

The case for RRR – A paper

Historically schools have accepted responsibility for promoting essential values in children and teaching what is expected of them as adult citizens to produce socially responsible behaviour. Citizenship in all but name has always been part of schooling.

This whole area of teaching and learning about values and morals which are aimed at producing such socially responsible attitudes and values has always had mixed effects, some disappointing. There have been programmes on social and moral issues, which have taken place in a kind of valueless vacuum and resulted in moral relativism. There have been behaviourist techniques which reward students for the adoption of certain prescribed values but contain a limited cognitive component and no critical thinking. Variations to the above have been programmes based on Kohlberg's cognitive development approach. Here teachers advocate certain values in a limited way – but provide issues which require the development of moral reasoning for students who will pass through several stages towards values based on universal principles of justice and human rights. Many of these issues are now part of the Citizenship curriculum

One problem with current Citizenship is that it is often taught as a series of fragmented modules covering the whole field of social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. A second problem is that specific skills are taught which are not always transferred into other areas and thirdly there can be a negative orientation, as with some Human Rights work. Content tends to emphasise issue related information. Skills such as problem solving and reasoning feature to promote certain values but there are no underlying concepts and principles which can be linked to wider expectations, children's lives and rights.

A lot of work that goes on in PHSE/Citizenship is undoubtedly good but there is a lack of consistency and coherence and also a lack of rigour about why we approach some issues the way we do and concern over effectiveness.

One approach still common in primary schools is for teachers and heads to read stories which illustrate certain human values. such as honesty, perseverance, triumph over adverse circumstances, kindness, courage etc. The assumption being that these 'virtue stories' will inspire others to admire or emulate the central characters values. However there is no valid reason to assume that children will take onboard the intended moral lesson nor is there any theoretical or empirical justification for why they should. In fact Narvaez (2002) points out that children will actively construct meanings through their prior knowledge and may interpret the story differently, even negatively.

Some programmes such as anti-racist and human rights work may focus on bad behaviours and how to prevent or control them. Despite how the work is constructed it can have a negative orientation. Activities contain obvious messages which essentially result in children being told that they must not be discriminatory, engage in conflict, be selfish, not care about others in distant lands etc. This is rarely a very effective strategy with young people, as many parents come to realise

For students it can be difficult to provide the motivation needed to promote more social responsible behaviours as the situation may be distant from pupils and seem so awful that they feel powerless to change things for the better.

In the development of these programmes there seems to have been little consideration of;

- the need for whole school approaches
- age appropriateness
- how the promotion of democratic values and behaviours may need to link to the process of identity formation
- wider agreed national/international values .
- that children need a context in which to coordinate and reconcile, their values, behaviours and knowledge.
- the existing citizenship status of the child with a focus on citizenship preparation

School and class codes of conduct.

These are often developed with children but articulated in terms of do's and don'ts, even when worded more positively. They seem to be separated from some parental and wider community values and can sometimes appear to be in conflict. There is rarely any connection to wider national or international codes of social and moral responsibility, unless they are a faith school where these values will be found in holy books. Codes in a secular context can be effective in guiding behaviour but are sometimes used in connection with rewards and punishments from adults. On the other hand Codes based on globally agreed values such as the UN Convention developed with pupils into a 'Rights and Responsibilities' class charter have a more positive effect

Our thinking has been influenced by recent research on teaching programmes in Nova Scotia, Canada which have been based around the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Under the directorship of Dr Katherine Covell and Dr Brian Howe, the Children's Rights Centre based at University College of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, have been working to address the issues raised by the Convention.

Through a well-researched and evaluated project the Centre has produced a new resourced curriculum aimed initially at Grade 6 and 8 pupils (Year 6/7 and 9) and also at Grade 12 and undergraduate students.

The pack of teaching material contains a variety of lesson plans with activities aimed at enabling pupils to understand their rights and make the connection between rights and responsibilities. It includes critical thinking skills, positive peer interaction and the teacher modelling the rights being taught. It involves participatory learning, critical thinking skills and promotes higher levels of oracy.

Findings included,

- Adolescents showed higher self-esteem and also felt valued.
- Those that received the rights curriculum perceived their classmates to be more accepting of ethnic minority children and perceived greater

levels of peer and teacher support. (Perceived teacher support is related to achievement and expectations and perceived peer support correlates with psychological well being).

- Children were more optimistic about their future.
- Children's increased knowledge about their rights improved behaviour and their understanding of the importance of rights for all, (eg in post tests, of those that had received the rights curriculum 47% felt that children had a right to education, compared to only 6% of those who had not experienced rights teaching).
- Teaching children's rights necessitated more democratic, egalitarian styles of teaching.
- When teachers model rights the atmosphere of classrooms is perceived to be more supportive.
- Teachers reported a real impact on classroom behaviour (more time spent on teaching). Much more positive atmosphere.
- The research suggests a 'contagion' effect, in that learning about one's own rights results in support for the rights of others, including adults and teachers right to teach.
- The more teachers used the rights curriculum the higher they rated it. (This included those who were instructed to use it and not just volunteers.)
- Student support for the rights of adults, ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, were significantly related to their teacher's support for children's rights.

We have therefore explored this work further and some Andover schools have trialled the approach with very similar results.

We can now answer the following question with some confidence.

Why the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a basis for learning?

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a standard and framework that describes the global consensus on societal values for all children. It promotes universal principles of the need to promote and protect the rights of all children which applies to the various aspect of Citizenship
- Children learn they have rights – now, solely because they are children. They are not earned or are awarded at a certain age. This is of much greater interest to them than being prepared for what they may acquire later in life.
- In learning about rights they learn that all children have these same rights, unconditionally. This allows for the development of a sense of connectedness with other children.
- In learning about their rights children also learn about their responsibilities which are the corollary of rights as others rights have to

be respected. (Covell and Howe 2001). This helps to maintain a positive tone to any work. It contributes to developing a positive and socially responsible identity which is more likely when children believe in and feel good about themselves (Baumesiter & Muraven 1996)

- Children come to realise that they have a responsibility to themselves to ensure that they take the opportunities that their rights offer.
- It avoids any tendency towards moral or cultural relativism in any discussion of social and moral dilemmas
- The realisation that there are many situations where rights appear to conflict, promotes the development of higher order thinking and reasoning skills.
- Difficulties faced by children can be seen as rights violations rather than individual weaknesses or failures
- Direct teaching can focus and appeal to pupils self interest linking work to current realities and enables work to have a positive tone.
- It avoids the teachers or the schools values being seen as isolated examples of political correctness. It demonstrates, for example, that codes of conduct are not unique to each school, but come from principles that are world-wide and expressed in the UN Convention

Pedagogy.

For many teachers' children's rights is a sensitive topic. This may stem from a misunderstanding of 'rights 'based teaching with a fear that this undermines a teacher's authority. Teachers who have no opportunity to have these anxieties addressed can undermine or subvert programmes. These fears of involving and listening to pupils more have to be overcome sensitively. After all it is clear from the research that for a rights based approach to be successful there has to be a participatory pedagogy.

Covell and Howe (2003 forthcoming) identify the 3 essential components of children's rights education. They are,

1. Democratic teaching
2. Cooperative learning
3. Rights reflection

Democratic teaching.

It is essential that classroom management style respect the rights and dignity of each child. The Teacher is supportive, recognises accomplishments and encourages participation. Teachers have to model rights of the Convention. A democratic classroom does not mean a situation where children are given decision-making power – it is about age appropriate participation in decision-making.

There are 5 characteristics of a democratic classroom,

1. Systematic opportunities are provided for children to participate in decisions, which affect them.

2. Children can think freely about and express their views
3. There is a Classroom climate which allows for different perspectives and views, opinions to be expressed without loss of dignity
4. Fair and equitable treatment
5. Children learn how to be active contributors to class, community and society.

Evidence is compelling (see Covell and MacIntyre 1999 for summary) that children with democratic teachers have more positive attitudes towards school, more respect for others, more successes and higher aspirations. Also those children who have experienced meaningful participation in their classroom develop improved communication and decision-making skills and increased social and interpersonal respect and responsibility. (Alderson 2000) There have been many studies which have demonstrated the link between a positive classroom climate and positive outcomes for children.

A positive classroom consists of, a caring atmosphere, respect for self and others, each student experiencing success, opportunities for democratic citizenship, teachers supportive of child, allowed to express feelings.

The classroom climate is a key predictor of student behaviour and values. Older students who perceive their classrooms to be respectful and supportive report higher levels of civic tolerance and political interest.

The evidence from Cape Breton and Andover indicated that these perception were generated by the children's rights work.

Cooperative leaning

This requires small group work to communicate ideas, listen to and respect others views, resolve conflict and share in a final outcome. The peer interaction that occurs plays a central role in the development of ethical reasoning. (Berndt 1987)

Many teachers are familiar with activities involving role-playing techniques and the discussion of often-controversial issues. This encourages critical thinking but it is important that students have a context for these discussions. Critical thinking from a democratic values base such as the Convention is essential.

Rights reflection

It is clear that rights work has to be taught. In addition the teachers role as facilitator is also essential in encouraging student participation in the first instance and to reflection in relation to the issues under consideration and the conventions aims. In particular dealing with Rights conflicts and resolution contributes to this reflection, especially on those based on areas of interest to children.

A considerable amount of attention has to be given to age appropriate teaching which at the same time also challenges children. We know from our own work in Hampshire that this can be introduced from an early age. The work and activities arising out of the 'First Steps' project will provide teachers of 4- 7 year olds with ways into this approach.

Torney -Purta suggest middle childhood is the optimum time to introduce a more explicit rights education as the values of 7- 11 year olds are not yet determined. Cognitive capacities are also more advanced to allow more abstract understanding of rights and the impact of rights violations. This is followed by more development work, especially on rights conflict in adolescence to link with identity development and interests and so more fully understand the implications and responsibilities of rights education. This age allows for the role taking ability to be expanded, ie assuming the perspective of a third party and anticipating how others may react. Empathy at this age for situations and for others does not always need direct experience. The promotion of rights respecting behaviours is more likely in this context.

The importance of self-interest.

A feature of the approach is that it is linked to children's self interest. A common misunderstanding is to equate self-interest with selfishness. What has been forgotten is that self-interest is the key to understanding and promoting empathy with others. Children need to know its ok to be concerned about themselves, to protect their self-interest as well as others. Issues need to be linked, where possible, to children's own interests so it is meaningful. This is the starting point which gives the power to change attitudes and behaviours. When then moving pupils outwards in their thinking there is a sense of connectedness with the situation and the feelings of others and so empathy can be developed. From becoming aware that they have 'rights' children are soon aware that others have rights and in order for their self interest to be realised means that respect and responsibility has to be exercised to others. The child needs to integrate what is being learnt into their sense of self, so these values become part of their core identity from an early age. A rights based approach gives a framework to interpret experiences and make decisions.

The 'contagion' model

The evidence from the Cape Breton studies and from Andover has been quoted elsewhere. It is clear that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that appropriately designed children's rights education has the potential to affect the child's values and identity. Covell and Howe argue that a 'contagion effect takes place.

As children learn they have rights, within the context of a democratic classroom, the value of rights spreads to support for the rights of others. Children become more responsible and begin to demonstrate more rights respecting behaviours to peers and adults. One of most important findings has been that the adult like understanding of rights gained and that responsibilities are inevitable corollaries of rights.

One factor noted in the research in Canada and the experiences in Andover has been the reduction of behaviour which infringes the rights of others, including bullying and challenging behaviour. It does not stop it occurring . Rather, teachers report less frequent examples and children exercising more control over some of their outbursts of challenging behaviour. In addition other

children have become more assertive about the way their rights are being infringed when inappropriate behaviour occurs, including their 'right to education'

What makes this approach to Children's Rights work different is that it starts from the point that children are citizens now. It begins with their self-interest as legitimate. When it is taught well it has the power to engage and empower the child. It impacts on the Child's sense of self. Evidence suggests that it will improve children's sense of responsibility to others and themselves and produce rights respecting behaviour with more socially responsible young people.

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