This paper is taken from

The Experience of Citizenship
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication

The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

The power is in the hand of the beholder: What is a democracy in pre-schools, in the mind of a pre-school teacher?

Kristín Dýrfjörð
Early Childhood Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Akureyri (Iceland)

The aim of this study is to understand how pre-school teachers in Iceland value democratic behaviour in pre-schools, and to ask how, through their pedagogical work, pre-school teachers can scaffold or build up a democratic society within the pre-schools, in order to help children to realise that they are citizens with both rights and duties. Aðalbjarnardóttir (2000) points out that surprisingly few studies have focused on teachers' professional assessment of the importance of working on citizenship issues. However, she also claims that teachers have a key role in organising constructive and meaningful experiences for their students in citizenship education. I agree with Aðalbjarnadóttir's assertion, and think that it is important for all teachers to acknowledge their role in citizenship education. The teacher is a crucial figure in every school and civic education depends on her/his views and skills. In pre-school teacher education in Iceland it has long been stressed that the humanistic understanding of the teacher governs his or her pedagogical action. Therefore it must be important to know the ideas on which the teachers base their pedagogy.

What is citizenship?

Citizenship for young children; is there such a concept or a reality? What could constitute a citizenship for the young child? Is it something different to citizenship for an adult, for example? To write about citizenship it is necessary to first look at the concept of democracy as understood within certain contexts. In the Icelandic National Curriculum for Pre-schools, it is clear that citizenship is understood as being an active member of a democratic society.

According to Ocaña (2003), citizenship is not a passive condition, that is to say, enjoying a series of rights and freedoms, but should be active, based on political and civic participation. He argues that national citizenship has been constructed historically through such social participation and this involvement has often taken the form of clashes and conflicts. In the long term this has lead to the development of a set of civil, political and social rights and duties, and a consciousness of identity. This is the cultural and historical route that early childhood educators have to follow when educating and talking about both citizenship and about children becoming active members of their societies. Korsgaard (2001a) explains what constitutes democratic citizenship in a similar way. He distinguishes diverse kinds of citizenship, but states that it is always a question of belonging, and that this a dual aspect - that of a status and that of a role. Korsgaard (2001b) also declares that the first right of a citizen is the right to establish law and the first duty of a citizen is to respect that law.

How does the child construct ideas about citizenship and democracy?

An important related question concerns how the child constructs ideas about citizenship and democracy. Cox (in Howard and Gill, 2000) believes that children need more than just formal knowledge of how a political system works. She says that if they are to become active and socially conscious citizens they also need to understand the purposes of democratic systems and the principles that underpin democratic citizenship. Logically then, citizenship education should begin with and build on the child's already existing understanding and experience of power in the world. Hence, the role and the views of the pre-school teacher become very important: it is essential that she/he understands the underlying concepts of democracy.

An important aspect of democracy is the existence of *rules*, both those that govern our societies and those that govern our daily lives. In pre-schools some rules can be established by children - but not all. In my experience, children realise who has the power in the pre-school, including the power to establish or change rules, at a very young age. When asked who is in charge they seem to have a solid knowledge of the hierarchical structure within the organisation. This is in accord with research by Howard and Gill (2000) on children's understandings of power relationships. However not all rules are rules that may or can be changed at will. Some rules or laws are fundamental laws and are considered to be universal. The respect for and of those laws is one of the things that gives us our humanity.

Various national curricula reflect a particular view on rules and their function for our society. For example, in the *National Curriculum for Icelandic Pre-schools* it says:

> A child should be taught democratic practices in pre-school. It [the child] should take part in planning; making decisions and evaluation. Various plans which concern the child and its interests should be discussed with the child. … As a beginning democratic working method it is recommended that the children are involved in setting rules for the group and discussing those rules. (National Curriculum for Icelandic Pre-schools, 1999:…).

It is further stressed that the pre-school has an obligation to teach the child how to live and participate in democratic societies (*National Curriculum for Icelandic Pre-schools*, 1999).

These words from the Icelandic National Curriculum probably apply to many early childhood programs within Europe. How this is thought to work and to be practiced is another question, which in our pluralistic, post-modern societies may have many answers. Asking educators how they organise their pedagogical work to accomplish this democratic goal is part of this study.

Developing political concepts/learning that leads to democracy

Howard and Gill (2000) state that from their experience, it is clear that children develop a range of political concepts, both broadly and narrowly defined, from their knowledge of life in families, schools and from exposure to the media. They argue that any civics curriculum should recognise this everyday knowledge and use it as a starting point. The question is which types of education and learning process favour the development of democratic personalities in institutions during the early years? Do early childhood educators have any answers or ideas regarding this issue?

Learning for citizenship

The pre-school child is a young human being whose perspective on life differs from that of an adult. Therefore it is of utmost importance to find ways to work with and educate young children on how to be active citizens, in a way that has the child's perspective at heart. Learning for citizenship for the pre-school child cannot primarily be based on giving information about democracy, human rights or omnipresent values, but on the other hand, identity, feelings and life-skills must be emphasised. Harðardóttir (2003) asked Icelandic parents of pre-school children what they regarded as important for their children to learn in pre-school. Three things stood out; firstly, to be able to consider other peoples' feeling and viewpoints; secondly, to be able to follow rules, and thirdly that the child be able to use conversation as a tool. It is apparent that these parents have mainly democratic views at heart. Following from these points, and as a base or framework for understanding citizenship, the work of Osler (2001) is useful. She identified some supplementary features of projects initiated by the European Commission that contribute to the development of active citizenship. According to Osler particular key skills are important for developing active citizenship. Her framework identified:

- *Information and rights.* It is important that children learn how to access information. They need to learn that each individual has certain rights but at the same time have to understand that other children have rights too.
- *Identities and feelings*. The child can learn to reflect on her/his own identity through contact with others. S/he can be guided to develop empathy with other children in order to accept their needs and to play together with them.
- *Inclusion*. The important thing is doing *with*, not doing *for*. Children can do things together as a group and learn to help each other, despite differences in age, cultural backgrounds etc. This includes also a connection to wider society.
- *Skills.* The children learn how to solve conflicts, how to argue and use their knowledge about their rights and duties.

In the next part of this paper I try to link Osler's model to pre-school teachers' ideas on democracy and citizenship.

Method

This paper uses material from a qualitative study among Icelandic early childhood educators. It is based on focus group interviews with educators from five different pre-schools (fifteen people in total). I wrote a questionnaire-guide that included questions on working methods, asked for descriptions from daily life in schools, and what part educators believe that democracy plays in their work. Before I met the groups I sent them the guide by email so they could prepare and reflect on the issues. My interviews took place from September 2003 to May 2004.

The teachers were asked to give a sample of what they considered as democratic behaviour by the children, and how they as teachers could support such behaviour. This study is ongoing but preliminary findings indicate that pre-school teachers use a variety of pedagogical methods to accomplish their goal. They gave different kinds of examples of behaviour to emphasise their point of view. The interviews were divided into themes, and there follow some examples of these.

Democracy

Almost every teacher mentioned first what might be called the ‘obvious’ definition of democracy; that of the right of the majority when decisions are made by voting. Asked to elaborate on this, they stressed the importance of respecting others, and of not opposing the right of the individual to be heard. In one pre-school, however, the teacher described democracy as being a conversation between different viewpoints with the aim of making a shared decision. Almost all respondents agreed on the right of pre-school children to choose within certain limits, these limits being the rules of rules of the pre-school and respect for other peoples' feelings and their rights. To be able to take part in this way, the child has to feel psychologically safe.

The main concepts that were mentioned as foundations for children becoming active citizens were self-respect, self-esteem, confidence, trust, and friendship. In all schools, developing self respect and respect for others are considered as one of the main aims of all pre-school education.

In two schools the teachers talked about working with virtues. They said that they believed that by weaving virtues into the everyday life of the school in all aspects of pedagogy, the effect was throwing a stone into a pond, and that virtues would ripple through society.

The teachers' role

The teachers considered their own role in democratic education as important. This role was two-fold: how they organise the physical environment and their pedagogical work, and how these are affected by their own vision and values. They regard themselves as important role models; children learn what they see in practice. Therefore how they talk to and act towards others is vital. The teachers said that how they organise, what materials are offered and how they are used, is critical. In one teacher’s words:

> It is always the teacher, and the material that she has to offer. She needs to make time and space. The child needs quietness, needs to be encouraged to see different viewpoints and come to a conclusion, and she needs to hold on to her curiosity. … Obviously, a person needs to exercise her brain to be able to participate in democracy.

Another teacher stated that democracy is always in the hand of the teacher or in her own words 'the power is in the hand of the beholder'.

The child

The key position of the child itself cannot be overlooked. The environment that can be provided is not sufficient. In one school, the teachers told about how children help each other: on Fridays everybody in the school gathers and enjoys belonging to a group by doing something together. One boy was very shy, but after a few months he stood up at the Friday gathering and wanted to sing a song. He could hardly manage this, but another child went to him, asked if he needed to have someone at his side, and then took his hand. The teachers pointed out that the Friday gatherings strengthen children's ability to stand up and voice their opinions, in that way helping them to become active citizens in a democratic society. When asked for examples of democratic behaviour by children, they mentioned most often incidents involving children helping other children, negotiating, showing empathy and concerns for others.

On rules

In one of the schools a teacher said: 'You can't practise a rule that you don't believe in, therefore we have different rules in different classrooms'. The assumption was made that most Icelanders have been brought up in similar way in a homogeneous society, and that as a result the same rules are more or less respected and considered important, as part of Icelandic heritage and culture. When asked about people from other cultural backgrounds moving into the society with their own sets of rules, one teacher said: 'Then their rules will be valued', but another teacher from the same school asked; 'Why does that person not confirm to our rules, it that not a reasonably expectation?' This is clearly a controversial issue.

Teachers from another school agreed that they shared a pedagogical vision that has led to sharing similar views on rules and how to pursue them.

Some rules are for the greater good of the children: such rules are not necessarily discussed with them, as it is looked upon as both impractical and time-consuming. Asked to give an example of these, one pre-school teacher said

> It is nice to constantly discuss everything, but we don't always have the time. It is not practical at all times to explain rules, sometime you just have to act. When twenty children are going out at same time you don't have the privilege to sit down and discuss with each and every one. Last

> week a boy wanted to go out just in his sweater, but it was cold outside and he had recently been sick. I told him he had to dress himself in warm clothes. In my mind there was no question about discussing this. Some things you discuss, some things you don't.

Participation

It is clear that the teachers have strong feelings regarding participation. This view is reflected by one teacher: 'It is important that everybody is a doer and everybody has both the wit and the will to participate'. At the same time, teachers realise that to be 'a doer' is not reasonable at all times, and other forces may sometimes rule. As one teacher said: 'It is this split between total control and partial control. There is always some control, it can be time, it can be something else. There is always control in one form or another, the issue is to find the balance'.

Being part of a minority – to listen and to be listened to

Is it possible to be an active citizen even when one belongs to a minority? Some responses were 'the children learn that you have to listen' and 'Sometimes they come up with ideas that you can't carry out but you can listen'. To be listened to, and thus given a chance to let your opinions to be heard, is a democratic right every child should have. Another teacher said that in a democratic society you are not always in the majority and that is all right as long as you have the right to give your opinion and be listened to. In the pre-school it is therefore equally important to learn that you cannot at all time win, and that sometimes you have to deal with the disappointment of loosing.

Discussion

My journey began with a few questions regarding the what and how of democratic education in pre-schools. In this short paper there is not enough space to give detailed descriptions; this will have to wait for another opportunity.

When teachers relate that children need time and space to develop their abilities, this gives an indication that they are valuing the rights of the child. When children learn that people may have different points of views, they are learning to identify with other peoples' feeling but also becoming aware of their own identity. For a child to understand that everyone has the right to be part of a game or to be listened too, this may in the long run also lead to better understanding of inclusion. It is obvious that there is an alignment between the pre-school teachers' view on what is important and the parents' views as reported by Harðadóttir (2003). It is also clear that the role of the teacher is to organise both the physical and psychological environment in such a way that it gives children the opportunity to work on their skills to both solve and to live with conflicts. Democratic values in the mind of a pre-school teacher certainly appear to go hand-in-hand with what both the education professionals and the parents believe is important for citizenship education. The next question to be asked is whether this works in reality – are pre-schools democratic institutions?

References

Act of Law regarding Pre-schools in Iceland. Number. 78/1994. [lög um leikskóla].
Aðalbjarnardóttir. Sigrún. (2001). Cultivating citizenship awareness: the school setting. In A. Ross (ed). *Learning for a Democratic Europe*. pp 69-74. London. Cice puplication.
Guðrún Alda Harðardóttir. (2003). Raddir barna. [Children voices] *Röggur*. Vol. 5:1, .2-11.
Howard, Sue. and Gill, Judith. (2000). The pebble in the pond: Children's constructions of power, politics and democratic citizenship. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Vol 30:3, 357 - 389.
Korsgaard, Ove. (2001a).The struggle regarding citizenship. In O. Korsgaard, Walters and Andresen (ed). *Learning for Democratic citizenship*. Copenhagen. Association for World Education and the Danish University of Education.
Korsgaard, Ove. (2001b). Why has citizenship become such a vogue world? in O. Korsgaard, Walters and Andresen (ed). *Learning for Democratic citizenship*. Copenhagen. Association for World Education and the Danish University of Education.
National Curriculum for Pre-school. [English version]. (1999). Reykjavík. Menntamálaráðuneytið.
Ocaña, Juan Carlos. 2003. *European Integration Process – The history of the European Union and European citizenship*.
http://www.historiasiglo20.org/europe/ciudadident.htm#Participación%20democrática [Taken of the web 5. May 2004]
Osler, Audrey. (2001). Learning for Active Citizenship in Europe, in Korsgaard Walters and Andresen (ed). *Learning for Democratic citizenship*. Copenhagen. Association for World Education and the Danish University of Education.