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Understanding children's citizenship, participation and agency in the primary school: An English ethnographic study

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Abstract

This paper presents the progress and analysis to date of doctoral research into primary school pupils' experiences and perceptions of political agency, autonomy, and the development of associated rights, responsibilities and political competencies. The selected site for this ethnographic work was the largest primary-age school in its region within England. To access, understand and explain participants' perceptions of their own autonomy and agency and the structures within which they operate, the methods used were qualitative: interviews, observations, analytical discussions and ethnographic field notes.

Data analysis to date demonstrates how being a pupil, political participant and child in this primary school can mean many different things, yet all curricular and cultural expectations apply to the same individuals. The inconsistencies within their learning both challenge and confuse the children. In addition to this, relevant knowledge and understanding appears not to be gained through the received citizenship curriculum, but a more subtle and nuanced experience of political practices within the school community, largely outside teaching time. The question guiding the on-going analysis is: How does the experience of developing political competence in school challenge or reaffirm established positions in wider societal democratic arenas?

Keywords: *children, citizenship competence, primary school*

Introduction

Examining the experience of children at primary school as a site for citizenship development furthers previous studies undertaken as a political scientist and education professional, combining theory and practice from both disciplines. The foreshadowed problems I seek to understand are: apparent political apathy amongst children and young people and the conflicting notions of childhood and expectations of children as citizens. My belief is that the primary school has great potential for citizenship learning and experience, but that the opportunity is not being fully exploited. I would like the results of my research to be used to enhance the democratic and participative experiences of primary age children at school.

A child voicing his or her opinions, ideas and questions is a function of healthy democracy and, indeed, an educational, legal and moral entitlement (DfES 2004, Ofsted 2005 and UN

1989). As a societal 'good', the 'coming to power' of children enhances the legitimacy of democratic institutions and practices, and defines a specific educational outcome: a citizenry enabled by political and social learning and experience. Viewing children as independent social and political agents reflects how the balance of responsibility for safe-guarding their rights has shifted from home to school; the expectations of both parents and government, through policy for the development of children's political competencies, is that schools should now provide that socialising function that was once the prerogative of home and before that the church. School is increasingly expected to be a model for society and teach what appropriate behaviour is. Reporting in the Cambridge Primary Review, Alexander (2010) indicates the challenge within this situation,

> Every society has to determine the respective responsibilities of the state and of parents for the care and education of children, but the English response has been distinctive. …In other European countries, such as France and Finland, there are clear divisions of responsibility, with parents doing the caring and socialising, and schools doing the schooling. (Alexander 2010:64-65)

He concludes that in the UK these divisions have never been easily recognised or uncontroversial, making them difficult to navigate for parents, children and schools (Alexander 2010).

This discussion also highlights the problem of viewing childhood as a single entity or experience. As Goldson (2001) points out, the discourses which construct children and their childhoods in particular ways – e.g. innocent babes or tiny tearaways - do not take into account their economic, social, mental, physical, educational differences. Prout (2005) summarises the situation as follows,

> The tendency for contemporary social life to be marked by dissolving boundaries and heightened ambiguity is a general one and, partly in response to it, new frameworks for understanding the world after modernity are being brought into existence. (Prout 2005:70)

Discourse theory allows us to see the world as constructed through human interaction: by and through differing and competing social discourses. It frees interpretations of 'the way the world is' from notions of alien, unchangeable forces and objects which define and control us. Of course, with this freedom also comes insecurity. We lose a sense of 'natural order' and can no longer depend on a predictable and secure past, present and future. This has been described by Usher and Edwards (1994) as the breakdown of what we have constructed as 'modern' or 'modernity', and challenges researchers to make new sense of the time and space in which we now find ourselves. It presents us with an opportunity to re-evaluate our understandings of children, their childhoods and relationship to adults and adulthood.

The aim of my study is to explore pupils' experiences and perceptions of political agency, autonomy and the development of associated rights, responsibilities and political competencies in a school. In using the term 'political competencies' I am referring to, for example: decision-making, problem-solving, relationship management, personal and collective advocacy and taking responsibility for oneself and others. The consequent objectives are to:

1. identify perceptions and examples of pupils acting as political agents in the primary school;
2. explore and provide a description of the structures governing political behaviours of pupils;
3. provide an opportunity to rethink power relations, the nature and meaning of participation in school;
4. derive theory explaining the structures, participant agency and the resulting behaviours.

From an ethnographic study in a primary school, my aim is to provide a value-relevant representation (Hammersley 2006) of the citizenship experience of children as pupils. In making this declaration, I acknowledge its many limitations and contestability. The knowledge created will be as a direct result of my value-commitments in deciding to pursue this research as well as my agency in the data gathering and analysis. It will be but one view of many. The nature of the knowledge which will be generated from my research will be, therefore, a representation of the personal and individual perceptions of the participants involved in my research, including myself.

Methodology and Selection of Participants

To access, understand and explain participants' experience of autonomy and agency and the structures within which they operate, the methodology which offered most to this research was ethnography: where 'a unique sense of embodied existence and consciousness [is] captured.' (Willis and Trondman 2000:6). I believe ethnography allows for greater depth and more meaningful descriptions and understandings of the research situation where other methodologies do not use or interrogate participant lived experience to the same degree.

The selected site for this study was the largest primary-age school within its region in England with approximately 500 registered pupils at the time of my research. I worked with 80 children aged eight to eleven and 30 adults, teaching and support staff.

From the objectives stated above, the data I set out to collect can be summarised as follows:

- Children's accounts and experience of exercising rights and competencies (Obj 1 & 2);

- Teachers' accounts and experience of children exercising rights and competencies (Obj 1 & 2);
- Descriptions of the school - institution and culture (Obj 2 & 4);
- Examples of (political) interactions within the school community (Obj 1, 2 & 4);
- Teacher and learner interpretations and analyses of interactions and relationships (Obj 1, 2, 3 & 4);
- Analysis of the wider national, educational context of children's citizenship, sense of autonomy and agency, and curricula expectations – literature and policy review (Obj 3).

To gather this data, I designed a three-phase participatory research programme, supported by the recording of observational and analytical field notes. The research design included participants:

1. contributing to the refinement and reviewing of research questions through focus group discussions and interviews, resulting in a distillation of relevant concepts and linguistic terms within school discourses;
2. providing accounts of personal understandings, perceptions and experiences in school through independently gathering data on and during one day at school, aimed at reducing the researcher's influence;
3. verifying and authenticating data through discussion within individual interviews, and contributing to initial analysis.

This generated a vast amount of data necessitating some tough decision-making about the themes to pursue in my subsequent data analysis: what to pull in as core material and what to leave as contextual information. This process is still on-going.

Results

I am coming to the end of my primary data analysis, summarising the most salient themes and deciding what to re-examine in greater detail. I have selected three of these themes to briefly illustrate the results so far. What I am presenting is tentative and in its infancy. Each theme is introduced by a quote from a participant and the analysis it reveals.

'You can't wee in advance!': trusting or controlling children

Many participants describe the tension and frustration they feel in negotiating and understanding the divergent trusting and controlling nature of relationships and rules at the school. The ideas of responsibility and accountability seem particularly confused and confusing to children. On one hand, children are seen as competent in understanding perceived errors in thought and action and can be held accountable: they know right from

wrong. However, at the same time, they are not sufficiently competent of thought and action to be free from the continuous oversight of an adult: not trustworthy or responsible enough to be able to act autonomously in school. This issue arose most often when talking about 'being allowed to go to the loo (toilet)' or to go back inside the school building from sports or playtime to fetch something. Whilst discussing the practicalities of organising when you went to the toilet, one girl declared: 'you can't wee in advance!' - expecting anyone to have that degree of control over their bodily functions was thought of as ridiculous: the rule of 'no toilet visits during lesson time' was unreasonable. Interestingly, however, no one mentioned the indignity of having to request 'permission to pee': something an adult would find challenging.

Both children and adults in the study stated categorically that children could not be trusted and needed 'to be controlled'; although individuals were acknowledged to be different, as a collective, children would always seek to be deviant. The conflicting notions of what 'I am' and 'we are', and how behaviour changes when children are seen as part of a group, feature in all the data sets. The responsible individual becomes untrustworthy and in need of constant monitoring and controlling when identified as an anonymous child, rather than an Ella or a James who can act autonomously with consideration for others and institutional norms.

This has a number of consequences, one of which is the acceptance of surveillance, censure and control. Children accept that they are not trustworthy by virtue of being children and, in some cases, despite an inner belief that they as individuals are. There is a lack of faith in his or her own judgement. I believe the degree to which these children do not trust their own opinion – their insecurity in 'what they know', dismissing themselves, their ideas and thoughts as illegitimate - makes for a weak sense of agency because it can never be truly autonomous, needing to be checked, monitored and authorised by an adult. I do wonder how we expect children to become trust*worthy* if they are never trust*ed*. Despite lessons in personal health and well-being, assuming responsibility for yourself, you are not allowed to decide when to go to the toilet.

'They can't help it if they are mentally ill!': normalising conformity and compliance

Much discussion in the research interviews included a consideration of normal and deviant behaviour: knowing how to conform and exhibiting 'normal behaviour' was an important part of being responsible, indeed of 'growing up'. Children who appeared unwilling or unable to conform are seen as unwell: 'they can't help it if they're mentally ill', one girl explained. This appears to be one way some children learn to accept non-conformity in a minority of others.

The more I think about the scenario described below, the more improbable it seems. We were discussing good days and bad days at school when this child gave an example of how difficult some days can be:

> Like Mrs Z being called in and all of us having to miss playtime and that, 'cos (because) usually there's some people in our class who just make all the trouble and make us lose break, 'cos they would crawl under the table and Miss X would tell us off for letting her take us over, if you know what I'm getting at, …but she's like hitting us at our feet and licking us which is nasty. (Paul, aged 11, Review Interview)

One child in his class with acknowledged behavioural issues would occasionally pretend to be a cat and crawl under the table, scratching and licking other children's ankles. Children and adults were advised to ignore this behaviour, but this is a challenge for ten-year olds. Indeed, I do not believe that many adults could or would sit and ignore another person licking their ankles under the table, especially when trying to work: it *is* nasty! The boy speaks with an air of normality when he describes the situation, resigned to the fact that it will happen and that he is expected to ignore it. Moreover, he understands that if he is seen to be distracted by it, he will get into trouble. Problematically, there is an assumption that the process of learning to conform is something children must accept, but not necessarily understand.

I question what this sort of experience does for the imagining of the present and future self for children. There is little room for autonomy or critical thinking in the expectation to conform and not to question. Where is the learning to dispute, critique, challenge and ultimately resist? These are all important facets of citizens and functions of a democracy. What could be legitimate challenge is effectively kept in abeyance. Widening this context, I query what suppressing an opportunity to challenge or resist does to the development of children's political identity. How is the expectation and acceptance of such a malleable child in school squared with the promotion of active political participation through the curriculum and other school initiatives?

Michel Foucault (1975) argues that through systematic temporal and spacial control and the creation of regimes of training, (soldiers, school pupils, citizens), obedience and efficiency can be instilled within a population. He tracks the changes in cultural belief from the historical selection of the most appropriate individuals for a function (e.g. strongest, fittest soldiers) to the current idea that through rigorous training any individual can fulfil that function. The population is malleable and docile and training produces 'good behaviour'. I can see and hear this in participant accounts and observations. Moreover, children cite ways of enhancing surveillance and disciplinary practices in order to promote greater conformity for example:

- Tracking devices for children embedded in the school logo on children's uniforms;
- Raising perimeter fence heights and locking children in;
- 'Cloning' teachers to control children.

'What did you tell her you were going to do?': developing agency despite surveillance

I have examples in my data where some children are moving beyond mere conformity and are developing autonomy in an agency outside the surveillance gaze. Having assimilated what needs to be seen by the adult surveyor, some individuals have learnt how to give the impression of conformity without compliance. One child's individual data recorded him successfully leaving a lesson on the premise of going to the toilet, but actually meeting two friends for a break and a chat. They did not use the bathroom facilities, but instead discussed how they escaped, whether they were seen or suspected, and how they planned to get back in again unnoticed: 'What did you tell her you were going to do?'

Andrew Hope describes similar activities in a secondary school as a form of resistance and 'counter-surveillance' (Hope 2010:326). Hope discusses whether the development of resistance practices must be conscious or intended: the experience still contributes to developing political competence whether the pupil is aware of it or not. I understand this argument, but wonder at the longer term contribution to citizenship competence which hidden learning makes. If a child is not aware of the techniques and practices they are allegedly developing, applying them to new situations and consciously engaging with the critical cognitive process of resisting, I question whether this is genuine resistance or merely playing with surveillance. Are they aware enough of the power they have to be able to transfer this competence to another situation? This, however, is an exciting area to investigate. The evidence of resistance practices in operation against the background of a system seeking to neutralise anti-social instincts and eliminate dissent and difference (Foucault 1975) is positive for the establishment of an active agency.

Conclusion

Data analysis to date demonstrates how being a child in this primary school can mean many different things, yet all curricular and institutional expectations apply to the same individuals. Having agency within the school's communities and structures is about becoming literate in diverse and sometimes conflicting political and social practices. The inconsistencies within this learning both challenge and confuse the children. Additionally, relevant knowledge and understanding appears not to be gained through the received citizenship curriculum, but a more subtle and nuanced experience of political practices within the school community, largely outside teaching time.

I am still in the throes of analysis, however, these emergent themes appear to question the potential for developing stable and sustainable citizenship competencies:

1. Children's multiple and contradictory understandings of political identity: specifically a divergence between notions of agency of the child as an individual and as part of a group;

2. Conflicting and damaging imperatives within the school environment: times and spaces where the expectations and experiences of children appear to simultaneously facilitate and restrain children's opportunities to practise citizenship learning;
3. The divergence of citizenship teaching and learning provides both an opportunity for children to develop a hidden agency, but at the same time threatens the establishment of institutionally recognised legitimate participation.

The questions I am now grappling with are:

- Is disobedience the only active agency present here? What of the conforming child? Is there agency in conformity?
- How does the experience of developing political competence in school challenge or reaffirm established positions in wider societal democratic arenas?
- In whose interests is it to maintain the status quo?

Further Work

The research is both enhanced and limited by the use of ethnographic methods and a single case study: further work should seek to broaden the field of study to beyond the single institution in the South West of England. Such research should seek to establish how far the experiences of the children within this study are localised or representative of wider social phenomena.

Additionally, research into older children's perceptions of their experiences of primary schooling, having transferred to secondary school, would also be illuminating: identifying the perceived relevance and value of primary school experience to later schooling and life in the wider community.

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