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Establishing a Rights Respecting Initial Teacher Education Course

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Abstract
At London Metropolitan University the secondary team (preparing teachers for 11-16 schools) has introduced a children's rights theme running throughout the teacher education programme. This builds on UNICEF's successful Rights Respecting Schools' programme in the UK and aims to introduce all student teachers, across the subject range, to the principles and documents underpinning children's rights. In this paper we share some of our reflections on the process of planning and implementing this programme from the perspectives of the programme director and the citizenship and science course leaders at the university and the NGOs who are supporting our work. We also draw on some preliminary feedback from the student teachers on their perception of children's rights and the relevance to their teacher training.

Introduction

A little over a year ago the team of tutors who run the secondary teacher education programme at London Metropolitan University began work on a new project – to embed children's rights into our programme in a much more consistent, coherent and conscious way than we had in the past. The establishment of our course as the first in the country to describe itself a Rights Respecting PGCE[i] (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) was facilitated by a partnership of charities – UNICEF UK, Amnesty International UK, and the British Institute for Human Rights – who were seeking university partners to promote the rights agenda in teacher education.

In the early stages this project had a very pragmatic appeal as it was evident that the children's rights agenda provided a robust framework in which we, as professionals keen to resist the pressure to become mere policy implementers, could interpret the welter of policy directives and 'advice' emanating from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) and the Teacher Development Agency (TDA). Many of these initiatives are actually rooted in a new concern with inclusion, child protection and well-being and are very easily related to the overarching children's rights agenda, although these agencies rarely express them in such terms. For example, Every Child Matters is a major policy to reform the whole of the children's workforce to work towards five essential outcomes (entitlements) for children to be healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. Education is also being personalised, with new curriculum and examination flexibility, student voice and assessment for learning. At the same time, schools (and teacher education courses) are being inspected on their work in promoting community cohesion and schools have a responsibility for teaching about diversity, identity and citizenship to all students.

However, from the outset of the planning process it was evident that, aside from the practical benefit of unifying these diverse policy strands, one of the most valuable aspects to this project was the quality of conversations we were having as colleagues. Our first discussion about whether this would be an appropriate way for us to proceed involved reflection on the often uneasy relationship between inclusion and the standards agenda in schools; about the increasing panic in many schools over the lack of discipline; and the connected cynicism in some quarters of the profession that school students already know enough about their rights and too little about their responsibilities. We also had to think about the nature of rights themselves and the ways in which this agenda might be interpreted in a multicultural university working in partnership with schools serving diverse communities in London, here we were particularly aware of the academic and political arguments about the alleged cultural specificity of the notion of individual (and especially children's) rights, and the countervailing pressures to recognise alternative traditions, collective rights and therefore different cultural expectations and constructions of childhood.

What we aim to do in this paper is to share some of the conversations and personal reflections that have been triggered as a result of our decision to embark on this project. Whilst we do not claim to have found satisfactory answers to the questions raised above, we are working towards a greater clarity about the

ways in which we can use the children's rights agenda to provide meaningful frameworks within which our trainee teachers can frame questions about, and make connections between, their experiences in the classroom (two thirds of their training year is based in schools), their theoretical understanding of teaching and learning and their own developing sense of professionalism.

Citizenship Case Study

Our teacher training programme is largely built around subject specialisms and we train 25 teachers every year in the citizenship programme. In secondary schools, the curriculum for citizenship is defined by three core concepts:

- Rights and Responsibilities
- Democracy and Justice
- Identity and Diversity

Hence human rights form a critical element of the statutory provision for citizenship in England. Whilst these concepts can be taught separately, teachers are also encouraged to explore the interconnections between them, investigating for example, the extent to which individual rights are respected in the justice system, or are reconciled with religious beliefs. Citizenship education in secondary schools aims both to prepare young people *for* citizenship and to teach, where possible, *through* citizenship experiences. Citizenship teachers are therefore urged to make the subject topical and engage with controversial issues. This connects the classroom with students' real lives and interests and helps them to develop key skills such as the abilities to think critically, research citizenship issues, advocate a position and take informed action. Our teacher education course therefore puts great emphasis on using real life issues to develop conceptual understanding and develop key citizenship skills.

Although Citizenship is a relatively small statutory subject in the national curriculum (in terms of curriculum time dedicated to the subject) it does have synergies with broader elements of the curriculum, and resonates especially with the underlying aims of the curriculum, which includes the intention to develop learners who 'challenge injustice, are committed to human rights and strive to live peaceably with others'. Citizenship is often referred to in this respect as both 'a subject and more than a subject' (HMI 2006:10).

Towards the beginning of the course we focused a whole day on the central role of rights. In collaboration with our human rights partners (Amnesty, UNICEF and BIHR) we ran a day covering the following elements:

- Values and principles
- Types of rights
- Issues in upholding rights
- Pedagogical principles – modelling activities
- Teaching through controversial and topical issues

During the day we spent considerable time exploring the values and principles underpinning human rights, which was important in providing a broad perspective and encouraging students to understand the conceptual rather than the narrower legalistic base for rights. We also considered the content, scope and application of human rights legislation at home, in Europe, through the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition we explored where rights are absolute, limited and qualified and considered the complexities of balancing rights against one another and against the related notion of responsibilities.

The day made use of numerous activities which modelled active learning, with the intention that students could use these in the classroom. We felt it was important that the day illustrated key pedagogical principles involved in teaching about, through and for human rights.

Student teachers' experiences

In reflecting on the experiences and our subsequent conversations with the students to evaluate the course, it was striking that they all talked about the powerful and empowering nature of education for rights. They appreciated the importance of creating an effective atmosphere within the classroom and beyond for developing an appreciation and active respect for rights and had begun to develop a more subtle awareness of the complexities and challenges of teaching rights. Three key themes emerged from our reflection on these conversations.

(1) Making it resonate
"Teaching human rights is an area which students enjoy…they are able to directly relate human rights issues to their own lives where as they find it difficult to engage and relate to political issues" (Student Teacher A)

"My pupils were very passionate about exploring rights issues about Guantanamo…they wanted to know more and wanted to write letters to detainees at Guantanamo" (Student Teacher B)

Our student teachers agreed that teaching rights had been engaging in the classroom, and reported that both they and their pupils had positive experiences learning about rights, particularly when addressing topical and controversial issues. A common topic that emerged in many classrooms this year has been the debate surrounding the closure of Guantanamo Bay. It is significant that our student teachers felt able to take advantage of this interest and were willing to use this as a hook to explore the nature of rights in the broadest context. At its most fundamental level this involved exploring the tension between the security of the masses and the rights of the individual.

In one example of the use of communications technology to support citizenship discussions, one student teacher reported using Twitter to connect learners in the classroom with members of staff in non-governmental organisations, who are involved in protecting human rights. Regardless of the form through which discussion was facilitated, several students discussed the way pupils understood the complexity of rights, as revealed by the types of questions learners asked. They also stated that it revealed the importance of avoiding superficiality, both in learning activities and in their own responses to such questions. This led on to a discussion among our student teachers of the importance of developing appropriate knowledge of rights at an early stage, to provide learners with the tools to explore rights issues throughout their education. One student teacher spoke of the importance and power of creating a 'common language' of rights, applicable in the exploration of all citizenship issues.

(2) Culture and atmosphere of respect
"You need to take the time to get to know the pupils, develop trust. You can't discuss or debate rights without that." (Student Teacher C)

"I know one of the reasons I tend to have fewer behaviour issues than others who don't have a rights dialogue is because the class know that I respect their rights – it's all over my teaching and learning…" (Student Teacher D)

"[Before the course] I didn't appreciate how effective rights could be in building up students' feelings of empathy, and understanding of right and wrong" (Student Teacher E)

A powerful element of their reflections was their realisation that teachers need to create a culture of respect in the classroom between themselves and learners and between learners to really explore the full potential of rights as an approach to teaching. The first two quotes (C and D) suggest the importance of trust and the nature of dialogue teachers have with their learners. These student teachers have discovered the need to think about the context in which they are teaching rights including their personal actions. The second contributor also reflected on her sadness at the power struggles she has witnessed during her school experience, as teachers and learners display a lack of mutual respect and empathy surrounding their rights and responsibilities.

Whole school approaches can therefore favour or impact negatively on the work of the citizenship teacher. Some students spoke about rights respecting systems for managing behaviour at their school, which supports what they are doing in the classroom (e.g. reconciliation and restorative justice). Others have used rights dialogue in their own management of behaviour within their individual classroom. Whilst this has clearly proved possible for some student teachers, this is obviously more difficult where the prevailing ethos of the school does not sit easily with dialogue and mutual respect, focusing instead on discipline and authority (Skillen, 2002).

Student E makes a point raised by several of the students who discussed the capacity of teaching rights for promoting broader aspects of moral education, through developing values and empathy (Halstead & Pike, 2006). Another student illustrated how this approach can seem to fit quite naturally with young people's own preferred approach to problems and spoke of the power of 'drawing upon their innate sense of fairness and justice'.

(3) Awareness of strategies to deal with challenges

"See, you're talking about the rights of child soldiers and you have an Afghani asylum seeker boy in your class, with a tear in his eye, telling you that you don't understand and telling you he would fight and would make his children fight. What's my experience compared with his? How can I begin to tell him this might be wrong?" (Student Teacher F)

Students were also realistic in identifying some of the complexities in teaching rights and in reflecting on their need to find strategies to deal with them. Indeed, this related to our promotion of the use of controversial issues and, as student F illustrates, the intense emotions stirred by discussing controversial and sensitive issues raise profound pedagogical challenges. How do you use rights to provide a different point of view in contrast to a view borne of experience? In this case the student teacher said this incident proved to be a turning point in his approach to teaching rights and forced him to present several viewpoints which pupils could engage with. Others spoke of the difficulty of pupils being unwilling to take on and accommodate different views and discussed how they had begun to trial different approaches to this in the classroom.

Other issues emerged which tested our students own subject knowledge in unexpected ways, for example, some spoke of the ongoing and oft quoted issue of children finding the concept of rights easier to grasp than responsibilities and had to find ways to link the two convincingly. At the other extreme, some children felt rights are like privileges, which could be taken away like material possessions for misdemeanours or criminal activity, which poses a different challenge for how the teacher engages young people in discussions which do not take certain understandings for granted, but which also help them to move on from their current understanding, to at least appreciate an alternative view of rights as being inviolable and indivisible (Starkey, 2007).

One student teacher in a deprived area flagged up the lack of empathy some of her learners had with those without rights in Less Economically Developed Countries, and her battle to get them to do this as well as getting them to see they too have their rights denied in some respects. Here the challenge seems to revolve around how the same rights could be interpreted so differently in different contexts – again making significant demands on trainee teachers' own knowledge of those varied contexts and the ways in which rights are being respected or violated. A related issue was the sheer sense of frustration and despondency that can emerge from studying case studies where governments appear to be able to deny access to rights at will.

These considerations move beyond the traditional kinds of discussions student teachers tend to have in relation to subject knowledge. They challenge the students' awareness of world affairs and also require them to engage fully with the deeper conceptual and philosophical understanding of the nature of rights and responsibilities. They also involve reflection on their response to students' affective engagement with the concepts, as well as the cognitive challenge.

Implications for PGCE

Reflecting on the experience of teaching through a rights perspective and on the evaluations conducted with the student teachers, the following themes emerge as particularly significant. Firstly, it has been crucial that all the students have been able to link the theoretical learning in university to experiential learning opportunities whilst on school placement. Here the centrality of rights in the citizenship curriculum creates a space in which students can experiment and develop practice.

Secondly, the students' experiences have highlighted the potential for a rights perspective to re-focus on the thorny questions of classroom management and pupil behaviour. The student teachers have been enthusiastic about using the notion of the rights respecting classroom to develop a teaching style with which they are comfortable, and which sits easily within the broader aims of their citizenship teaching (and the broader aims of the curriculum as mentioned above). This moves us closer to a model in which there is 'harmony' between the ends and means of citizenship (McCowan, 2009), as opposed to the apparent tension between teaching about rights and democracy in authoritarian and unequal classrooms.

Thirdly, a sustained focus on rights has also enabled us to develop a much deeper appreciation of subject knowledge throughout the course, both in terms of how to talk about rights accurately, and also in relation to strategies for engaging young people in serious and often high-level discussions about topical issues and the complex nature of rights, responsibilities and the ties of mutual obligation which are so central to

understanding citizenship. This ability to teach about specific issues in order to explore the underlying concepts, which ultimately provide the framework for citizenship understanding, is a crucial dimension to effective planning (Jerome, 2006).

Finally, these discussions, which have clearly tested the student teachers to the limit and forced them to think seriously about their pedagogy, have also illustrated another key tenet of the curriculum, and of effective citizenship, that the knowledge and skills cannot be easily separated. Debating a topical issue effectively and subsequently participating in or initiating some kind of action, goes hand in hand with the development of deeper knowledge of the issue and the underlying concepts that help us to explain and understand the specific issue (for a related discussion of the problematic tendency to split knowledge and skills see Counsell, 2000). In the student teachers' reflections – especially in relation to the challenges they experienced – this blended approach to developing skills and knowledge has emerged clearly.

Of course, there are improvements we can make in the course in future years to enhance these four potential advantages. One of the main issues to emerge is the need to prepare students (so far as possible) for the emotional dimension to their citizenship teaching in relation to rights, especially when linking to controversial and sensitive issues. If we use this approach to make the subject 'real' for the school students, and to connect to their lives and concerns, inevitably there will be an emotional aspect to their engagement. In many ways this is just another way of saying that the young people are engaged and motivated in the learning, but the intensity of emotion is perhaps one of the distinctive aspects of citizenship as opposed to many other school subjects, where academic engagement might be envisaged without such intense, personal emotions. It is inevitable that our student teachers will also experience intense emotions, both in relation to the topics being discussed, and in response to the young people's emotional responses. Legitimising this aspect of experience and making space to acknowledge and discuss it will be an important feature of how we move forward next year (Hayward, 2009).

Concluding comments

In citizenship therefore there are some important issues that have emerged from this first year's piloting of the Rights Respecting PGCE, which have resonated with the nature of the subject. We have also been piloting this across the whole secondary programme, in maths, English, science, modern languages, music and physical education, and so our concluding comments relate to the key ideas that have emerged from our reflections on citizenship and those other subjects, and the model that has emerged to underpin our work in the forthcoming year. The framework we have adopted for the second year of our programme identifies three dimensions:

(1) Knowledge about rights
(2) Rights as pedagogy
(3) Rights as a values framework for the children's workforce

Whilst we aim to engage our trainee teachers with all three dimensions during their one-year course, it might be appropriate, in the light of the foregoing discussion of citizenship, to say something briefly about the role of rights in an overarching conception of pedagogy for our teacher education programme.

Rights as pedagogy

In turning to think about the implications of children's rights for pedagogy there are several useful starting points. Hammarberg, who was appointed by the Council of Europe as the Commissioner for Human Rights in 2006, has argued that taking children's rights seriously has implications for the curriculum and how teachers interpret it, for example, if education is to develop 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (UNCRC Article 29) this requires learning experiences which are relevant to learners. Schools must also, he argues, encourage children,

> "to be curious, to ask questions and receive answers, to argue and disagree, to test and make mistakes, to know and not to know, to create and be spontaneous, to be recognized and respected. There should be recognition in school of the reality that pupils are individuals and learn in different ways and at a different pace" (Hammarberg, 1998: 19).

Osler and Starkey (2005) identify a range of pedagogical principles, based on the UNCRC:

- Dignity and Security (Art. 19, 23,28, 29) – an environment free of bullying, intimidation and mockery and teachers who nurture respectful relationships.
- Participation (Art. 12, 13, 14, 15, 31) – opportunities for learners to exercise choice and responsibility in their learning and teachers who consult about learning and promote learners' autonomy.

- Identity and inclusivity (Art. 2, 7, 8, 16, 23, 28, 29, 31) – respect for children's (multiple / hybrid) identities and the communities they belong to.
- Freedom (Art. 12, 13,14, 15) – classrooms which allow for maximum freedom of expression and conscience, but which have limitations to protect the freedom, security and dignity of all. Teachers who encourage and facilitate dialogue.
- Access to information (Art. 17) – opportunities to engage with a range of information and teachers who nurture the skills of critical interpretation. This is essential if learners are to have the opportunity to develop their own opinions.
- Privacy (Art. 16) – teachers should consider the purpose and the context if they seek information about the private lives of children.

Whilst this clearly has the potential to engage new teachers in deep and difficult discussions about their experiences, it also serves as a constant reminder of the moral dimension to teaching and the need for teachers to build up a repertoire of practical skills for classroom practice within an ethical professional framework. This sits uneasily with one contemporary current in education towards the 'toolkit' approach to effective practice (see for example Ginnis, 2002[ii]). We are seeking to enable our trainee teachers to develop their practice with constant reference to their own politically informed vision for education. This fits readily with Fullan's (1993) model of the teacher as *change agent*, constantly aware of the need to strive for technical excellence, but pursuing this through reflective inquiry in collaborative relationships, and with reference to one's own personal vision for education and for oneself as a teacher.

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[i] The one year teacher education programme is called the Post (or Professional) Graduate Certificate in Education and leads to a university certificate and Qualified Teacher Status.

[ii] This best-selling *Teachers' Toolkit* serves as an example of the genre and includes 22 references to 'groundrules' but not a single entry for ethics, values, morality, or professionalism.