of the research (Allan, Duffield and Turner, 1999) were:

1. To investigate children's perception of their role as learners
2. To identify ways of achieving process targets relating to children's learning.

We also had a longer term aim, of involving teachers in the research process.

Single gender groups of pupils in two primary and two secondary schools were interviewed three times (total of eight groups, 48 pupils). The schools identified willing pupils in accordance with researchers' guidelines as to year group, mixed levels of attainment, and gender. We chose single gender groups mainly for ease of eliciting unconstrained contributions as far as possible. While the dynamics of boys' and girls' groups differed, gender differences were not a prime focus. The pupils were aged eleven (P6, the penultimate year of primary school in Scotland) and fourteen (S3, the third year of secondary school. Standard Grade examinations are taken by all Scottish pupils in S4). In the first two interviews, issues of learning and teaching were discussed using a flexible schedule, and probing ideas from each group so that there were wide variations among the transcripts. The third meeting took the form of a workshop in which children produced written ideas and personal examples in answer to questions based upon the quality of learning process targets (Table 1). A final group discussion dealt with the personal and social target areas:

1. Preparing learners for active citizenship
2. Ensuring that all learners are prepared for likely parenthood
3. Involving learners in the activities of the wider community
4. Ensuring that learners develop an interest in lifelong learning.

Table 2 gives the discussion questions presented in the final session. The findings presented below are drawn from these final discussions, from relevant written workshop data and from elements of the group interviews. They are arranged thematically to address learning beyond the school; the learner as decision maker, and finally, pupils' ideas about citizenship and politics.

Table 2: Final workshop discussion

WHAT SHOULD YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL?

The Council (your teachers' bosses) have suggested a number of other things which are important for you to learn. Look at this list, and say which ones you do learn already and what you think of them. You may want to add more, or cross some off the list. Say what you really think: don't hold back.

6. Opportunities to be involved with the local community
7. Being prepared to be good parents in the future
8. Learning to be 'good citizens'
9. Being interested in learning all through your life
10. Preparing for the world of work

FINDINGS

Learning beyond the school

Local community activities experienced by the primary pupils included events or visits associated with an enterprise project, concerts, open assemblies involving parents and a project about the local area. Secondary pupils cited sports and charity events, including activities with disabled people, geography trips, debating and environmental projects. They anticipated and looked forward to work experience

opportunities to come in S4. The older pupils considered that there were too few opportunities of this kind, and that they would particularly welcome more and earlier work experience and contact with local shops and businesses, possibly as an aspect of business studies courses.

Pupils were divided about whether and how schools could prepare them to be good parents in the future. A group of P6 boys who initially agreed that it was necessary suggested that the way to do this would be to teach us how to cook, how to get a job, and to tell your bairns sums. One boy who suggested sex education was jeered at by the rest of the group. Generally, groups divided as to preparation for parenthood being appropriate for the school to address. It was strongly seen as a parental role, but some secondary girls recognised that individuals may lack this home support. However, interview data included some rejection of family topics in PSE after S1; it was seen as repetitive, the same rubbish videos; just common sense, with the implication that little genuine discussion took place. S3 girls expressed irritation that time was taken up which, pupils suggested, they would choose to devote to more explicit careers education and information about university and college opportunities:

It is not as if we are going to have a child and raise a family; you could be doing something important, what about university? Everybody freaks out, they don't know about it (S3 girls).

Some social problems went beyond the common-sense knowledge which, they argued, made PSE lessons on family relationships redundant. However, S3 boys claimed that drugs education currently gave out generalised warnings but failed to acknowledge the seriousness of young people's exposure to drugs:

They need to get somebody in, get the whole school to listen ... it's a certainty, you walk through the park and see somebody skinning up ... [in school] they teach you, 'don't do drugs' but they dinnae teach you why and how it's bad (S3 boys).

This group also commented on an English teacher's rejection of their suggestion that a book dealing with drugs would keep people interested ... I didn't mean recommending heroin. The messages conveyed seemed to be of a lack of honesty in relation to dangerous topics that were of genuine concern. A choice of reading was offered, but a 'safe' option selected by the teacher from among pupils' suggestions (very possibly for lack of a book confronting drug problems that was not seen as grossly unsuitable). Research on drugs education materials (Stephen et al, 1997) indicated that indirect approaches to drugs education, focusing, for example, on self-esteem and assertiveness, can engage children while leaving them with a clear message. We speculate that many teachers feel inadequate to open up class discussion in this area, suspecting that their pupils may know more about it than they do.

The learner as decision maker

The pupils' enthusiasm for making choices and decisions about learning, whether in real or simulated situations, was evident. They made it clear that the opportunities should be more prevalent, although only four pupils suggested that they should be involved in decision-making about all learning activities. A number of pupils wanted the option of withdrawing from certain subjects, including religious education:

You should have a choice of whether or not you have to talk about Jesus or God. Some people don't believe in God and couldn't care about the work they are doing (S3 boy).

The most popular suggestions were modest: more consultation on activities in practical subjects, PE and Art; and more involvement in choosing reading and writing topics in English. An enterprise project in one primary school had been a resounding success, especially with girls who spoke eloquently of acquiring personal and social skills as well as valuable practical experience. Others mentioned circle time:

We do a circle time in class and we have a speaking object and everyone has a chance of saying something ... it's really fun (P6 girl).

A minority, especially among the primary pupils, felt that their voices were not heard:

We hardly ever have a say; I want to have more of a say ... I have never had my say in school (P6 girls and boy).

One older girl's recollection of primary school as a time when you had to ask [permission] to turn over the page bore out these minority views of exclusion from decision-making. All four boys' groups and one group of secondary girls demanded agency, expressing the importance of knowing the purposes of learning specific topics. There was a consensus among those who dealt with the issue that knowing why they were learning something made it easier to grasp. Practical use in everyday life, or relevance to future occupation were commonly cited criteria. Intrinsic motivation was a minority concern, but one S3 boy referred to the satisfaction of learning in science explaining:

Things that form in your mind ... it might not be a career advantage but you know what things are made up of and what could happen (S3 boy).

Having their views listened to enhanced confidence both within the classroom and in the school as a whole. One girl who found that her comment at the pupil council about kitchen hygiene had been acted upon, said:

I felt I was being heard and had a restored faith in the school and I wanted to learn as I felt part of the school (S3 girl).

At a whole school level, some primary pupils (like those in reported by Rafferty, 1997) had been invited to comment on their playground. Secondary pupils had voted for a school logo and uniform, although if given a free hand, one group asserted that the first thing would be no uniform. These boys noted that uniform was connected with control (outside the school they can tell where you are from) and were sceptical of the connection between wearing a shirt and tie and realising that they were at school to learn.

Pupils' ideas about citizenship and politics

Pupils' responses to the idea of 'learning to be a good citizen' (Table 2) produced definitions which overwhelmingly emphasised social, moral and personal meanings: being good friends, being gentle, fair, honest and caring, helping people. It also meant avoiding negative behaviours: bullying, vandalism, drinking, tempting people to smoke and doing anything against the law. S3 girls, who indicated that they were encouraged to be helpful to neighbours within and outside the school, initially described it as a good school because of warm relationships linked to a cohesive community. Boys at the same school cited the code of conduct, covering good manners and behaviour, but also suggested that it would be beyond the scope of the school to expand into being a good person.

The few answers implying more active definitions of citizenship included some opportunities to experience running things, such as house football competitions

organised by S6 pupils. P6 boys whose class had undertaken the mini-enterprise project advanced the notion that running a company was relevant to learning to be a good citizen.

The S3 groups were prompted to consider to what extent they learned about politics, and whether this would help them to learn to be 'good citizens'. They answered:

Waste of time ... we are only fourteen ... we don't need to know what happens way up there; who cares? ... [when I'm voting age] I'll care whether they give student grants, what they give to me ... [modern studies was] garbage about how many sheep there are in Luxembourg (S3 boys)

modern studies wasn't much to do with politics, just reading from books. . did some stuff about racism ... once we went into groups to get elected, it was fun (S3 girls)

[citizenship] is nothing to do with what the Government decides (S3 girls)

we don't learn about politics ... S1-2 modern studies is not about the things that happen (S3 boys).

Nevertheless, the first group of boys quoted above asserted that they learnt about political affairs from home and the media, rather than school. (For reasons of the school's convenience, the sample groups from this school were all drawn from geography classes; they had not opted for Standard Grade Modern Studies). One put forward the view that the whole school depends on politics because politics is about money. An extended discussion arose, which revealed knowledge and developing conceptions of political issues. However, most of the group explained their lack of respect for politicians, who:

come on TV with their titles all saying 'we're the best'

... how many politicians come out of a school like this? not very many. People from posh schools have money ...

- but ... anyone can become a politician if they wanted to, I could become Prime Minister if I worked hard enough
- but Blair has money, people like that know more about it
- they all say they are going to make the schools better, better health
- they all say the same but they are not going to do it
- politics in Britain is really not politics for Britain, it's European Union now, if EU say no, it's no.
- I don't think we should have the EU, it's good for money and for the poor, but it's no use Scotland suggesting anything, nobody's going to listen to Scotland (S3 boys).

While politics as experienced through Modern Studies in the curriculum or through the media were rejected, a boy at another school gave a highly alienated but vivid account of education and power relationships in an unequal society:

If you went round and asked who liked school it would be all the toffs and snobs who actually learnt something; any common person would say 'I learnt nothing' . . we get mucked about and don't learn anything and it's the snobs who have got the money, they treat them fair ... you could walk outside and learn more (S3 boy).

Strong views about social issues, however, were not in general perceived as relating either to politics, or to the kind of preparation for citizenship with which schools should be concerned.

LEARNERS' VOICES AND DEBATE ABOUT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The pupils in this study endorsed an apolitical, social and moral conception of citizenship, yet they displayed at many points a desire for greater voice and participation in their own learning, in the activities and organisation of their schools and in the connections between school and social context. Their lack of interest in politics is disappointing, particularly at this point of important constitutional change for Scotland. This may reflect wider issues of culture and identity, or pervasive messages that on the one hand emphasise the personal, instrumental goals of educational success, and, on the other, define politics as the personal rivalries of politicians. Schools, however, could counter these messages and encourage young people at least to engage with issues of national identity. First Minister Donald Dewar envisages that young people will have a central role in the new democracy, making choices and enjoying a new sense of 'ownership and belonging to the public life of Scotland' (Centre for Scottish Public Policy, 1999, 6). In order to realise such a goal, the kind of multi-dimensional approaches to active citizenship and political literacy outlined in the Introduction to this paper would be required, encompassing curricular, social and experiential learning.

Maitles (1999, 183) points out that Modern Studies aims to develop political literacy not only in terms of content knowledge but also in its methodology emphasising active learning, discussion and dialogue, an approach providing the 'guarantee[d] scepticism' advocated by Paterson (1998, 57). The primary pupils in Rafferty's study (Rafferty, 1997) were fully involved in analysing a problem, suggesting and helping to implement solutions, and when it turned out to be necessary, going to great lengths to defend the playground improvements of which they felt ownership. The pupils clearly learnt about power and participation in a way that might not always be comfortable for existing institutions (Maitles, 1999). Pupils in our study, however, suggested that Modern Studies is 'not about the things that happen', but rather about institutional structures. Without a participative approach, and a willingness to reflect on big issues of inequality and power, the subject might only reinforce pupils' impressions that politics is nothing to do with them. Many pupils' families use agencies like the Benefits Agency and Social Work; school courses, for example, those set out several years ago in the People in Society strand of Environmental Studies 5-14 (SOED, 1993, 36-37), might potentially place these within their political context. The essential skills base involving critical investigation and decision-making can come from a wide range of curricular areas including activities such as the class enterprise project in the primary school. The pupils' accounts (here and in the previous phase, Duffield et al, 2000) suggest that more opportunities to reflect on the purposes of learning, express ideas and make choices could increase engagement with learning, a key priority of the local Raising Achievement policy and of the Consultation Paper (SEED, 1999), reiterating the view that:

A commitment to learning ... is a fundamental element in personal growth and development, both throughout schooling and throughout adult life (SCCC, 1995, 5).

From our pupils' accounts, citizenship is being tackled in their schools in terms of helpful, co-operative behaviour within and beyond the school. They endorse its importance, driven by a strong sense of social justice and the need to care for others.

However, in order to engage with their own observed experience of society, young people appear to need more encouragement to articulate their ideas and engage in dialogue. Opening up controversial issues cannot be done lightly, but the young people clearly indicated that the passive receipt of urgent social messages by means of the 'same old videos' was inadequate.

It must be noted that the concept of citizenship expressed by these pupils' responses is a gendered one. Whereas the girls were articulate about social responsibility, and as eager as boys to have more say in their learning and in activities within and beyond the school, they were much less aware of political dimensions of citizenship. As reported above, the boys also overtly rejected curricular learning about politics, yet they introduced public and political elements into the conversations and expressed strong views about them. For whatever reason, the only part of these data where girls assumed greater power was the primary school enterprise project.

The experiential dimension of citizenship education in schools has been regarded by several writers as crucial (Maitles, 1999; Rafferty, 1997; Dobie and MacBeath, 1998). One girl in our study reported the sense of affirmation she experienced when the school acted upon her contribution to pupil council discussion. Some primary pupils in our study had expressed views about their own playground improvements; but as with the other dimensions of citizenship, on this evidence, the need exists to pursue active citizenship in ways which ensure genuine participation, rather than generating curriculum content which will reinforce passivity.

CONCLUSION

Fostering social and civic responsibility, and a sense of care for self and others, are priorities within the Scottish Executive Consultation Paper and Draft Bill, *Improving Our Schools* (SEED, 1999). Stirling Council, who funded the project reported here, is promoting citizenship as a core skill for pupils from age 3 to 18, using the apolitical definition of personal and social development, skills for social inclusion and sustainability, comparable with the remit of the Crick Report (Crick et al, 1998). Children in our study and across the authority's schools are already involved in decision-making at different levels, not only through the pupil councils of which our sample groups were aware, but also in Area Forums, a Civic Assembly, and in plans for the authority's New Community Schools Project. These are developments that potentially realise Paterson's argument that local authorities are centrally involved in redefining citizenship in post-devolution Scotland, with the capacity to 'encourage the next generation of citizens to subject the parliament to informed and critical scrutiny' (Paterson, 1998, 58, 59). More generally, this study of pupils' voices provides indications (but no hard evidence) that listening and responding to pupils' views about matters affecting learning and school is likely to make them more committed learners. By responding in this way to pupils schools may have the potential at last to realise the rhetoric of education for citizenship repeated over recent years, and to open up, rather than 'shut down the civic imagination' (Rose, quoted in Slee, 1997, 307).

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NOTE

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