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Younger children's political learning: concept-based approaches versus issues-based approaches

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'Political education' is not today a term in frequent use: for many years it has been regarded with suspicion. In much of Eastern Europe it is now associated with the educational policies of the former regimes and as akin to indoctrination. In Western Europe and North America, it has been criticised variously as impossible, unnecessary and an interference with the liberties of the individual and/or family. It has been argued that children are incapable of the sort of complex social thinking that is necessary to understand politics; that political understanding should not be formally transmitted by the educational system, but should properly be absorbed from family, the media and the political institutions themselves; and that it is impossible to tackle in an unbiased, even-handed way, and should therefore not be attempted. Despite these criticisms, there has been some recent resurgence of interest in this area, often through forms of 'rebranding' - as civics education, citizenship education, or political literacy. This paper has two foci: a critique of current initiatives, and an attempt to suggest a model for development with younger children.

There was some early interest in political education in UK primary education in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the political literacy movement of that time. Crick and Porter (1978) proposed that secondary pupils needed to become politically literate - developing the skills to evaluate political discussion and to make informed judgements between alternatives. Crick (1974) argued that his matrix of core concepts encompassed a far better reality of political activity that the sterile learning of structures.

Government	Power	Authority	Force	Order
Relationship between government and society	Law	Justice	Repres-entation	Pressure
Society	Natural rights	Individuality	Freedom	Welfare

These ideas were taken up by teachers of younger children, and through the 1970s there were primary school developments in political understanding, discussed later in this paper. They included getting children to role-play decision making about difficult situations on a deserted island, discussions of authority and power in local decisions, and drawing parallels between political and human politics. These activities were discretely encouraged by official bodies at the time.

The 1980s were, in contrast, a period in which any form of teaching about society, let alone politics, was discouraged by the Government and its agents of curriculum development and control. The National Curriculum of 1988 only allowed the most traditional subjects to be taught, in a tightly controlled manner. The emphasis was on the responsibilities that the citizen owed the state – an influential book was *The Principle of Duty* by David Selbourne (1994). Social education was downgraded as successive Ministers of Education promoted the core and foundation subjects, and left no place for learning about how society worked (Ahier and Ross, 1994).

New Labour maintained many of the previous Government's policies: in education in particular it emphasised that it was not interested in adjusting the structures of the curriculum. But a review of the National Curriculum recommended the introduction of citizenship education. A working party resulted in a formal new subject of Citizenship - mandatory in secondary schools, and recommended in primary schools.

There have been parallel moves in the European Union. The former Commissioner for Education and Youth, Edith Cresson, called for "the achievement of citizenship through the sharing of common values, and the development of a sense of belonging to a common social and cultural area ... a broader-base understanding of citizenship founded on mutual understanding of the cultural diversities that constitute Europe's originality and richness" in *Towards a Europe of Knowledge* (COM (97) 563), and there have been initiatives designed to improve the understanding of European political institutions, calls for European citizenship, and to foster understanding of democratic understanding amongst young people.

However, many educators in contemporary Europe approach the concept of European identity with some caution, suggesting that citizenship based on the new Europe must be distinctly different from the old citizenships of the nation-states: less ethnocentric, more diverse, more inclusive, less wedded to nationalistic conceptions. Osler (1994), for example, urges caution, and the "development of an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of identity and citizenship", and similar qualifications are made by Clough *et al* (1995). Hladnik (1995) argues that European citizenship should not be limited to a legal definition of status, and suggests that refugees also should be regarded as citizens, in a broad and inclusive definition, separate from historical definitions of citizenship by birth, ancestry or naturalisation. The European programmes make much of the ideas of nested identities, and seek to promote citizenship at European level as part of a self-identity that includes national and regional elements.

Moves to educate for citizenship in the UK and in Europe both seem to show confusion at the political institution level about identity. What are the states, or super-states, or unions, with which people identify? States are not natural, but recent social constructions forged at the beginning of the modern period. As a phenomenon of modernism, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the post-modernist age the legitimacy of states comes into question - both of individual states, and of states per se, which may be no more than *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1963). Citizenship education is being initiated when there is a very real decline in understanding, sympathy and trust in politicians and political institutions. The European Parliamentary elections in June 1999 saw remarkably low participation rates. The traditional (politicians') explanation for this is that we have not had enough political education. Schools have let down the nation: if the schools told their pupils about the virtues of democracy, all would be well. Politicians fear that without popular endorsement at the polls, they lack authority: getting people to believe in the systems that they stand for might restore their legitimacy. But politicians have a much greater personal identity with the state (or the union) than do other people. This is a powerful motivating force for the current political emphasis on programmes for citizenship. (Some non-politicians also feel threatened by the erosion of the idea of the nation-state. Those who need the authority of a state, who chose to identify strongly with conceptions of "their race", their genetic stock, are undermined by questions that challenge the legitimacy of this institution.)

Citizenship 'for democracy' is particularly problematic. Borhaug (1999) points out that it depends on what kind of democracy. Traditional representative democracy simply ensures intermittent participation in elections, through political parties that stand for broad principles. The key actor is the informed voter. The classic 1960s study *The Civic Culture* suggested that the ideal citizen was a careful mix of the active citizen and the passive subject (Almond and Verba, 1965). But there are other kinds of democratic action, and many over the past two decades have become involved in specific political activities rather than supporting political parties. The growth of 'single issue' politics has challenged traditional politicians, who have found electors deserting mass parties in favour of pressure groups, such as Drop the Debt and coalitions of Greens. The old political parties have had their activities and compromises challenged by informed political activists. This alternative democracy is less concerned with the political structures and procedures than with the issues themselves. The key actor becomes the local activist.

This is not what politicians and public servants want political education to be about. Their concerns are - quite naturally - with buttressing the systems and institutions that brought them into existence and that maintain them. This is not just the identity question, as I argued above, but also about civic duties and obligations - to participate in political processes, to understand the need for compromise, to accept the decision-making processes. If future citizens can be told how fair the existing system is, how the machinery of government works in the interest of the citizen, how interest groups must (of course) be listened to, but balances struck between competing interests - then they will accept the legitimacy of the political processes, and become part of *The Civic Culture* - the good citizen.

This brings the argument back to the contemporary classroom. Primary teachers are increasingly sure that children can understand political issues in a meaningful way. Stevens suggested that seven year olds "have some cognitive contact with the political world": they saw political power as "limited, consented to and conditional upon results" (1982, p 38). Short (1999) pointed out that Piagetian notions of sequential stages of development have been effectively ‘dethroned’ in the 1990s and suggests that social learning in particular has been misdirected by Piaget's analysis.

The work of teachers in the 1970s shows how children are able to develop political understanding. Margerison (1968, 1972) described an extended project, lasting several months, in which junior children developed an island society discussing the creation of social and political structures. Riches (1974) worked with 10-11 year olds to develop a politically-focussed programme based around the island theme, with discussion that made the links between the simulated activities and contemporary political processes explicit. Robins and Robins (1978) discussed a series of primary classroom activities that had a political focus. Wagstaff (1978) developed materials that encouraged the systematic examination of a series of eight social/political concepts through three environments that figured significantly in children's lives - the family, friendship groups and work. Ross (1981) used political fables such Adams' *Watership Down* (1972), and Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) to draw parallels with human behaviour. Denscombe and Conway (1982) used issues in development education to examine a range of political concepts, using classroom discussion to explore issues around a conceptual framework.

These approaches have several common characteristics. They utilise the learners' experience, direct and vicarious, from role-playing, modelling, sharing stories, or watching the news. They use discussion to get children to articulate their thoughts, and to actively construct meaning from the experience. By developing ideas in a social context with their peers (and with the teacher, and adults other than teachers) a shared understanding is achieved. The experience is around some particular issue, something that is possibly controversial, that arouses opinions, dissent and disagreement. Finally, in these examples there is a clear idea of a concept to be developed: the teachers concerned are initiating the teaching because they wish the learners to form some kind of abstract, transferable idea at the end of the process.

Conceptual frameworks for learning were increasingly popular in the 1970s: Bruner's work in the *MACOS* project and Senesh's programme *Our Working World* illustrated how social, political and economic concepts could be developed in children who were much younger than had been previously thought possible. They built up concepts through repeated exposure to case studies, and through encouraging the learner to note, discuss and mark similarities, and to draw from this the abstraction that was encompassed in the concept. The innovation was in the recognition that the abstraction, the concept, was best not taught directly, as a definition. However, to be useful, abstract concepts need some shared contextual meanings, and to develop these, we need to trade the words about, to use them with references to our experiences, so that we use them in a way that others understand. This is why classroom discussion must take place, so that meanings can be jointly constructed, not rote-learned in isolation (Bruner and Haste, 1987)

One problem that this approach can lead to is to over-emphasis on the issues, or the experiential element of the learning. It is possible to develop an approach through a whole series of important social and political issues - engaging to the children, focussed on experiences, arousing concern - which are not harnessed to any underlying conceptual structures or frameworks. A teacher can develop lively classroom topics on environmental issues, but without an attempt to encourage reflection on the principles of political behaviour that lie behind them, a valuable educational experience is lost. Children need to construct a view of (adult) behaviour that enables them to see competing interests, power structures, systems of law construction and of justice and authority systems that underpin how these issues are dealt with, and about why they are issues. This contrasts starkly with a strong primary ideology towards a consensual view - that the world should be presented to young children in a 'cosy' way.

It is also tempting to take short-cuts, or to mistake the outcome for the process. Given a conceptual map, or a grouping of key concepts (as given, for example, by Crick, 1974), it is possible to offer children ready-made, hand-me-down definitions or summaries that become the 'correct' answer. This is one of the traditions of the pedagogue in popular culture and experience: the teacher knows, and tells the learner what is to be known. This leads to a model of transmitting accepted knowledge: politics is a structured activity with defined institutions, procedures and conventions. When one has the facts, the knowledge, then one can begin to understand political activity. This is the kind of political education that politicians would have us promote - explanations of the wonders of the existing system that confirm the legitimacy of politicians to the young, and the justice and the equity that they promote. The trouble is that the pupils know better: they are aware that despite its rhetoric, the system isn't handling a whole range of social, political and economic issues that concern them - racism, poverty, the environment, housing, pollution,

corruption. If one wants to engage children in a learning process about politics, one has to start with the issues that concern them.

The solution is a delicate balance combining several elements: experiences, issues, concepts and structures and processes. All are necessary components - no single one may be left out. The sequence of the learning programme is also critical.

Firstly, begin with issues firmly grounded in the pupils' own experience. Issues selected must provoke some differences in the class. The way to engage children in political education is to get them to talk, discuss and argue about controversial issues, such as poverty, homelessness, pollution, capitalism, gender, race and language. The role of the teacher is to facilitate argument, to protect different points of view, and to be prepared to challenge the children's viewpoints

Secondly, the teacher plans out a programme, mapping the events and processes that surround the issue on a conceptual map. Crick's conceptual framework could be useful, to check that debates and arguments include some core ideas of politics - rule of law, representation, democracy, political rights, separation of powers, and more - and to ensure that discussion leads to understanding of how these concepts relate to the issues and cases discussed. Issue-based teaching needs a conceptual framework in the mind of the teacher if it is to amount to a political education.

Thirdly, the teacher needs to engage in discussion: to be provocative, be a chair that allows dissent, that puts forward her/his views (but maintains that it is only a view), that protects minorities, that advocates alternative positions. The teacher's role is not neutral - we do not want children to be neutral on issues that they are passionate about. But the teacher is also a chair and must allow access - encouraging the quieter and more reticent, protecting the rights of the minority, and so on. Teachers must also put forward views that have not been expressed, putting challenges to the children's views - if necessary emphasising that these are not their own views - in a way that allows the class to respond, to rebut, and to challenge them. If there is unanimity in the class, then pupils need to know that others may have different views and to rehearse their arguments against these.

Fourthly, encourage some finding out of information by the class, about alternatives, about facts. This stage is a return to more traditional teaching: it may involve reference sources and library work, but may also involve interviewing people, surveys, talking with parents and with other adults, or visits to particular locations.

Fifthly, re-engage in debate, bringing in the new knowledge that the children have researched, and encourage reflection, comparison, alternatives that can be used to encourage the drawing out of generalisations. Conceptual learning begins to become evident. When a child begins to draw two events together, and can point to similarities in them, analyse the commonalities and begin to make a prediction, a rule that might apply - this is when the concept begins. The principle is to get the child who put the proposition forward to rethink it, and to accommodate the new material in a reformulation.

Sixthly, the teacher will need to provide the necessary structural information about the processes, procedures and forms of the political system that will enlighten and supplement the class's understanding. Voting procedure, legislative processes, officers of state, roles of legislators, rules of law and bills of rights: all this will now - and probably

only now - be of interest and relevance. The machinery is much more interesting, and better understood, when the child knows what s/he wants to do with it.

This is challenging. Teachers need a broad understanding of how structures work (not a detailed knowledge of the machinery of government); a conceptual framework onto which they can map issues as they arise; and to maintain a pedagogic style that permits them *not* to know the answers, and to not be the authority. To get away from safe teaching about structures and processes, about the neutral and the bland, we need to ensure that teachers are equipped with a wide conceptual understanding, with a knowledge of the issues that might illustrate these, and with the skills to manage covering the issues of participatory democracy through handling classroom political debate. Preliminary investigation suggests that there is much work to be done in developing these skills (Holden, 1999).

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