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Talking with teenagers: the pre-conditions for effective education for citizenship

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> *Louise sits on the back row. She gazes ahead while the lesson is introduced. As the lesson progresses she stares at the wall or chats to her friends. The science teacher carries on regardless, paying no attention to Louise or anyone in her group, ignoring the general chat and off task behaviour.*
> *(Notes from case study)*

This paper opens with Louise, a 15 year old girl who has been identified as bright but underachieving. She is the kind of girl who should be involved in her school, in her community, able to debate topical political issues and ready to vote when she turns 18 in three years time. But in interview she reveals she is disaffected and disengaged, choosing not to participate in learning. There are many boys and girls like Louise around Britain - young people who should be the next generation of active citizens - but who are 'turned off', resistant to involvement in school or community.

This paper asks what we want from citizenship education; it looks at where we are now, with reference to a recent case study (including Louise), and how we might get from one to the other. It draws on the voices of teachers and children and on observations in the classroom and is part of wider research currently being carried out at the University of Exeter.

What do we want?

Citizenship education will be a statutory subject in the secondary curriculum in the UK from 2002. This has prompted a keen debate about what constitutes effective education in this area. Orr (1992) has argued that we must develop critically and politically aware citizens if we are to strengthen the power of democracies to address current social and environmental challenges. Griffiths (1996) sees as central 'a moral concern for social justice' and Holden and Clough (1998) maintain that participation is at the core of education for citizenship: participation in debate, in reflection and in action. Most recently the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000) has recommended that education for citizenship should include 'human rights principles; skills of deliberation, advocacy and campaigning; understanding of equality legislation; and opposition to racist beliefs and behaviour' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, p149). Cogan and Derricott (2000) reporting on an international survey of the characteristics that effective citizens of the twenty-first century require, also identify the ability to work co-operatively and responsibly, think in a critical and systemic way and solve conflicts non-violently.

Effective education for citizenship must be more than just the teaching of civics. What is needed is a curriculum and school ethos which is participatory, global in outlook and which connects with life outside the school. Students will need to learn about democratic processes and social justice in an environment which is itself democratic and just. In summary, it requires a whole school approach which:

- encourages respect for different national religious and ethnic identities, respect for human rights and opposition to racist beliefs and behaviour
- addresses economic and environmental issues
- teaches about democracy and the law
- provides opportunities for students to set the agenda, to voice their own concerns and to negotiate some areas of learning
- teaches skills of collaborative working, advocacy and campaigning
- models participation in democratic and political processes
- promotes critical thinking and interactive learning
- provides opportunities for values-based participation
- is reflected in the ethos of the school, where students feel they are respected, that teachers are 'fair', and that their voice is heard and acted upon.

Where are we now?

Case study: teenagers talking

Many of the above features of effective citizenship education reflect an ethos which is just and an approach to teaching and learning which is participatory and promotes critical thinking. This case study discusses these features as they relate to a 'typical' secondary school. It has much to say about the value of listening to students, the rights of students to participate and what enables or constrains their participation. There are implications for what could be termed the pre-conditions for effective citizenship education, i.e. the work that may need to be done on values, learning styles and critical thinking before students can begin to take part in informed debate about wider issues of global democracy.

Background to the study

Concerned by national reports of boys' underachievement (OFSTED 1996) and by statistics which pointed to underachievement in their own schools, a cluster of schools (a high school, with its feeder middle and first schools) commissioned a team of researchers at Exeter University to investigate. The focus was on both teachers' and pupils' attitudes to teaching and learning styles, their perceptions of the differences in achievement and behaviour of boys and girls and participation in the classroom. The research design involved interviews with the focus students (a high achieving boy and girl and an underachieving boy and girl in each class) and their teachers, and classroom observation.

Findings from the high school

Findings from the first and middle schools are reported elsewhere (Wood 2000, Holden 2000). In this paper the focus is on the high school where a total of 44 teaching sessions were observed and 48 students and 14 teachers were interviewed. The school was inspected in 1997 and found to be working in generally favourable educational and socio-economic circumstances with grades better than the national average but with girls far out-performing boys.

Attitudes and behaviour: perceptions of teachers and students

Teachers' and students' perceptions of the attitudes of boys and girls tell us much about the ethos of the school and the disaffection of many underachievers. Most teachers accepted that the underachievement and low participation of many boys in lessons was a problem. Many saw the root causes of this behaviour as extrinsic, 'a cultural phenomenon' and not a consequence of any in-school factor. As one teacher said, 'It's everything from outside school', including the influence of parents and the media. There was little acknowledgement that either the school or the students themselves could be agents of change.

The teachers felt that the culture of the school reflected these external pressures, with boys being afraid of being labelled a 'boffin' or a 'keener'. 'It's not cool to achieve' said one teacher. As a result they felt that boys were more disruptive than girls, the latter being seen as more compliant and passive. However, when asked to describe the characteristics of underachieving boys and girls, they often described both as 'not prepared to be compliant', 'orally capable' and 'perceptive and intelligent'.

The teachers noted a contradiction between the characteristics we might want to engender in young learners, such as the ability to question and challenge, and the way school actually responds to students who exhibit these characteristics:

> We want children to question for themselves but when they do that in a lesson we tell them off for being cheeky.

Interviews with the students indicated that there was peer pressure on boys to 'fool around' and not to be seen as too clever. However, while many agreed that boys did 'muck about more' they felt that girls could also be off-task, either 'brushing their hair or just talking' or being openly disruptive. Louise (at the opening of this paper) exemplifies this point. Both sexes felt that teachers were less aware of girls' negative behaviour and felt very strongly that boys were told off far more than girls, which was unjust. Typical comments were:

> I think some teachers treat girls more like adults than they do boys.

> Some people just have a view of girls that they do nothing wrong, they're just little girls and they don't misbehave.

Parallel to this was a view that male teachers treated girls preferentially:

> The year 10 male teachers, they're very lenient on the girls…I get well annoyed… (but) you can't exactly just tell the teacher "you know, you're oggling the girls there." (Boy)

It's more likely that a boy would get stronger punishment. Not that a girl wouldn't get punished, but she wouldn't be punished as much. (Boy)

Students' comments on peer pressure and their resentment at the perceived advantage of some girls point to factors which may contribute to the disaffection and consequent low participation of both under-achieving girls and boys.

Teaching and learning: perceptions of teachers and students

Just as they believed that the behaviour of boys and girls was different, the teachers also felt that they had different learning styles. Within English, for example, boys were seen as preferring finite, 'hard' knowledge, and preferring fact to fiction. They were seen as needing an approach to learning which was focused and active so as to maintain their interest. Girls, in contrast, were seen as passive and compliant hard workers who achieved but were perhaps less able to show initiative. In English they were seen as preferring fiction, creative writing and longer assignments.

However, the students' interviews revealed that both boys and girls had very strong preferences for active learning: it was not a prerogative of the boys or the underachievers. When asked what made a good lesson, all were clear that they disliked too much teacher talk, copying from the board and silence. They preferred the opportunity to work in pairs or groups, to discuss and to do practical activities.

In contrast to some teachers' perceptions that boys preferred factual and analytical writing in English, the students (including the underachievers) liked written work when 'it's more your own opinion, you can say what you want' and when they could write 'what I think and not what the teacher wants me to write.' They recognised that active involvement increased their ability and motivation to learn. As one said:

It's not just sitting there at the front listening all the time, it's actually doing it yourself, so you can produce something that you've done instead of what the teacher's told you to do.

The students' comments indicate that all learners prefer active approaches to lessons, enjoying tasks and activities which allow them to grapple with knowledge and ideas for themselves. Indeed, over-dependence on teacher-focused learning and a mismatch between students' preferred ways of being taught and their actual experiences may be a further contributory factor to the lower participation rates of underachievers and their apparent disaffection.

Observation data

This is reported on in full in Myhill (2000). In brief, in the classroom setting the underachievers stood out as the least compliant and participatory group of learners, often not engaging with tasks and activities set. The strongest differences were between underachievers and high achievers, though there was substantial evidence that high-achieving boys tended to be more like the underachievers in this respect than the high achieving girls. The high achieving girl was the most consistent 'performer' and was always the most likely to be doing what the teacher intended. When this data is combined with the interview data from the students, there is an emerging picture of adolescents who are unable or unwilling to participate in the learning environment.

In summary then,

- teachers perceive external factors as negatively affecting boys; they appear reluctant to consider the role of the school in bringing about change
- a negative culture of underachievement exists for boys and to a lesser extent for girls, leading to disruption and disaffection
- underachieving students are seen as having some of the characteristics required of effective learners
- most students feel that boys are unjustly punished and girls unfairly favoured
- underachievers participate least in the classroom
- all students favour interactive, participatory teaching styles, contrary to teachers' beliefs
- all students welcome the opportunity to think for themselves and voice their own opinion

These findings raise questions for those of us concerned with effective education for citizenship:

1. How can we encourage teachers and students to believe that they are not powerless to affect change, that they have a voice?
2. With an education system dominated by exam results, how can we ensure that students are given opportunities to set the agenda, to voice their own concerns and to negotiate some areas of learning?
3. How can schools promote critical thinking and interactive learning throughout the curriculum?
4. How can schools work towards an ethos where students feel they are respected, that teachers are 'fair', and that their voice is listened to?

Conclusion: how do we get there?

This case study was of a 'good' school with better than average results where one might expect education for citizenship to be implemented successfully. The citizenship curriculum talks of students understanding the importance of their own role in democratic processes, 'the importance of resolving conflict fairly' and 'the need for mutual respect and understanding' (DfEE/QCA 1999). But given the disaffection and the resentment at what were seen as unfair practices in the school and given the lack of voice felt by students, bringing about such an understanding could be difficult.

We suggest that certain preconditions are essential for effective education for citizenship. The first of these is that schools must model the values they wish students to adopt. An understanding of 'mutual respect' will only be possible where there is real student-teacher dialogue, where students feel the community is just and fair. Second, if schools are to teach about active participation in democratic processes, they must model this process in the school. This may mean at one level giving students some choice over their own

learning and facilitating the active learning styles they favour, and at another level ensuring effective student participation in the decision-making bodies of the school.

What becomes apparent is that a surface approach to citizenship, based on merely learning *about* democracy or *about* 'the need for' respect, will not engage disaffected teenagers such as those in this study. One cannot teach about democratic participation or social justice in a climate where students do not participate and where they feel that the school itself is unjust. Education for citizenship requires a whole-school approach where the learning environment fosters critical thinking, creative learning and values-based participation in both school and community. In such schools students are able to voice their concerns, set the agenda for discussion and have some say in their own learning.

This may have implications beyond the citizenship curriculum. Rudduck et al (1995) argue that we have a curriculum and school environment which do not reflect the social maturity of students today, and Griffiths warns of the dangers of a curriculum content unrelated to the experiences or interests of the students and to the wider social world, thus 'existing without external relevance' (Griffiths 1996, p.209). It may be that good practice in citizenship education can inform practice in other curriculum areas, leading the way to a more inclusive and participative approach to learning.

If education for citizenship is to be implemented effectively, with the potential to influence the whole curriculum (and indeed the ethos of a school), there are implications for the professional development of teachers and for initial teacher education. Both teachers and student-teachers will need time to consider their own values and beliefs, the kind of school they want and the kind of society children will be a part of. They will need to be convinced that education for citizenship is not a threat but an opportunity. There is anecdotal evidence that this is possible. As two teachers said after a recent course on education for citizenship:

> It's the central core to quality education.

> It's a breath of fresh air for schools.

To end with Louise, as we began. After a day of 'shadowing' this disaffected 15 year old, a sudden change was observed in the last lesson. Louise was alert and engaged, she volunteered an opinion, she smiled. What brought about this change? It is hard to be precise, but this teacher did not patronise the students: she encouraged them to participate, she made it clear that she valued their opinions, she encouraged critical reflection about the issues under discussion - the holocaust and racism today. The lesson exemplified values-based participation and education for citizenship. Louise was, for the first time that day, interested, involved and participating in the learning community.

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