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‘We’ve got rights, we’re citizens now!’: a case study of a democratic approach to learning in a secondary class in the West of Scotland

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Introduction: education for citizenship

Education for citizenship is intrinsically bound up with democracy. In particular, the feeling that both young people are citizens now (as opposed to in the future) and that democracy has to be fostered from a young age are central issues in the formal proposals put to governments in Britain by both the Advisory Group (1998) in England and the Review Group (LTS, 2002) in Scotland.

There is a near moral panic in Britain (indeed in most representative democracies around the world) that young people are apathetic, alienated and disinterested in politics. In Britain, there is the example of the recent European Union elections in which, as a whole, turnout was barely above 20%, in some areas just in double figures and amongst the 18-24 year olds much lower than for the population as a whole. Indeed, for those who felt that whatever happened in this ‘less important’ election, the General Elections would hold up, June 2001 and May 2005 showed that this was over optimistic; turnout was under 60% in the former and just over 60% in the latter, the two lowest since 1918. Even more worryingly, the Scottish Parliament, described as having the *raison d’etre* of bringing interest in politics and participation closer to the people and, consequently providing a forum that would reverse the trend in terms of voting participation, achieved a sub 50% turnout in May 2003.

Nonetheless, whatever the voting figures may show about participation in formal politics, there is also evidence that although young people are alienated from formal politics, they are active and interested in single issue, environmental, political, developing world and animal welfare issues (Wilkinson (1996), Mulgan and Bentley (1997), Roker, Player and Coleman (1999), Chamberlain (2003)). Indeed, single issue politics is still capable of mobilising massive support.

A crucial but difficult area relating education for citizenship to schools is whether one only learns about democracy or also lives it. Are pupils in schools citizens or citizens-in-waiting? If we take the ‘living’ and citizens now model, then there are implications for our schools and indeed for society as a whole. Firstly, there is the difficult issue of whether democratic ideas and values can be effectively developed in the fundamentally undemocratic, indeed authoritarian, structure of the current typical Scottish secondary school, where many teachers, never mind pupils, feel that they have little real say in the running of the school. It has been argued that it is not possible (Arnstine, 1995; Puolimatka 1995; Levin, 1998).

For schools though, it means there should be proper forums for discussion, consultation and decision-making involving pupils. The Education (Scotland) Act, 2000, from the Scottish Parliament enshrined Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the rights

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of the child, that young people should be consulted on issues that affect them and proposes functioning pupil councils as a means of facilitating this. However, the experience of school councils throughout Britain is not yet particularly hopeful; although there are some very positive examples (Polan, 1989; Dobie, 1998; Shinkfield, 2000; Taylor and Johnson, 2002), far too many are tokenistic (Hannam, 1998; Dobie, 1998; Rowe, 2000; Chamberlin, 2003).

Thus, for the individual young people, schools and society as a whole, it is important that young people's views must be actively sought and it is particularly important that not all young people are targeted as moral panic crusades sometimes do. Secondly, for schools, the legislation, based on article 12 of the UN charter, goes further than just pupil councils; it maintains that young people should be consulted 'in all matters affecting him/her and to have that opinion taken into account'. Clearly that also affects what goes on in the classroom. While for many teachers this is problematic and seen as a threat, the experiences below suggest that better learning and better atmosphere is created through treating the pupils as participants in learning at all levels rather than recipients of courses. The case study below thus ties in with the significant literature in terms of pupil voice and pupil decisions in the classroom over how they learn (Newman (1997), Osborne and Collins (1999), MacBeath et al (2001), Fielding (2001b), MacBeath et al (2003), Ruddock and Flutter (2004), MacBeath and Moos (2004), Maitles (2005)).

The following case study was an attempt to promote citizenship through a democratic approach to learning in a Religious and Moral Education (RME) department in a West of Scotland comprehensive. Pupils were given a genuine say in what affects them most – the methodology and content of how and what they learn. The key objective was to discover whether a participative learning style and citizenship curriculum content in core RME altered pupils' citizenship values.

Research methodology 1: choosing the sample

A thorough curriculum audit highlighted S3 curriculum (the equivalent of key stage 4; 15 to 16 year olds) as most in need of development. 'Justice in the World', a Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies unit within Higher Still, was identified as providing the most appropriate content: covering issues of social justice and global solidarity, it has a strong citizenship focus. A main focus of the methodology was the selection of a control group and experimental group to compare baseline and final comparative data.

Research methodology 2: action research

The principal research style was action research, progressed as a case study. However the procedures adopted to answer the main research question, 'To what extent do participative learning style and citizenship curriculum content in core RME alter pupils' citizenship values?' cannot be described in terms of action research cycles. The measurement process was the completion of anonymous attitude questionnaires by the experimental and control groups before and after the exposure of 3I to democratic learning. Closed questions and restricted responses aided quantification and analysis of results. All questionnaires completed by pupils were given under formal conditions. All pupils completed a course evaluation form in December 2004 and January 2005.

Promoting citizenship implies listening to participants' voices. Interviewing pupils provided important information to evaluate the impact of interventions in greater depth. Six pupils, five girls and one boy, opted to join the focus group: the voluntary nature of membership was in keeping with the democratic approach. Ethical procedures were observed.

Through triangulation, parents' and peers' perceptions of development of pupil attitudes to citizenship issues and areas of individual pupil benefit from the democratic RME class were invited: these perceptions validated pupils' self evaluation.

Findings 1: Preferred learning styles

One pupil explained how she felt about involvement in a democratic class:

I thought it was really good to be part of a democratic class because the teacher was letting us in on the whole learning bit. It was good but quite scary at the same time because somebody is saying, 'How would you like to be taught?' and we've never been asked that before.

Pupils completed a questionnaire expressing preferences about learning styles. Autocratic styles and solitary activities were unpopular. Pupils were keen to work with partners or teams of their own choice. They felt that teacher exposition had an important place, especially in small groups, but would prefer to learn from visiting speakers and videos. Independent resource-based learning, e.g. using ICT, was a popular option. 80% of 3I expressed interest in contacting pupils in other schools and countries. A lower, but significant, proportion of pupils favoured presenting their work to the class or others. Outings were requested. The survey results were shared with the class and the teacher explained that she wanted to act on what they said about how they like to learn. Progression of some of the pupil choices is described below.

Working in teams of own choice

Pupils opted to choose teams and were given freedom to organise this. 'You must be mad, Miss, to let them be in the same group'; the girl who insinuated that disorder would ensue voiced the teacher's concern. This was to be a participative class, but not a permissive one. Thanks to groundwork on ethos, there was a relaxed, open, warm atmosphere during teamwork with pupils acting responsibly. Indiscipline was rare and minor, kept in check as often by other pupils as by the teacher.

One pupil explained how her experience of being listened to in a democratic class helped improve her team working skills:

It kind of helped me to involve people because sometimes I like to do things my way, but now I'm starting to think, 'No, maybe (name) wants to do it a different way, or (name) might want to add this to it'. I've become better at talking to people and listening to their ideas.

Speakers

To push at the potential of pupils as responsible, independent, confident citizens, teams chose and organised seven speakers themselves, as follows:

- Baptist Minister previously in local politics – *Christians challenging Injustice*
- Castlemilk Churches Together Refugee Centre – *Christians helping Asylum Seekers*
- Christian Aid – *Fair Trade and the work of Christian Aid*
- Glasgow City Mission – *A Christian response to Homelessness in Glasgow*
- Jubilee Scotland – *The problem of Debt and the work of Jubilee Scotland*
- Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) – *Social Inclusion*
- UNICEF – *Absolute poverty and the work of UNICEF*

Focus group members enjoyed the responsibility of organising speakers. Some teacher guidance was appreciated: ‘You gave us a little starter. You gave us examples of who we could pick ... We need a little gentle shove in the right direction, gently lulling us away from someone else doing everything for us ... We’re slowly becoming independent’.

Benefits of speakers included: ‘I just seem to be taking it in more ... It’s real life’ ‘You could ask them questions that you wouldn’t be able to ask if it was only a teacher who wasn’t that sure about it’. 76% of parents said that their child talked to them about the speakers.

E-mail friends

The Scottish Executive (2001) recommends ICT links with pupils abroad. Cogan and Derricott (2000) advocate twinning of schools across local and national boundaries to develop appreciation of different perspectives and promote empathy. Facilitating international links was time-consuming and difficult, a catalogue of frustrating dead ends. Pupils were excited when links were successfully established with Maryvale College in Johannesburg, South Africa and Bloomfield Hall, Sahiwal, Pakistan. In addition, a link was established with a local denominational school, John Ogilvie High School in Hamilton. 31 pupils e-mailed a questionnaire to pupils in these schools, asking, among other things, their opinions about world problems and whether they intended to vote. They offered e-mail friendships.

Pupils in Pakistan shared their greatest concerns:

- I think that by taking drugs these people are not only killing themselves but also a generation from which the world expects a lot. I think that ... the parents should take action to ... go to the depth of the matter and try to understand the reason for the child going towards such a dangerous habit.
- As we people are Muslims, so we should help other Muslims. Iraq should be given complete independence and should be free to use its own reserves itself. America should not unjustly take away their rights.

- Education is the most important and valuable treasure one should have. There are many children who cannot go to school just because of poverty and are left uneducated.
- I think trade laws and world debts are two of the biggest problems. The poor countries are so much buried in debts that it might take 50 years to fulfil these debts to rich countries.

95% of their e-mail friends from South Africa stated that Aids was the global problem which concerned them most. The link between Stonelaw High School and Bloomfield Hall has extended to two video conferences in which pupils shared information on their respective cultures.

Commenting on the value of this contact, one of the focus group said, 'I've gained an insight into the world and the life and concerns of teenagers in different countries. It's really brought our learning alive.' Pupils are discovering that developing friendships between young people in different countries is the key to international understanding.

Outings

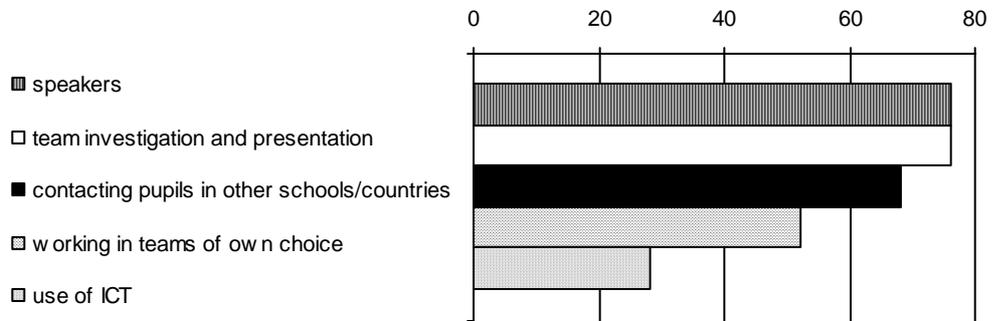
Arranging a 'citizenship' outing would meet 3I's expectations. Apart from an Eco Committee outing to a recycling plant which some of the class joined, outings were in response to invitations to disseminate the pupils' experience of democratic learning.

The International Development Education Association of Scotland and Glasgow University invited 3I to make a presentation at the 'Big Day', a global citizenship open day for student teachers. Eleven pupils, eight girls and three boys, volunteered to speak.

At Jordanhill campus, Strathclyde University, three pupils joined their RME teacher to speak to the whole cohort of students (725) on the Post-graduate Certificate in Education (Secondary) course. Also at Jordanhill campus, three pupils participated in presentations at a research seminar and to teachers studying for the Diploma in Support for Learning.

Pupils also helped to deliver two in-service courses to teachers in their local education authority and contributed to presentations at the Scottish Educational Research Association conference and the European Conference on Educational Research.

Responses on the parental questionnaire indicated which learning methods, from a list, pupils had talked to parent(s) about. In order of popularity:



Findings 2: Course content

Teams were given a choice of investigation topic based on the unit, 'Justice in the World'. 96% of pupils were happy that the teacher was acting on their preferences. Focus group members felt more motivated: 'I just think you try harder. It's more special to you if it's something you've picked ... It's more interesting'. One group's reason for their topic choice mirrored part of the teacher's rationale for developing a democratic classroom: 'We chose to do war through the eyes of a child because children don't get listened to a lot ... and war is something that world leaders choose, the people don't get to choose these things, so children are just thrown into these things and need to be listened to.'

Findings 3: Citizenship values

Attitude questionnaires were examined, comparing responses of the experimental group with the control group in June 2004 and June 2005. Findings relating to attitudes and actions on a range of issues are given below (figure 4).

Figure 4 shows that during the session 31 pupils became significantly more accepting of asylum seekers in Britain: pupils in the control group became less tolerant.

Trends regarding purchase of the Big Issue (figure 6) reflected trends in attitudes to homeless people (figure 5). The significant changes were among 31 girls, 38% more of whom disagreed that homeless people had only themselves to blame and should sort themselves out and 31% more of whom bought the Big Issue. In December interviews, the main attitude

Figure 4 : "Asylum seekers should be sent home" - Disagree

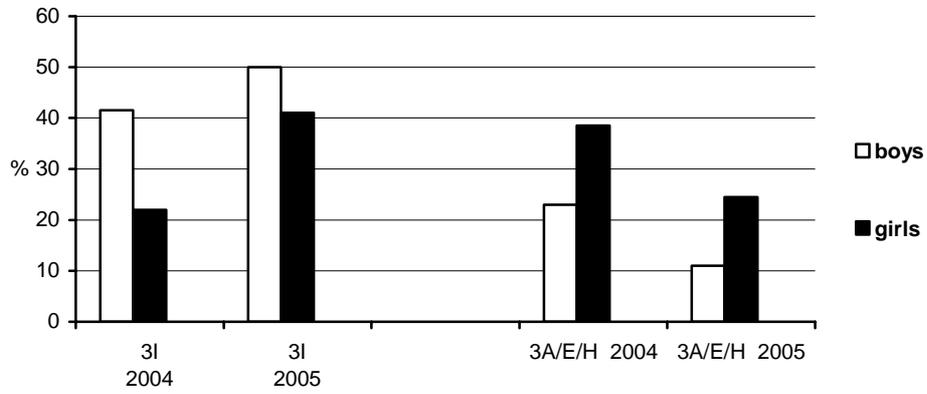


Figure 6 : "Have you bought the Big Issue?" - Yes

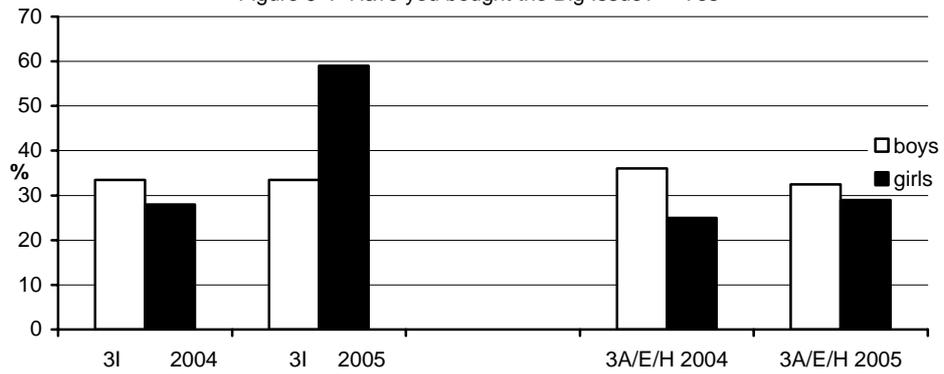


Figure 7 : "The British government should give more help to developing countries" - Agree

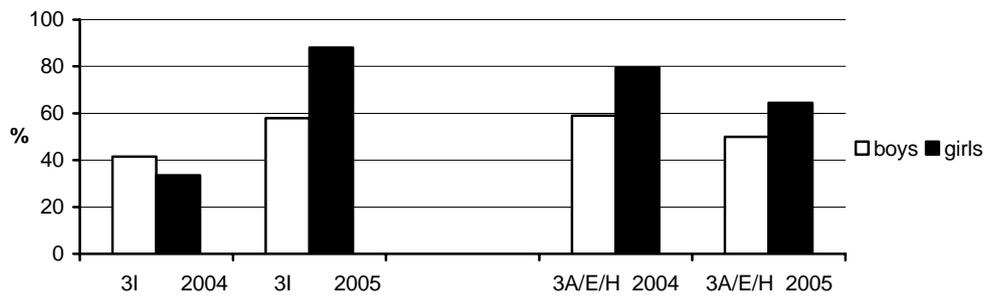
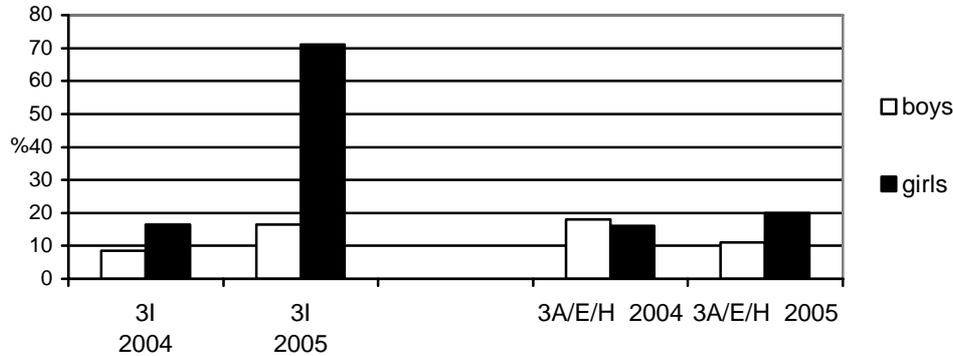


Figure 8 : "Have you made an effort to buy Fair Trade goods?" - Yes



change stated related to homeless people, changing from 'the stereotypical view ... that it's all their own fault' to a sympathetic understanding that they should be given more help: 'People ... need to see it from their point of view'.

Attitudes and actions related to the developing world were also measured.

Pupils in the experimental group developed a more positive stance to the British government giving more help to developing countries (figure 7), while the stance of pupils in the control group became more negative.

The clearest and most significant positive attitude change in relation to poverty in the developing world and consequent consumer action was among 3I girls (figures 7, 8). During the session, 54.5% more girls in 3I tried to buy fairly traded goods. Focus group girls reflected this enthusiasm: two encouraged others to follow suit and intended writing letters to shops about stocking 'Fair Trade'. They recognised the need for education: 'I forget that not everyone knows about it, they haven't had the chance.'

Their growing interest led to the establishment, along with pupils in other year groups, of the Stonelaw High Fair Traders, a pupil-run, fair trade co-operative business whose sales exceeded £5,000 in the first five months. They initiated a joint project with pupils in the local denominational and Special Needs secondary schools and raised awareness of ethical trading by setting up a fair trade stall in the local shopping centre. Pupils decided unanimously to distribute all profits among projects that provide education for children in developing countries.

Findings 4: Attitudes related to conventional and single-issue politics

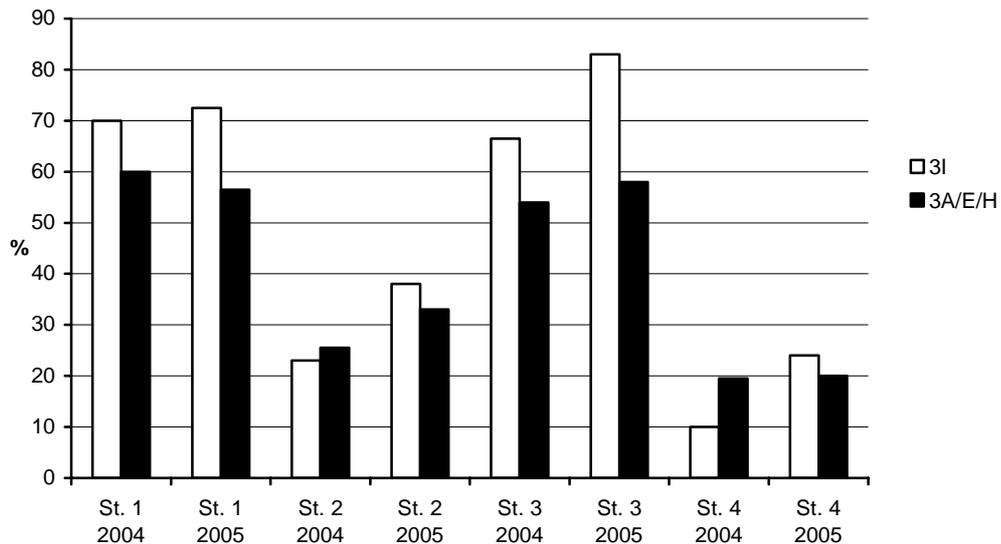
Figure 9 summarises responses for all pupils. The attitudes measured relate to a cynical stance to politics through responses to statements as follows:

Statement 1: The government is interested in what young people think – No.

Statement 2: Scottish politicians are only interested in themselves – Yes.

Statement 3: Politicians promise things just to get your vote – Yes
 Statement 4: Voting is a waste of time – Yes.

Figure 9 : Cynicism towards conventional politics



By June 2003, 3I pupils had become more cynical than 3A/E/H pupils in response to all statements. The experimental group’s growing scepticism mirrors the rise in public distrust of the government: Baldwin and Kelland (2003) cite an ICM poll in the Guardian that shows public trust in the Prime Minister dropped in each of the preceding three months to 37% in July 2003. This finding suggests that cynicism about conventional politics, a concern highlighted by the Review Group (LTS, 2002), may be heightened rather than reduced by citizenship education. As the pupils become more convinced of the need to act on issues, then the immediacy of campaigning can become more relevant than conventional political activity.

Despite increased cynicism, pupils’ intention to vote remained virtually unchanged at 73% in 2002 and 72% in 2003. One pupil said the course confirmed her determination to vote: ‘I want my voice to be heard, because if it’s heard in class I hope it would be heard in the outside world as well’. These findings, that extent of cynicism did not affect intention to vote, were mirrored by responses from pupils in international school links. It is interesting that although 72-73% of the experimental group, who were 15 years old, intended to vote, this does not as yet reflect the current trend in actual voting practice, where 18 to 24 year olds have a lower than average turnout. Nonetheless, the experimental group, although more cynical, are also more interested, and that means that they are potentially more likely to vote.

Validation of results through triangulation

Clarification of results was sought regarding the main research question, ‘To what extent does participative methodology and citizenship curriculum content in core RME alter the values of pupils re citizenship issues?’ The triangulation process, obtaining peer and parent evaluations, revealed a clarity and consensus that the course had a positive impact on citizenship values of at least twelve 3I pupils - in itself encouraging and a mark of success. Yet as table 1 suggests, at least twenty-one pupils probably developed a more positive citizenship outlook.

3I girls (no.)	3I boys (no.)	Pupil assessment: ‘My attitude to an issue has changed as a result of the lessons’.	Outcome of triangulation (peer / parent evaluation)
7	5	Agree	Consensus
2	2	Agree	Partial agreement
2	0	Don't know	
4	1	Don't know	Other evidence suggests pupil more positive than claimed
1	3	Disagree	
1	0	Don't know	Unsubstantiated
0	1	(Absent)	(lack of evidence)

Table 1: Triangulation of results re pupil attitude change

All parents who completed an evaluation thought it was a good idea for pupils to have a genuine say in what and how they learn in RME.

Findings 5: Dispositions

When asked to identify benefits to themselves and peers from involvement in RME this session, positive dispositions were highlighted, in particular increased confidence. Five of the focus group identified one girl, usually painfully shy, as surprising them by her enhanced confidence. One pupil linked her growth in confidence to being shown respect:

I think when you're with kids they can be cruel and they'll laugh at her or whatever, and that happened to her in Primary School. It wasn't very funny. It put her down a bit so she doesn't really talk out any more. (In this class) nobody laughs at your opinions or anything.

Enhanced respect from the teacher and pupils was a feature of the class according to four of the focus group: ‘Because of the democratic classroom we can open ourselves up and know that the rest of the class will understand and the class is more relaxed now and we all support each other’

The girl who volunteered to join the focus group at the end of the session was also identified by a peer as having particularly benefited:

Before, I didn't think she was that bothered or that serious about things. I thought she was just sitting there and having a laugh. But now she really tries hard. ... I just think she has changed a lot ... I think (this class) has brought her out of her shell more ... If you'd said to her last year I don't think she would have stood up there and spoke the way that she spoke.

Six boys, others noticed, seemed more mature, respectful, tolerant or confident. One mother said of her son, 'He has gained in self confidence and is more willing to state what he really thinks even if this does not fit in with his peers. It has helped him in making personal choices – always a difficult area particularly for teenage boys.'

Twelve girls, it was claimed, had gained confidence. In addition, enhancement in independence, conscientiousness and/or respect was claimed for eight of these girls.

Most of the focus group felt the democratic experience in RME had helped them in other subjects: three cited Modern Studies, two cited English, one cited Drama and Religious Studies. Areas in which they had been helped were knowledge and understanding of content and confidence to speak out. A principal teacher whose subject was not cited by any pupil, naming four pupils in his Standard Grade class, volunteered:

I can see the benefits of RME in group work and presentations. I can see a difference in confidence between pupils who have been doing this course (i.e. 3I RME). There's a marked difference in confidence in speaking. A lot of (subject) is about empathy and a lot of that is coming through.

One of the focus group stated, 'the class is more relaxed now and we all support each other. There's not this barrier between us, because we've not been sitting writing, we've been involved in the class in discussions and interacting.' When asked by the teacher how she would feel if the teacher abandoned the democratic class and went back to an autocratic style, she said, 'Gutted. Now that you've opened us up, if you just shut us off, it would not be a good idea.'

These findings suggest that genuine democracy in the classroom may well be the most effective way to develop some of the life skills widely acknowledged as vital. This thinking is in line with that of Menter and Walker (2000) who advocate opportunities for young people to develop emotional literacy skills as an important requirement for effective citizenship.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the inadvisability of over-generalisation, it is significant that this small-scale study rooted the theory of the democratic classroom in reality, showing it to be possible, practical and rewarding. Despite previously adopting an autocratic style, the teacher gradually relaxed into the democratic teacher role, and derived a great sense of fulfilment from the transformation, confirmed by a pupil: 'I thought we'd still get, 'Do this, do that', but we don't. It's like a vote on everything. It's not, like, just whenever you feel like it ... it's just democratic all the time.' One of the focus group stated that her expectations about the democratic class had been met; five felt that expectations were

exceeded. 'You get so involved in it, so wrapped up in what you're doing, you forget it's just a class'. The teacher felt that the democratic approach communicated informed values appropriately and effectively. This is supported by Brandes and Ginnis (1995, page 173), 'Values may be communicated more through method than content ... they must ooze from the methodology'.

Findings demonstrated that a participative leaning style and citizenship curriculum content in core Religious and Moral Education had a largely positive impact on pupils' citizenship values, also improving their dispositions, motivation and interest. 87% of pupils agreed they were learning better because the teacher was trying to involve them.

It must be stressed that the democratic approach is not an easy option. Prerequisite to its success are mutual respect and trust. Trying to meet pupils' expectations involved a great deal of unseen work, so its introduction, where considered appropriate, should be at a manageable pace. It would be damaging to pupils' perception of democracy if teachers embarked on it half-heartedly and empowerment was not delivered. As Alexander (2001, page 62) points out, 'If they dismiss citizenship education as a sham, it may simply add to the cynicism about politics and participation in public life'.

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