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Symposium: Children as citizens: an international perspective

This symposium brings together research undertaken in nine very different countries. The project was introduced the 2005 CiCe conference (*Teaching Citizenship*, pp 13 – 23), after which new researchers joined and reported in 2006 (*Citizenship Education: Europe and the World*, pp 535-540). In this symposium, researchers from Spain, South Africa, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Canada report on findings from 660 children and discuss the implications for educators in their countries. They focus on understanding children's hopes and fears for the future and their perspectives on poverty, employment, crime and violence, prejudice and racism, and the environment at local and global levels. Whilst children share some common global concerns, local circumstances and the school curriculum significantly influence their responses and the extent to which they are able to engage in action for change.

Children as citizens: an international perspective

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Abstract

This paper introduces the project and review current research on the concerns of young people around contemporary local and global issues. It will outline the methodology used in the study and will introduce some of the key similarities and differences between the countries, in particular the data from the UK. Recent guidelines in England advise that children learn about peace and conflict, globalisation, poverty, prejudice and sustainability, yet little is known about children's interest in such issues. 77

Introduction

What is it that concerns children growing up in the 21st century? How do they see the future? Are their concerns a reflection of events in their local communities or are there some hopes and fears which are common to young people across the globe? Many countries are now grappling with how best to educate their children for the challenges of the 21st century; one which includes increasing global conflict, social justice and environmental concerns. Recent guidelines in England advise that children learn about peace and conflict, globalisation, poverty, prejudice and sustainability (DfES, 2005). Yet little is known about children's interest in such issues. This lack of knowledge about young people's views reflects their continuing marginalisation from current debates on issues affecting them. This 'traditional exclusion of young people' says Rudduck and Flutter, is 'founded upon an outdated view of childhood which fails to acknowledge children's capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives' (2000: 86).

The research reported in this collection of six papers redresses this balance. The study set out to listen to children, acknowledging and taking seriously what they have to say about issues affecting their lives. The focus is on children aged 8-12 as this age group has received less attention than their secondary counterparts. In so doing it contributes to our knowledge about children's thinking and to the current debate on an appropriate curriculum for the 21st century.

The research started in the UK but has since grown to include over 1300 children from nine very diverse countries. They speak about their hopes and fears for their personal, local and global futures, their views on key global issues, and action for change. The findings reveal that some concerns and values appear constant across countries, others are country specific and yet others are gender specific. There are implications for all those involved in education for global citizenship.

Images of the future

People's hopes and fears for the future influence what they are prepared to do in the present and what they are prepared to work towards. Hicks (2002) and others have suggested that images of the future are a critical measure of a society's inner well being, acting as a mirror of our times. Ascertaining the views of young people towards the future thus serves as an indicator of their current concerns, beliefs and actions as well as indicating the role they see for themselves as future citizens. Teachers who are aware of these views can formulate curricula that are responsive to children's needs so that rather than fear change, they 'feel they can manipulate events and action in the future' (Page, 2000: 48).

Research into secondary pupils' concerns for the future shows young people optimistic about their own future but less optimistic about the future for their country. Students in Finland fear that that their country will descend into 'a society of corruption, unemployment, growing environmental problems, drugs and dirty urban centres full of poor people struggling for their livelihood' (Rubin, 2002: 103). Their concerns for the global community centre on poverty and hunger, wars, overpopulation and environmental pollution. Swedish students, while positive about their own future, are less positive about their country's future and worry about economic conditions. They are even less optimistic about the global future with their fears centring around environmental issues and global conflict (Oscarsson, 1996).

Hutchinson, reporting from Australia, notes that many teenagers feel a sense of helplessness and despondency about the problems they think society will have to face in the near future. Some think that 'high-tech' solutions may be found but others are keen to have a more equitable and sustainable world where conflicts are dealt with constructively rather than destructively. All say that little time is given over to such issues in their schooling - an omission which they regret. (Hutchinson, 1996)

There has been little research into the views of primary children. Page, investigating the hopes and fears of four and five year olds in Australia, found that they 'were clearly engaged by current issues of pollution, the environment, contemporary music and warfare' (2000: 31). Research conducted in 1994 (Hicks and Holden, 1995) was the first

to explore the hopes and fears of UK pupils (aged 7, 11, 14 and 18), making it possible to track the development of children's thinking. The study indicated that British children aged 7 and 11 shared many of the concerns of secondary students noted above but were less cynical and more optimistic. They showed a growing awareness of social and environmental issues and were concerned that their local communities would be affected adversely by increasing violence, unemployment and racism and a lack of facilities for young people. Similar concerns were expressed at a global level, with many children worried about an increasing number of wars. Most children wished to be better informed about these issues, learning more about them at school.

This research has taken place in Europe and Australia. There have been no studies in less economically developed countries so it is not known to what extent these findings are shared. Again, the research reported on here aims to redress the balance.

Local and global issues: a rationale

Whilst any study of children's hopes and fears for the future must allow them to speak freely about matters of personal interest, we also need to know what they feel about key global issues which affect all communities. Hicks maintains that 'long standing global issues - those to do with poverty, environment, conflict and social justice - constantly take on new forms, whether in relation to the complexities of globalisation, the "war against terrorism" or global climate change' and that children need to understand the implications of these for their own lives (2007:1).

A belief that young people should be educated about such key issues was one of the reasons behind the introduction of Education for Citizenship (DfES/QCA 1999) in English schools. This has been supplemented by advice to all schools to include a 'global dimension' in their curriculum (DfES 2005). These initiatives reflect European and international concerns about how to educate young people effectively for global citizenship in the light of declining political engagement and social cohesion (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

This study thus investigates both children's hopes and fears for the future and their understanding of key local and global issues, identified here as poverty, employment, health, conflict, racism and the environment. It also examines the extent to which children feel prepared for, and committed to, action for change.

The study

The first study of pupils aged 7, 11, 14 and 18 was carried out in 1994 in the UK (Hicks and Holden, 1995). A follow up study in the UK in 2004 with 9 to 11 year olds in the UK has been reported in Holden (2006). The findings were presented at conferences in the UK, Slovenia and Canada, and as a result researchers from Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Ukraine, South Africa, The Gambia, Canada, Sweden and Spain joined the study. The focus has been on children aged 8 – 12 as what this age group has to say has implications for primary teaching, enabling us to access pupils' reflections on what has been taught, and implications for secondary teaching, in terms of what young people would like to

achieve. These children may be the key to turning around the negativity and despair evidenced (above) by so many secondary students.

The research design

In each country researchers were asked to select schools from a cross section of urban and rural environments and a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. They were asked to have a balance of boys and girls and to include children from minority groups wherever possible.

The research design was common to all countries. All children were given a questionnaire, which was translated into the language of the country. The first section asked children to write freely about their hopes and fears for their personal future, the future of the local area and the future of the world. The open ended nature of the questions allowed for a variety of responses. Three closed questions asked if they thought life in the future would be better or worse for them personally, for those in their community and for 'people in the world as a whole'. The second section focussed on particular issues: unemployment, violence, prejudice and racism, health, the environment and poverty, asking children if they thought that these issues would get better, stay the same or get worse in the future. The final section focused on action for change, looking at what organisations children were involved in and what they had learnt about such issues at school. Children's drawings of their vision of the world in 2030 added another perspective to the findings.

In order to illuminate the data from the questionnaires, a sample of children was interviewed from each class. The interviews were carried out in small groups of three to six children on the same day as the questionnaires and were tape recorded with the children's permission.

The data from the questionnaires required two methods of analysis. The responses to the closed questions were entered into an Excel spreadsheet which yielded descriptive statistics showing the percentage of responses to predetermined answers represented by a three point or five point scale. The open questions were first coded for emerging themes and ideas, then represented statistically in terms of the percentage of children that voiced these perceptions. The interviews were used to ask the children to say more about their responses to the key issues identified in section two. The transcripts were coded in line with the themes then analysed to reflect the breadth of the hopes and fears that were expressed in relation to these. The focus was not to quantify the most common or least commonly held concerns amongst these children, but rather to provide qualitative data which explored the parameters of their thinking.

The findings

Findings from England have been reported elsewhere (Holden, 2006; 2007). Findings from Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, Canada, Spain and Ukraine will be reported on in depth in these conference proceedings. What follows here is a brief overview of the findings from the six countries to allow for inter-country comparisons. This indicates

commonalities and differences between children and the extent to which their perceptions reflect local contexts.

Optimism about the future

The children were asked to rate on a five point scale, whether the future would be much better, a bit better, the same, a bit worse or much worse than it is today for their own future, the future of their local community and the global future. Kyrgyz children were the most optimistic about the future being better on all fronts, followed by South African and Ukrainian children, whereas children from more affluent European or North American countries were the least optimistic. However, all children were more optimistic that their personal future would be better than the future for other people, both locally and globally.

Concerns for the future

The themes highlighted in the following tables emerged as categories in the qualitative analysis of children's responses when asked to list three fears for their personal future, the future of their locality and the global future. The themes are thus those which children themselves have identified as significant. The numbers indicate the ranking associated with each theme, such that 1 represents the most frequently reported theme.

The personal future

	England	Kyrgyzstan	S Africa	Ukraine	Spain	Canada
Health	1	1	1	4	4	1
Success & failure	4	2	5	1	2	3
Poverty	5	6	4	5	5	4
Relationships	2	3	3	2	1	2
Being a victim	3	4	2	3	3	4
War	NA	5	NA	NA	NA	NA

Table 1: Concerns for the personal future (n=1090)

When asked about their hopes for the future, children were unanimous in wanting education, employment and good relationships, but when asked about their fears, there were more differences across national boundaries as indicated in Table 1. Ill health is feared by many, with South African children mentioning HIV/AIDS and Kyrgyz children worrying about TB, bird flu, malaria and hepatitis. Personal failure (unemployment, homelessness) is a particular concern for Ukrainian, Kyrgyz and Spanish children and the latter worry about relationship breakdown. Only Kyrgyz children harbour personal fears with regard to war.

The local future

	England	Kyrgyzstan	S Africa	Ukraine	Spain	Canada
Violence/crime	1	4	1	4	1	3
Environment	2	6	5	3	2	1
Community Issues	3	7	3	5	3	4
Poverty	4	5	3	2	4	2
Health	5	3	2	7	6	5
Disasters	6	1	7	NA	5	6
War	NA	2	NA	NA	NA	NA
Politics	NA	NA	6	1	NA	NA
Culture	NA	NA	NA	6	NA	NA

Table 2: Concerns for the local future (n=1090)

Children from England, South Africa and Spain identify crime and violence as a particular concern in their community, whereas in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine this is positioned relatively low down their priorities. However, in Kyrgyzstan, war emerges as a local issue reflecting recent political instability. Canadian, English and Spanish children appear much more concerned about the environment than their peers in less developed countries. Every child in Kyrgyzstan identified a possible natural disaster as something to fear, while children from the Ukraine talked about local politics, referring to recent elections and Yuschenko. Only comments from the Ukraine and South Africa generated a theme coded as political. In South Africa children worried about the return of apartheid and the instability caused by having Zimbabwe as a neighbour.

The global future

	England	Kyrgyzstan	S Africa	Ukraine	Spain	Canada
War	1	3	2	NA	1	2
Disasters	2	1	4	1	2	4
Environment	3	6	3	6	5	1
Poverty	4	7	6	4	3	3
Violence/crime	5	4	1	4	6	5
Health	6	2	5	7	7	6
Relationships	NA	5	NA	1	4	7
Traffic	NA	7	NA	NA	NA	NA
Education	NA	NA	7	NA	NA	NA
Politics	NA	NA	8	3	NA	NA

Table 3: Concerns for the global future (n=1090)

There are five common global fears: war, disasters, poverty, crime and violence and health, many of which echo those identified in the local area. Fear of global conflict is a real concern for the majority of the children and is related to local situations. Kyrgyz children refer to unrest between Ukraine and Russia regarding a gas pipeline; English children mention the war in Iraq and Spanish children talk about the terrorist group ETA. South African children name crime and violence as the issue they are most concerned about both locally and globally. The children from the Ukraine cite poor relationships between countries as their main concern, whereas the fears of Canadian children for the environment mirror what they have to say about their local area.

Action for change

Most children believed they could do something to help make the world a better place. The children from Kyrgyzstan were the most positive about what they could do, followed by the South African children, then the Canadian and Ukrainian, with the English and Spanish being the least optimistic. However when questioned on what they had actually done, the tables were turned and the English children appeared to have been the most active. They talked about recycling, saving energy, picking up litter and raising money for charity.

Conclusion

It is apparent that children's concerns for the future reflect local circumstances, such as health related problems or crime and violence. They indicate the extent to which children are immersed in their communities, aware of the problems and mindful of the changes needed to bring about better living conditions. The ability of children to comment on global issues illustrates the rise of information technology: even those in the remotest and poorest areas referred to the internet and TV.

Whilst the UK children were the least optimistic about the future being better, they appeared to have been the most active in working for change. By contrast Kyrgyz and South African children had not done much in school at a practical level and were from less affluent nations but were more optimistic about the possibilities for change. Such apparent anomalies need exploring in more depth. The following papers will now report the findings from each country, illuminating the statistics with interview data and contextual information. It is hoped that the voices of children from these very diverse countries will add to our knowledge about how best to educate the next generation of global citizens.

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