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The Citizenship Challenge: educating children about the ‘real world and real issues’

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Introduction

Many countries are now grappling with how best to educate students for the challenges of the 21st century, including increasing global conflict, social justice and environmental concerns. Education for citizenship, introduced in England in 2002, states that pupils must learn about ‘topical issues, problems and events’ and about social, economic and global disparities (DfEE/QCA 1999). Recent guidelines *Developing the Global Dimension* advise that children learn about peace and conflict, globalisation, poverty, prejudice and sustainability (DfES, 2005). Yet little is known about children’s interest in such areas or about the training of teachers to educate for what may be termed global citizenship.

This paper reports on two studies- the first on children and the second on student teachers- both in relation to global citizenship. The first study looks at children’s hopes and fears for the future and their levels of concern about global issues. The second project examines the knowledge, understanding and motivation of student teachers to teach about such issues.

The first study: children’s concerns

People’s hopes and fears for the future influence what they are prepared to do in the present and what they are prepared to work towards. Hicks (2002) and others have suggested that images of the future are a critical measure of a society’s inner well being, acting as a mirror of our times. Ascertaining the views of children towards the future thus serves as an indicator of their current concerns, beliefs and actions.

Research into secondary pupils’ concerns for the future from different countries appears to tell the same story. Research from Finland shows young people optimistic about their own future but less optimistic about the future for their country. They fear that it will descend into ‘a society of corruption, unemployment, growing environmental problems, drugs and dirty urban centres full of poor people struggling for their livelihood’ (Rubin, 2002, p 103). Their concerns for the global community centre on poverty and hunger, wars, overpopulation and environmental pollution. Similar findings are reported by Oscarsson, whose Swedish students hold positive views about their own future but are less optimistic about the future for Sweden, where economic conditions are seen as uncertain and they are less optimistic still about the global future. Like their Finnish counterparts their fears are around environmental issues and global conflict (Oscarsson, 1996).

Hutchinson’s work in Australia reveals similar attitudes. He reports that many teenagers feel a sense of helplessness and despondency about the problems they think society will have to face in the near future. Some think that ‘high-tech’ solutions may be found but others are keen to have a more equitable and sustainable world where conflicts are dealt with constructively rather than destructively. All say that little time is given over to such issues in their schooling – an omission which they regret (Hutchinson, 1996).

There has been little research into the views of primary children. Our research in 1994 (Hicks and Holden, 1995) indicates that British children aged 7 and 11 share many of the concerns of the older students but are less cynical and more optimistic. They show a growing awareness of social and environmental issues and are concerned that their local communities will be affected adversely by increasing violence, unemployment and racism and a lack of facilities for young people. Similar concerns are expressed at a global level, with many children being worried about the possibility of an increasing number of wars.

The 2004 study: research design

The study reported on here involved 425 children aged nine to eleven from twelve different English primary schools, four of which were used in the original study. Schools were selected from a cross-section of urban and rural environments and a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

The questionnaire, given to all children, asked them to write freely about their hopes and fears for their personal future, the future of the local area and the future of the world. The local area was chosen as a focus, rather than the national, as it was felt that primary children would be able to relate more closely to this and that their views about their community were important. They were then asked for their views on particular issues: unemployment, violence, prejudice and racism, the environment, poverty and health. The final section, action for change, asked which (if any) organisations children were involved in and what they had learnt about such issues at school. In order to illuminate this data, interviews were carried out with a sample of children from each class, where they were asked to 'say more about' their earlier responses.

The findings

Local futures

Children's hopes and fears for their local community reflect the adult world but are informed by their own needs and perspectives. These areas emerge as being of greatest concern:

- Crime and violence
- Local amenities
- Environment
- Poverty/jobs/housing
- Community relations
- Traffic

Crime and violence is their main concern, named by three quarters of the children. They want less violence, less crime and fewer drunks, drug dealers, addicts and gangs. They worry about mugging, rape, paedophiles, people with knives and guns and those who commit vandalism or 'do graffiti'. Some children fear that the violence they have witnessed on the media will spread to their local area, with one boy being worried about 'terrorists' while another hopes 'that Bin Laden don't bomb Bristol'.

Linked to this are concerns about poverty, homelessness and ill health. Two girls worry that in the future 'rich people only could afford houses' and 'people get homeless from drinking and taking drugs'. Others comment that more housing or cheaper housing is needed along with 'enough jobs'. It would appear that children are beginning to make links between unemployment, housing and crime.

Over half of the children mention improved amenities – in particular they want more or better shops, more sports facilities and more parks and places to play. Typical are the comments from two children who want a 'park for bigger children' and 'more places where you can sit and talk without the sound of cars in the background'. Closely allied to the desire for better facilities are hopes for an improved environment. 'There needs to be grass; it needs to be more quiet' writes an inner city girl. They are concerned about increased pollution, trees being cut down, litter, loss of wildlife and 'more factories'.

Although the environment and traffic are linked, traffic issues relating to congestion, traffic accidents and parking are mentioned sufficiently often for traffic to be seen as a distinct theme. It is not just less or slower traffic that the children want, but better transport and roads, safer drivers, more cycling and more pedestrian crossings. The vulnerability of children as pedestrians and cyclists is evident in their concerns.

Girls are more likely than boys to want improved community relations. Many want 'friendly neighbours' and 'kinder people', while for some inner city children the hope is for 'no racism'. Boys' hopes also centre on kinder or more understanding people, but in addition some want their area 'to have a better reputation' and be 'more peaceful'. Fears relate to what happens when people don't get on and children don't feel safe.

In general their comments indicate a real desire for a better quality of life in their community. There is evidence that the concerns of the adult world have informed these opinions as the children discuss house prices, racism and increasing urbanisation.

Global futures

The concerns of children about the global future centre around:

- War
- Environment
- Disasters
- Poverty
- Crime and violence
- Health
- Politics/government

Two thirds of children want peace or an end to wars. In most cases this is a general plea, but there are some specific references to wanting an end to the war in Iraq or the war on terrorism, and to 'finding Bin Laden'. This is linked to a desire for less violence and crime in general, with children wanting 'less unrestricted gun use especially in America' and no harming of children. Others are concerned that there may be an increase in natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tornados, meteorites and flooding.

One third mentions a desire to find a solution to poverty in the developing world and links this with an end to homelessness and hunger. An eleven year old boy wants to see us 'putting the world's money together and giving Africa water'. There are general fears that 'things will get worse' in the developing world with an increasing number of poor people, fewer jobs, overcrowding and overpopulation. The older children also begin to mention politics for the first time. They talk about 'better governments' who can help eradicate poverty and wars and express concerns about what Tony Blair or George Bush might do next.

As with the local area, environmental issues emerge as a concern. They want less pollution, more recycling and an end to global warming. There are also fears about the destruction of trees, the extinction of animals and the disappearance of the countryside. An eleven year old girl worries that 'the whole world will become a series of never ending cities' and another fears that 'there won't be any land to grow crops'.

Comments related to health mirror those made about the local community. The children want less smoking, fewer drugs and healthier people. They would like to see 'more cures' for diseases, including cancer and 'better medicines'.

These children's concerns are not dissimilar to those of the teenagers reported above: they are aware of the major issues in the news and are not optimistic about the future.

Action for change

In spite of the myriad concerns reported above, the majority of children think that they can do something to bring about change. When asked what they actually do to make their local community or the world 'a better place', their responses fall into three broad categories:

- environment
- action and campaigns
- relationships

Environment is most frequently mentioned with children saying they do not drop litter, they recycle, save energy or walk to school. Two cite 'sharing lifts to school' and 'buying stuff with less packaging' as examples. One in three mentions their involvement in campaigns or fundraising, usually linked to work at school. They talk about Oxfam, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Blue Peter, Children in Need and cancer charities.

The third category relates to fostering good relationships, such as 'helping people' and 'being kind' as well as 'not fighting'. Some children talk about 'making new children from other countries welcome' and 'treating people the way you want to be treated'.

When asked how much they feel they have actually learnt at school about such issues, the most common response is to say they have learnt 'a little' rather than 'a lot'. However, all think that it is important that they do learn about these things, as summed up by two boys:

It's important cause otherwise you can't do anything about it
And like say we didn't know anything about wars and everything, then, like, as
Josh said, it's your future and you wouldn't know what to do or how to handle it.

Specific issues and comparison with 1994

One part of the survey was designed to probe more deeply into children's thinking around specific issues and to enable comparison with the 1994 cohort. The children were asked to say whether they thought certain issues (eg poverty) would get better, stay the same or become worse in the future- these questions were also asked in 1994.

What emerges is a picture where children in 2004 are more optimistic than their counterparts in 1994 about the chances that there will be less racism, poverty, unemployment and violence in their local area. The one issue about which they are less positive is the environment. Half of the 1994 children thought environmental problems would increase; today over three quarters do. Attitudes to the global future are more or less the same between the cohorts. Both groups are pessimistic about the global future, foreseeing an increase in global poverty, conflict and environmental problems.

The reasons for these differences are unclear. It may be that lower levels of unemployment and homelessness in 2004 compared with 1994 have influenced the children's responses about their local area, whereas media coverage of global issues would indicate similar levels of conflict, poverty and inequality over the decade. Their increased concern about environmental issues may well reflect current debates in the media and an increased focus on education for sustainable development in schools. It is also noteworthy that in 1994 one in ten children mentioned being involved in campaigning or fundraising (mainly through school) whereas in 2004 this rises to one in three.

Summary and conclusion

Children in 2004 indicate a real desire for a better quality of life in their local community. They want more amenities, affordable housing, better relationships between people, less crime and violence and an end to racism. Their concerns for the global future build on this. There is an overwhelming desire for peace, less violence and poverty and a concern for the future of both the built and natural environment. Their concerns are not dissimilar to those found in both primary and secondary school pupils a decade earlier.

We have, then, a picture of primary school children with very real concerns which merit being taken seriously by today's teachers. The citizenship guidelines, which state that children should discuss topical issues, problems and events and understand economic choices and their effects (DfEE,QCA, 1999), provide a way in for teachers to engage children in discussion of local and global issues. Education for citizenship also involves acting for change: this includes knowing about the role of voluntary groups in this process and participation by pupils themselves. Our research suggests that pupils would welcome such knowledge and participation.

The challenge for teachers is to listen to what their pupils have to say, to acknowledge their concerns and to plan a curriculum which includes both local and global communities. In order to do this, teachers themselves will need a secure knowledge of socio-economic and global issues along with motivation to teach about them and confidence in their pedagogical skills. This is the focus of the second study.

The second study: student teachers' knowledge, understanding and motivation to teach about global issues

Whilst there are no teacher training courses which focus specifically on global education in the UK, a concern that education should help young people become more world-

minded has been the focus of many progressive educators and curriculum projects over the last century. Heater (1980) traces the work of teachers from the 1920s and Hicks (2003) looks at those who have influenced models of global education from the 1980s to the present time. Current interest in a global perspective has been quickened by the emergence of citizenship, race equality and sustainability as key areas of concern in the curriculum.

*Initial teacher education in England*²

Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITET) in England has specific parameters, with a focus on the acquisition of national curriculum subject knowledge and on the basics of planning, assessment and management in the classroom. Student teachers are unlikely to find a global focus on these tightly defined courses and are also unlikely to come to their training having studied global issues, global history or world cultures in depth, due to the single subject focus of most first degrees. This lack of formal education about global issues coupled with the absence of a global dimension on most ITET programmes underlines the importance of ascertaining how best we can prepare teachers to educate for global citizenship.

The study

The purpose of this study was to investigate student teachers':

- knowledge about various global issues
- sources of information
- prior experience of global issues
- motivation to teach about global issues

Research design

Trainee teachers from four universities across the south- west of England were recruited to provide three cohorts which reflect the training routes taken by most student teachers:

- Cohort 1: 313 primary PGCE students
- Cohort 2: 442 secondary PGCE students
- Cohort 3: 101 primary undergraduate students [Total 856]

The PGCE course is one year; the undergraduate three years. The secondary students were being trained to teach a national curriculum subject based on their degree, whilst primary students were being trained to teach all subjects of the national curriculum. Half of the total sample was in the 18-23 age range, with 35% in the 24-34 age range and 15% over 35. Three-quarters of the sample were female, with the majority of the men being secondary trainees. The undergraduate students were in their first year at university.

Quantitative data were obtained through the use of a questionnaire given to all 856 students. This asked about their knowledge of key global issues, sources of information

² In the context of the research described here we refer only to training in England as requirements in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland differ

and relevant prior experiences. The data was analysed quantitatively using Sphinxsurvey Plus2 which allowed for cross-referencing (www.sphinxdevelopment.co.uk). Raw numbers were analysed using chi-squared but percentages are reported in the tables.

Qualitative data were obtained from in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of 41 students drawn from across three cohorts. The themes in the questionnaire formed the basis for the interview, with students being asked to ‘say more about’ particular questions as well as discussing their interest in teaching about global issues and their perceptions of their training.

Findings from the questionnaires

These findings give an overview of student perceptions and indicate significant statistical differences (italicized) between responses from undergraduates and postgraduates, secondary and primary trainees.

Knowledge of global issues	Know a lot	Know something	Know nothing
Reasons for war in the world	17%	81%	2%
Reasons for famine in the world	17%	79%	4%
Reasons for environmental problems	20%	74%	6%
Reasons for overpopulation	20%	74%	6%
Reasons for the Third World’s economic problems	15%	74%	11%
Reasons for human rights abuses	11%	75%	14%

Table 1: Knowledge of global issues (n=856)

Table 1 shows that the majority of student teachers claim that they either know ‘something’ or ‘a lot’ about most of today’s global problems. They appear to know most about the reasons for war and famine and least about the reasons for economic problems in the third world and for human rights abuses.

In order to ascertain if levels of knowledge and understanding were evenly distributed across the three cohorts of students, further analysis of the data was carried out. It appears from this that secondary students have more confidence in their knowledge of each of the issues in Table 1, followed by primary PGCE students, with primary undergraduate students being the least confident. Male students are more confident than female.

War	PGCE primary	PGCE secondary	Under graduate	TOTAL
I know a lot about this	11%	24%	5%	17%
I know something about this	86%	75%	91%	81%
I know nothing about this	3%	1%	4%	2%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2: Knowledge of reasons for war by (by cohort) (n=856)

Table 2 gives an example of this, looking at students’ knowledge of reasons for war, cross-referenced by cohort. In this case the number of secondary students claiming to ‘know a lot’ is statistically significant.

When asked about their sources of information, the following are cited in order of importance:

- television
- newspapers
- friends
- family
- internet
- university
- school

The vast majority of students (95%) claim to get most of their information on global issues from the media (television and newspapers) with only 40% referring to school or university. This is true for students on all three training routes and raises questions about the critical lenses through which they view such information. It also brings into question the lack of teaching about global issues in both university and school.

Questions on prior experience of global issues as well as exposure to cultures other than their own were included in the study as it seemed likely this would be a significant factor in determining both students' knowledge and their motivation to teach about global issues.

Prior experience of global issues	PGCE primary	PGCE secondary	Under graduate	TOTAL
Have lived and worked abroad	45%	45%	5%	40%
Have family/friends from other cultural backgrounds	64%	56%	28%	55%
Am particularly interested in global issues	59%	58%	17%	53%
Not applicable	11%	12%	59%	18%

Table 3: Experience of and interest in global issues (by cohort) (n=856)

(NB. Responses total more than 100% as students could tick more than one response)

Overall, a considerable number of students (40%) have lived or worked abroad and over half have friends or family from cultures other than their own. This prior experience appears to directly influence students' interest in and knowledge of global matters. The undergraduate students who have the least experience of other cultures and who are least likely to have lived or worked abroad, are much less motivated to teach about global issues. This raises a vital question for undergraduate programmes: if a knowledge and understanding of global issues is important to prospective teachers there may need to be a broadening of the experiences, both direct and mediated, that undergraduates have.

Findings from the interviews

The interviews reveal more about the importance of prior experience in shaping students' views. Many who had worked abroad or travelled extensively spoke of the importance of

experiencing difference. They spoke in terms of cultural difference, ideological difference and the difference in terms of wealth and privilege. One student explained that ‘it opens up your eyes to how other people live and the problems they face and how like you they are...’ Other students talked of the importance of their work with campaigning organisations in this country and how this had influenced their views. Work with Amnesty, Greenpeace, Traidcraft and local environmental or action groups was cited. The experience of students in the workplace was also important.

The majority of those interviewed were committed and enthusiastic about including global perspectives in their teaching, but were concerned about how best to teach about these issues. An undergraduate who was on her first school placement at the time of 9/11 in a Year 1 class, spoke of her dilemma:

(Pupils) came up to me and said ‘Did you see what happened and how many people died?’ but the teacher wouldn’t discuss it. I think they should have had a moment, a few minutes just to discuss it briefly, get it off their chests, try to understand it in their own way without just going (straight) into the numeracy hour.

She felt she was not allowed to talk about what had happened with the children and was left feeling frustrated by her inability to address their needs. Another primary teacher worried about being ‘vested with this huge authority as a teacher’ which might, she thought, lead her to influence children without letting them make up their own minds. Concerns voiced by others were:

- How to deal with children’s concerns and fears (eg about war)
- How to judge what is appropriate (especially with young children)
- Their own role – should they try to be neutral or give their opinion?
- The reaction of parents to teachers dealing with controversial issues
- Time to teach about global issues
- How to facilitate meaningful discussion on sensitive issues
- Having sufficient knowledge themselves

These interviews endorse the wealth of prior experience many students bring to their PGCE courses and indicate a commitment to addressing young people’s concerns about these issues. They also shed light on the reasons for many students’ expressed lack of confidence: global issues are seen as sensitive, controversial and complex and they feel they need specific guidance on appropriate teaching methods and better subject knowledge.

Conclusion

There are several key issues here for those who work in initial teacher education. Quite clearly more detailed research is needed in the UK context into the impact of prior cross-cultural experiences on students’ attitudes. Thomas (2001), for example, found that teachers with experience of VSO (Voluntary service Overseas) were more committed to introducing global perspectives into their teaching. The increasing popularity of ‘gap’ years and the culturally diverse nature of British society mean that many student teachers

have knowledge and experience of cultures and countries other than their own. Using their experiences of and commitment to global issues could be one way into a broader curriculum and more relevant and innovative teaching.

There is also a case for the inclusion of courses with a specific global component in undergraduate degrees. A report on *Global Perspectives in Higher Education* (DEA, 2003) indicates that this may be happening already: it cites a number of undergraduate modules such as Global Citizenship and Civic Society, Globalisation and Ethics in the Workplace and Global Responsibility and Sustainable Business Practice. Should such students then wish to train as teachers they would then come with considerable global insight.

The findings from this study raise questions about the nature of pre-service courses themselves. As indicated earlier, there are both strong governmental and time restraints on what is possible in ITET courses. Nevertheless, it is vital that such programmes find ways of broadening their remit. There needs to be time and provision for students to learn strategies for teaching about global and controversial issues, time for them to improve their own knowledge and understanding, and time for them to learn how to critically evaluate sources of information. Garratt and Piper (2003: 143) accordingly highlight the need to challenge “the limitation of a classroom competency driven approach to teacher training in comparison with a more socially conscious conception of teacher education.” One of the PGCE students put this another way:

There’s teaching the stuff that you have to teach but there’s also educating children about life and the real world and real issues and that’s something which I feel is important, it’s close to my heart and something which I would want to do.

The world of the early twenty-first century is complex and fast changing. Local and national issues, events and trends can only be understood if set in the wider global context. As the first study has shown, children are concerned about such issues and wish to learn about them in school. If we are to prepare teachers to meet the needs of these children and to be effective educators for global citizenship, then we must ensure that ITET programmes take seriously the need to include a global dimension in their courses and that, in turn, schools embrace education for global citizenship.

Note: a fuller account of the second study appears in Holden, C and Hicks, D (in press) *Making Global Connections: the knowledge, understanding and motivation of trainee teachers*.

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