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Pluralism in divided societies – citizenship education and social work with care experienced young people in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland is a divided society emerging from a conflict which has lasted over 30 years and left more than 3,000 dead, many thousands injured and many people and communities deeply traumatised. In the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement 1998, the Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland underlined their commitment to:

dedicating ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all¹

- concepts which would form the building blocks of normality in more peaceful times. This commitment is statutorily embedded in Northern Ireland's public sector where employers are now obliged to adhere to equality of opportunity principles and practices.

In the sphere of education, citizenship education will become part of the Northern Ireland curriculum in September 2007, and Further Education Colleges (post compulsory leaving age) are also in the developmental process of embracing this concept.

This paper outlines research work I carried out for the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), which has become subsequently the basis and argument for both a citizenship-led ethos and training methodology in further education colleges throughout Northern Ireland. I will detail some of the main findings of this research and the perceived problems in implementing its recommendations in educational institutions where staff and students often come from communities where sectarian violence was endemic and accepted. The experiences of Armagh College of Further and Higher Education will be examined as a case study analysis of implementing citizenship and community relations initiatives in the curriculum.

The work I describe is obviously centred on Northern Ireland and its particular problems, but I will suggest that the same strategy is usable in further education throughout the European community and its neighbours where there is social division when a number of social, political and religious elements interact. I will also suggest that the values underpinning citizenship education can apply to other public sector situations such as social work with young people who are in care, with the objective of addressing issues concerning their social exclusion, marginalisation and oppression.

In this respect, it will be shown that citizenship education can occur in settings beyond the classroom to empower oppressed young people in the care context to participate in society as active citizens.

Citizenship and the further education sector in Northern Ireland

The further education sector across Northern Ireland is made up of sixteen colleges, offering educational and training opportunities for post-16 learners from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. For many, this is their first experience of interacting with peers

¹ Governments of UK and Ireland, (1998) The Agreement, Northern Ireland Office

from different community, religious and racial backgrounds. The colleges are regulated by a government body, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

For much of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' these colleges attempted to provide a safe and protected haven for many students, providing a neutral learning environment so much in contrast with the violence and community conflict occurring where they lived. This ethos prevailed without question until the changes heralded by the Northern Ireland Act (1998) required all public authorities in their activities to consider ways in which 'good relations' could be promoted 'between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group' (Northern Ireland Act, 1998 Section 75(2)).

It was clear that the further education sector also had to review the continuing appropriateness of its neutrality policy in this new era of promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and community relations. Therefore the Department for Employment and Learning commissioned me to research areas of good practice which promoted cultural diversity in order to help the further education sector move towards the mainstreaming of cultural diversity and 'good relations' initiatives across all aspects of college life.

One of the key areas to be addressed was recommending how the further education curriculum could be developed to 'provide students with the opportunity to develop the competence and skills necessary to live and work in an increasingly culturally diverse society' (DEL, 2001)

In *Cultural Diversity – A Good Practice Guide for the Further Education Sector in Northern Ireland* (Duffy, 2002), I recommended that further education colleges should design programmes around citizenship drawing on the themes of *Local and Global Citizenship*². This was one of many recommendations for curricular change, central to colleges embracing a broader belief in the value of education as a vehicle for challenging attitudes and exploring diversity in their aspiration towards equality and social justice.

Implementing a citizenship philosophy

This research specifically recommended that Northern Ireland's further education colleges should embody cultural diversity and good relations throughout all aspects of college life and introduce citizenship education as a feature of this. This was a considerable shift in philosophy given that historically such issues had only been approached and with little consistency tentatively by colleges (Black and Quinliven, 1999). The business and moral case for the implementation of such pluralist policies were, however, both compelling (Kantner, 1994).

Having said this, many challenges could have mitigated against the introduction of such initiatives. Evidence was and still is emerging that Northern Ireland people were very intolerant towards minority ethnic groups and that perpetrators of most racist crime were likely to be young males between the ages of 16 and 19 (Connolly and Keenan, 2001). To further complicate matters, the broader political backdrop against which these initiatives

² The term used to describe Northern Ireland's citizenship education programme developed by the University of Ulster's Social Civic and Political Education Project (SCPE) in 1995

were launched was characterised by crisis, uncertainty and instability with fluctuations between devolved Local Assembly government in Belfast and Direct Rule from London.

A consistently encouraging finding emerging from this research however was that young people in Northern Ireland were clearly saying that they were interested in politics and wanted to engage more in debate around controversial and divisive issues (Smyth, 2000). A significant number of young people surveyed in my research also expressed a desire to learn more about community relations issues in colleges.

The Department for Employment and Learning funded four further education colleges to pilot initiatives on cultural diversity and good relations in July 2003. One of the colleges involved was Armagh College of Further and Higher Education (www.armaghcollege.ac.uk).

Armagh College's citizenship philosophy

Armagh College, situated close to Northern Ireland's border with the Republic of Ireland, opened in 1902 and has a total student population of 6,600.

The city of Armagh has held a pre-eminent historical and cultural position in Ireland for almost 4,000 years and is portrayed in legend and folklore as both the seat of kings and the chosen site of St Patrick to become the centre of the Christian religion. It has also been known as the City of Saints and Scholars for almost 1000 years, producing some of Britain's and Ireland's finest scholars with works such as the *Book of Armagh*, associated with influencing the spread of Christianity throughout Northern Europe (www.armagh.gov.uk/history).

The city and district area has an estimated population of 52,500, an unemployment rate of 7.2% and has suffered the highest incidence of fatalities in Northern Ireland outside of Belfast (apart from the Enniskillen and Omagh massacres) due to the conflict and associated sectarian violence.

The area is polarised at the local level, with communal and religious separatism evidenced by population shifts according to community background. For example, south and west of Armagh city is predominantly Catholic, whereas north and east is mainly Protestant (Knox, 2000). Such acute polarisation has resulted in surrounding rural communities developing distinct patterns of daily living reflecting their cultural and community identities. This seems consistent with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1978) where individuals undertake a process of social categorisation, which becomes a fundamental part of their social identity.

It would be wrong however to portray the area as being completely polarised as there have been significant moves, since the ceasefires in 1994, towards improving community relations and development assisted by EU Peace 1 and 2 Funding initiatives. For example, there is now an increase in integration in terms of housing in the city and also in pupils attending integrated primary schools in the wider area (Knox, 2000).

Set against such a polarised backdrop, Armagh College vigorously developed a strategy aimed at improving community relations and promoting understanding of cultural diversity in all aspects of its educational activity and has established itself at the heart of its local community as a neutral learning environment, reflected in its balanced enrolments across diverse religious, community and ethnic backgrounds.

And so, in February 2005, the College developed a nationally accredited Level 2 course titled 'Challenging Prejudice and Discrimination' as part of its curricular commitment to equipping students for life in an increasingly diverse, multi-cultural and pluralist society. It deals with complex and sensitive issues such as racism, sectarianism, homophobia etc, in a supportive environment and encourages students to reflect upon and challenge their own prejudices and stereotypes.

An initial cohort comprising some 120 full-time students is presently undertaking the programme and overall feedback from participants has been encouraging with comments such as:

I have learned a lot from this course it has taught me to listen to others. I think it is the blind ignorance of others that leads to people not knowing about other religions.... I have educated myself for the future. (17 year old female student)

people shouldn't be treated differently because of race or ethnic minority background

every member of a different background, ethnic group, religion and minority group are just humans like me and you (17 year old female)

I now understand and respect the views of both the Protestant and Catholic side (16 year old male student)

I find the course interesting and enjoyable and I feel it will be valuable to me in later life (17 year old female)

Armagh College's pioneering 'Good Relations' programme provides one model of good practice in citizenship education for Northern Ireland's further education sector, which is encouraging young people to think critically and to engage in examining ways of building a more harmonious and inclusive society.

By encouraging critical exploration of the roots of sectarianism, prejudice and discrimination, such a curriculum is making a valuable contribution to promoting respect for the themes of diversity and inclusion, human rights, equality, justice and democracy amongst a critical and influential mass of young people in Northern Ireland.

In this way, citizenship education has been used as a vehicle for enabling young people in a divided society to learn about peaceful ways for resolving conflict. Such an approach can also be usefully applied in other public sector contexts such as social work to demonstrate that teaching citizenship can occur beyond the classroom.

Citizenship social work with care experienced young people

In Northern Ireland there are currently 2,453 children in some form of state care (DHSSPS, 2003). Substantial evidence confirms the disadvantages and social exclusion that these children face when in the care system and when leaving care to live independently (Pinkerton and McCrea, 1996).

Such children experience disadvantage in education, employment, housing and family support (DHSSPS, 2000) and are perceived as the most vulnerable young people in society, often leaving care without the necessary support to facilitate social inclusion into society (DHSSPS, 2003).

Through applying the themes of *Local and Global Citizenship*, and acknowledging that citizenship perspectives in social work are also associated with the promotion of social, political and civil rights (Banks, 2001), social workers can contribute to creating opportunities for these young people to challenge such social exclusion and marginalisation. Local and global citizenship education in the Northern Ireland context invites young people to 'Engage in a process of creating a culture of democracy as opposed to violence' (Arlow, 2001; p.8) and recognises that young people can be helped in their understanding of problems around identity, inclusion, pluralism and diversity by learning about similar experiences from other countries in the developed world.

The four inter-connected thematic areas in this approach to citizenship education are

- Diversity and Inclusion
- Human Rights and Social Responsibilities
- Equality and Social Justice
- Democracy and Active Participation (SCPE, 1998; Arlow, 2001).

Each theme is conceived of as being problematic in its investigation in local, national and global terms. This paper proposes that citizenship social work can similarly apply these themes from citizenship education to facilitate social workers in creative and emancipatory work with young people in the care system.

Diversity and inclusion

In this theme young people are encouraged to examine the breadth of diversity existing in their own community, and in national/European and global contexts in areas such as gender, sexuality, religion etc. In this way, they are invited to engage in debate that focuses on the challenges and opportunities presented by diversity, social exclusion and inclusion. Such encounters must be managed with skill and sensitivity to ensure that young people can express their views on sensitive and controversial material in a safe environment where they are helped to analyse, understand and challenge their own and others' perceptions.

Human rights and social responsibilities

Both nationally and internationally, much attention is now focussed on children's rights. The challenge for social workers in citizenship social work with children in care is to engage in a public conversation (Minow, 1987) about national and international human rights instruments such as

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The European Convention on Human Rights
- The Human Rights Act
- The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

The purpose of this dialogue is to emphasise to children that a globally accepted value base exists within such legislation, clearly committing democratic societies and individuals to enshrining specific rights and responsibilities. Social workers must

encourage children in care to examine areas of their own lives where human rights can conflict.

Equality and social justice

Closely linked to the last section, the type of citizenship social work emerging from this theme will involve exploring how democratic societies protect and safeguard individual and collective rights through rules and laws aimed at equal and fair treatment. Social workers therefore need to encourage and empower young people to reflect on how their own lives are affected by laws in a local, national and global context.

Democracy and active participation

This strand of citizenship social work is directly aimed at empowering young people to develop the skills and confidence required to participate as full and active citizens in society. Young people are offered advice and insights into the mechanisms not only for influencing democratic processes but also the functions of key democratic institutions in promoting social inclusion, justice and democracy.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how a citizenship education philosophy has been introduced into the further education sector in Northern Ireland. This has been introduced in the broader context of promoting community relations and cultural diversity and the work of Armagh College has been highlighted.

Evidence of demonstrable progress has been cited to show how this citizenship-based approach has promoted democratic dialogue on contested and divisive issues among the young people involved. The paper has then explored how citizenship education themes and values can also empower creative approaches to working with young people in the care system through citizenship social work.

The argument is therefore proposed that citizenship education can mould itself to other public sector contexts as an emancipatory force in promoting pluralism and social inclusion in divided and post-conflict societies where young people face social exclusion and marginalisation.

The significant outcome, common to both educational and social work settings, is that young people are provided with rich democratic moments for engaging effectively with each other as citizens. Citizenship education therefore has the potential to adapt itself to the peculiarities and contours of divided societies in local, European and global contexts to offer young people opportunities for exploring and developing the skills and values needed to live and work in a pluralist society facing growing pressures and uncertainties from local and global perspectives.

The challenge now is whether initiatives such as citizenship education and citizenship social work can help young people move beyond 'polite exchange' to engaging with each other in meaningful deliberation of controversial social, cultural, religious and political issues (Smith and Robinson, 1996).

Research indicates that young people are up to the challenge. Educationalists across Europe have the moral responsibility to facilitate and empower young peoples'

development on this journey as they attempt to make society more responsive to their needs.

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