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Parents' Views on the Importance of Personal, Social and Citizenship Education

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Abstract

This paper reports on parents' perceptions of personal, social and citizenship education (PSCE) in both the home and the classroom as part of a larger study on citizenship education and children's self-esteem conducted during the 2007-2008 school year in two primary schools in France. The data collected through semi-structured interviews with the parents/carers of twelve focus children illustrate that while some parents held ambivalent or negative attitudes about the teachers' role in helping children to become more responsible individuals within a classroom context, most parents held positive attitudes toward PSCE as a means of raising self-esteem and were able to point to direct examples of influential practices.

Introduction

Personal, Social and Citizenship Education (PSCE) in France appears under the title *Education Civique* in the National Curriculum. The main objective of this area of education for primary school children revolves around helping children learn how to integrate well in the community of the class and the school. This includes learning to respect, listen and accept the other members of the community, learning how to express one's ideas in a democratic way, developing thinking and decision making skills and learning how to take initiative on various levels (M.E.N, 2007). Within the outline of this programme teachers have the freedom to choose the practices which they feel will allow them to meet these objectives.

This data for this paper were collected as part of a larger doctoral study on citizenship education and children's self-esteem. The main aim of this study was to explore and describe the role of personal, social and citizenship education in fostering positive self-esteem in two classrooms of 7-10 year old children in France. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents/carers of twelve focus children in the first trimester of the 2007-2008 school year in order to build up a complete picture of the classroom context and to obtain a deeper understanding of the influence this context had on the lives of the participants.

Within the context of effective citizenship education, research has shown evidence that teachers are often unaware of parents' desire to be informed of classroom practices with the aim of supporting their child's learning (Hughes, 1994). In addition to this, it has been advocated that in introducing PSCE in the classroom, it is vital to know what parents' attitudes are to the various areas of PSCE and to know where they situate the school's role in this area (Holden, 2004). This paper aims to illuminate parents' views of the importance of PSCE in schools, the place they feel this area of the curriculum should

occupy in the classroom and the impact some PSCE practices may have on their child's self-esteem and sense of responsibility.

Background

Developmental psychologists have underlined the role that responsibility plays in the development of a positive sense of self in children (Dweck, 1999; Harter, 1999; Mruk, 1999). One of the aims of Personal, Social and Citizenship Education (PSCE) is to provide students with opportunities to take on various responsibilities within the classroom as well as to consider their extended responsibilities outside the classroom. Such opportunities can be found within activities such as class councils, circle time, cooperative group work or appointed responsibilities within the class. These activities can be the framework through which students gain 'the confidence to be able to voice their opinions, to listen to others, to empathise, and to make moral judgements' (Clough and Holden, 2002, p.63).

Given the influence that parents have on the development of their children's self-esteem, identity and sense of responsibility (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Emler, 2001) it appears essential to listen to what they have to say about these issues. Previous research also advocates the necessity of including parents in the implementation of PSCE programmes underlining the importance of building on practices already being implemented in the home and of creating and maintaining a healthy dialogue between parents and teachers (Brown, 2002; Vincent and Martin, 2002; Holden, 2004).

As part of the author's doctoral study on effective PSCE in French schools, two primary school teachers from two different schools implemented a range of PSCE practices which included activities such as circle time, cooperative games, philosophy for children, class councils, co-operative group work, the use of portfolios, discussion of controversial issues as well as various other activities which aimed to promote self-awareness and empathy among students.

Several questions were raised at the start of the case studies:

- What, if any, influence did these activities have on the daily lives of the children?
- Did parents actually have any awareness of PSCE practices implemented in the classroom and if so how did the parents or carers feel about them?
- What similarities and/or differences existed between practices in the home and at school?
- How did parents view the development of self-esteem and responsibility and how did they see the teacher's role in this area?

The Study

Methodology

The parents and carers of a group of focus children from these two classrooms were interviewed as a means of providing some insight into these areas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents/carers of twelve focus children in the first

trimester of the 2007-2008 school year. A cross section of children was selected from each of the classrooms to form two focus groups comprised of two low, two medium and two high self-esteem children for each class.

The parents of the focus children from school A came from predominantly white middle-class backgrounds. Six parents, five mothers and one father, one parent for each of the focus children, were interviewed in their homes. In contrast, the area in which School B was located contained various low-income housing areas, contributing to a lower socio-economic status of the focus children which ranged from low to medium. A total of nine parents, two mothers, one father, and three sets of parents (mother and father together), one of which consisted of the focus child's father and his stepmother, were interviewed. Four of the interviews were conducted in the parents' homes and two were conducted at the school at the request of the parents.

The interview questions revolved around the themes of self-esteem and responsibility and their development in the classroom and in the home. Parents were asked to explain whether they felt it was a teacher's role to contribute to the development of self-esteem and responsibility in their children. They were also asked whether they had noticed any practices which had influenced their child's self-esteem or had helped their child become more responsible. One of the questions specifically asked parents whether they felt there was a link between helping a child become responsible and the development of his or her self-esteem.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule which allowed the parents the freedom to discuss various aspects of self-esteem and responsibility in the home and at school. The interviews ranged between 25 to 65 minutes and were recorded with the parents' permission.

Findings and Analysis

How did parents view personal, social, and citizenship education in the classroom?
Although parents were not specifically asked how they viewed PSCE practices in the classroom, this theme was evoked though various questions addressing practices which the parents felt had influenced their child with regards to their self-esteem or responsibility and how they viewed the teacher's role in these areas. In response to the question of whether they felt it was a teacher's role to help children become more responsible, several parents specifically expressed that they felt this was not the role of the teacher. One father said it was 'not the teacher's role to be a substitute for the parents' adding that 'school is for learning to read and to write and those kinds of activities. Civics is the parents' job'. Two other parents echoed this point of view saying that PSCE is 'primarily the parents' role' and that 'it shouldn't be the priority' for teachers.

In contrast to these parents' views, the majority of the parents expressed the view that parents and teachers were 'complementary' to each other, and that each provided 'continuity' for the other. One father described parents and teachers as 'links of a chain' stating that 'for parents all by themselves, it's not so easy, for teachers all by themselves it's not so easy, parents and teachers must be complementary.' Several parents suggested

that teachers have had to assume this role due to a certain 'laxness' or 'overindulgence' on the part of some parents who have not assumed their parental responsibilities. In this case, one father emphasised that 'teachers could be of great help'.

Many parents felt that teachers had a powerful and different kind of influence on children, referring to the large amount of time the children spend in class and the different nature of the responsibilities they were allowed to take on. One mother pointed out that the viewpoint of the teacher was at times more readily accepted than her own stating 'when the teachers say something it works right away but at home it's not the same.' A few of the parents felt that PSCE was an 'inherent part of the curriculum' and that the classroom was in some way 'the school of life' which should aim to prepare children for the future. One mother said 'Nowadays, you can't hide anything from children anyway … they know everything, as much as adults, which is not always an excellent thing but that's the way it is. I think that in fact you have to talk about these things'.

To what degree did parents feel PSCE practices had influenced their child?
Parents were also asked whether they had noticed any teaching practices which had had a positive influence on their child's self-esteem or which they felt had helped their child to become more responsible. Over half of the parents cited 'class responsibilities' held within the class as having a positive effect on these areas. These responsibilities were regular designated tasks assigned to children on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. In school B the students were able to gradually acquire greater responsibilities by demonstrating competence in smaller areas, whereas the teacher in school A focussed on giving every child a responsibility and encouraged the class to work as a team. The responsibilities assigned ranged from picking up papers off the floor, to erasing the board, to watching over the class when the teacher left the room. What might seem like everyday, ordinary classroom activities apparently had quite an influence on the children which led the parents to comment at length on the positive benefits of these. One mother whose son did not often show much enthusiasm for school said:

> When he is in charge of taking the chairs down in the morning he's so happy. You have to be on time, you have to leave earlier in the morning for school, he does this job really well … He gets there before the bell rings because it takes time to take the all chairs down and prepare the room. He is thrilled! It lasts for weeks and he never tires of doing it.

Most of the parents referred to how proud their children felt when accomplishing these tasks. One mother said her daughter took her responsibility 'very seriously', that 'she felt valued' and 'put her whole heart into it.

Nearly half of the parents mentioned class councils in this same way. The Class Council in France is a weekly activity which usually takes place at the end of the school week. The National Curriculum in France allows up to one half hour per week to what is officially referred to as the *débat règlé* (regular discussion time) (M.E.N., 2007). The Class Council includes all of the members of the class, follows a set agenda each week and works within a basic set of rules which ensure confidentiality and provide a safe environment in which children may express themselves. Each week a different child is

designated to be the president of the council. This role involves ensuring the agenda and council rules are followed, designating who may speak, and issuing warnings for misconduct when necessary. The issues that arise most frequently concern the daily functioning of the classroom and the relationships between the children. Children have the right to evoke problems or concerns but also have the possibility to praise or congratulate other children in the class for their behaviour, work, attitude or accomplishments.

One mother said the class council allowed the children to feel in control and have some sort of mastery over their own lives 'All of a sudden, they feel like they are the actors … the actors of their own lives. They express themselves, which is good, and they express themselves only if they want to.' Another mother referred to the fact that the children had an important influence on each other's behaviour and that they were perhaps more sensitive to the comments and judgements of their classmates than to those of the teacher, stating, 'You wouldn't believe how they [the children] are attentive to what the others say to them.' This mother went on to describe how surprised her daughter had recently been when congratulated by the class for having modified her behaviour, saying 'She said "Can you believe it? I was congratulated because I didn't chat in class this week!"' In addition to this, one mother spoke of a classroom election and a visit to the French parliament which was to take place, saying that 'it shows them that they can in fact take their place in society, in a socio-professional group. It's so important not to stay on the sidelines … you have to put up a fight these days.' This same mother emphasised the positive role of discussing current events and moral dilemmas in the classroom.

Several parents cited circle time, cooperative games and cooperative group work within the class as activities which helped them to 'learn to work together and to 'become responsible for each other'. Two parents identified class/school projects, and two stressed the positive influence on responsibility in having the homework assignments a week in advance. One father said he could not think of any specific activities which had helped his child become more responsible, but that this was achieved in 'a general manner' by the teacher. Another father, however, was completely opposed to children holding responsibilities within the classroom stating that 'those are the kinds of activities you do at home because you live there'.

Do the parents of the focus children feel there is a link between helping children become more responsible and raising their self-esteem?
All but two of the parents felt strongly that there was a definite link between children becoming responsible and having high self-esteem. Many of them said they felt one was not possible without the other and that in a certain sense they fed into each other. One father expressed it this way: 'One cannot necessarily function without the other. If they [children] have high self-esteem, they might be able to do certain things more easily, and then they'll have more self-confidence. And if you let them do certain things [on their own] they will have better self-esteem. They will perhaps have better self-esteem if they know that they themselves are able to do certain things on their own.' Several parents referred to the fact that having responsibilities helped the child feel 'valued' and led to the feeling of having a purpose and being recognised. The two mothers who felt that there was no definite link between responsibility and self-esteem referred to examples of adults who held important responsibilities but underneath were quite unsure of

themselves. However, one of the mothers did admit that she was not sure if one could generalise between children and adults.

Conclusions

Most of the parents knew quite a bit about the PSCE practices which had taken place in their child's classroom. It is important to stress that the examples they mentioned as having a positive effect on either the development of their child's self-esteem or responsibility came spontaneously from the parents themselves and were not solicited directly by the interviewer. In most cases, the examples that parents gave were backed up by quotes from their child or descriptions of their child at home which led the interviewer to believe that the children themselves had reported the classroom practices back to the parents and that they were the main source of information for them.

Overall, with the exception of one father, the parents interviewed supported the PSCE activities mentioned in the classroom and felt they had had a positive influence on their child and on the functioning of the classroom. It is interesting to note that the child of the father who felt PSCE type activities should only take place in the home refused to participate in most of these activities in class. Although this is an isolated example it can raise the question of the importance and influence of parental support with regards to PSCE practices and children's willingness and desire to take part in such practices.

PSCE practices do appear to play a crucial role in these classrooms for children who are having a difficult time in school for various reasons, whether it be learning difficulties, lack of social skills or a difficult family background. For these children, having responsibilities within the classroom either through taking chairs down in the morning before class, being responsible for materials or directing the class council, gave them an opportunity to be valued, and to learn about and feel they have their place in the world, albeit on a small scale. As one mother said 'they become actors of their own lives'. In providing a safe context within the classroom children are allowed to experiment with responsibility, decision making, and self-expression. This confirms the idea that schools function as 'mini-societies' which allow children the space to learn about and to practice democratic practices (Clough and Holden, 2002; M.E.N., 2007).

The overwhelming majority of the parents felt there was a definite link between giving children the opportunity to be responsible and their self-esteem. Interestingly, the parents of the children who had been identified as having high self-esteem were already practicing this in the home. In fact, when asked what they were doing at home to help their child become more responsible, they mentioned numerous tasks but described them in such a way that suggested they felt this was nothing extraordinary in itself. This could be evidence that the small everyday activities which take place in the classroom, such as the responsibilities described above, work together with and build on to what children are already practicing to reinforce the mechanisms which support self-confidence and healthy self-esteem.

Ways forward for educators

Despite teachers' possible apprehension with regards to including parents' views in their curriculum planning, this study, along with previous research (Holden, 2004; Vincent and Martin, 2002; Young, 2008), suggests that active teacher-parent partnerships in the planning of certain PSCE practices could have numerous benefits. An example of this can be seen in one study in which parents met with teachers to discuss and plan one area of the curriculum, where parents and teachers were able to 'exchange, to discover how each person's knowledge and skills could complement the others' and to build a relationship of trust and mutual respect' (Young, 2008, p.56). This is an aspect to take into consideration during curriculum planning stages.

Despite certain claims that self-esteem is essentially dependant on a child's primary caregivers (Emler, 2001; Kohn, 1994), this study has already begun to show evidence that what takes place in the classroom also contributes to the way a child sees him/herself, confirming previous research in this area (Humphrey, 2004; Lawrence, 2006). The parents/carers in this study stressed the important role the teacher played in the development of the self-esteem of the children in their classrooms. A majority of them pointed to a link between certain PSCE practices and their child's self-esteem. The teachers in these classrooms have also mentioned changes in some of the children's behaviour which they attribute in part to the positive influence of certain PSCE practices. This study which will continue until July 2008 also includes semi-structured interviews with the focus children and the use of a self-esteem questionnaire which contribute to further exploration of this area through its many different facets.

Perhaps one of the important elements to have emerged from this strand of the study is that almost all of the parents were able to point to practices which had helped their child become responsible and which had positively influenced their self-esteem. This is an important argument in favour of maintaining such practices in the classroom at a time where there is much pressure on teachers to obtain visible results and to get through the curriculum.

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