



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education: Europe and the World
Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2006

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 899764 66 6

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Elm, A. (2006) Young children's concerns for the future – a challenge for teacher students, in Ross, A. (ed) Citizenship Education: Europe and the World. London: CiCe, pp 535-540.

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Latvia
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

Young children's concerns for the future – a challenge for teacher students

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Introduction

The international research project Children's concerns for the future, was conducted in the autumn of 2005, at the Department of Education and Psychology, University of Gävle Sweden, in a collaboration with Catherine Holden, Exeter University UK and six other countries. The study builds on two projects carried out in 1994 and 2004 with focus on young peoples concern for the future. Findings from the 1994 project found that students showed a growing awareness of social and environmental issues and were concerned that their local communities would be affected by increased violence, unemployment and racism and a lack of facilities for young people. The authors' conclusion was that whilst some students felt that they could act on a personal level to create a better future, others did not. Students spoke about being responsible as citizens of the future for what may happen, but lacked a vision of what their own part might be in this question. Their visions remain fragmented and essentially conservative in a time of radical change (Hicks & Holden 1995). Ten years later (2005) Cathie Holden reported her findings from a study in England with 425 children aged nine to eleven involved. Her findings showed that children more frequently mentioned the environment in 2004 and that they were also more optimistic compared to their counterparts in 1994. The children also spoke about their belief that there will be less racism, unemployment and violence in their local area. The findings indicate a real desire for a better quality of life, affordable housing and better relationships between people. This picture of children with real concerns of the future create a challenge not only for teachers in schools but also for teacher education to educate teachers to listen to what their pupils have to say and to engage children in discussions of local and global issues.

The purpose of this paper is to report some preliminary findings about what Swedish pre-school children have to say about their views of the future, their interest in peace and conflict as well as their hopes and fears. This paper will also report on teacher education and student teacher's experience of participating in the research project by interviewing pre-school children.

Pre-school children's concerns for the future

From the moment of birth children are developing ideas about the world around them, using a large number of different resources, such as a number of adults and peers to interact with, as well as toys, ICT, newspapers and television which brings a lot of information about the world around in different ways (Johnston, 2005; Alison, Gopnik & Kuhl, 2001). The pre-schools and compulsory schools in Sweden were reformed during the last decade and since 1998 a new curriculum has stated a widened task, children aged one to five years and preschool class for children aged six are a part of the educational system with a national curriculum. The context of Swedish pre-schools has always had a

This paper is part of *Citizenship Education: Europe and the World: Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A, published by CiCe (London) 2006. ISBN 1 899764 66 6; ISSN 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

strong influence on pedagogical intentions. In the curriculum the goals are provided as something to strive towards. The foundation of pre-schools is formed by fundamental democratic values which represent the values on which Swedish society is based. Children are to be helped to understand specific aspects of the environment and the world around them as well as to acquire values such as individual freedom, the equality of all people and the inviolability of human life. Solidarity with the weak and an ethical attitude characterises all pre-school activity (Ministry of Culture and Education in Sweden, 1998 a, b).

Different research projects and projects designed to improve pre-school teachers' competences in educating children to become active citizens show examples of children participating in group decisions about what to plant in the garden, the meals for lunches, visits they are going to make, what theme to work on and how to arrange the nearest indoor and outdoor environment. Some pre-schools also have a specific profile towards science and science technique. It shows that teachers in pre-school have a teaching role, and shows how they work to develop the children's learning of values and how those questions have been more focused over the years (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003; Bjervås, 2003; Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1996; Hultqvist, 1990). Those aspects of the curriculum and experiences from different projects in the field indicate that children in Swedish pre-schools have opportunities to participate and influence their everyday life, as well as aspects regarding gender and the world around them.

This raises the question of how best to educate student teachers for the challenge of the 21st century, a question that Sweden, as well as other countries among the world, is attempting to deal with.

Teacher Education

The role of citizenship education has been given a prominent place in discussions on the development of the society in Europe. An important landmark in the debate was the European Year of Citizenship through Education, in 2005. Part of the preparation for the launch involved an All-European study on Education for Democratic Citizenship Policies (EDC) initiated in 2002. This study assigned education a prominent role to solving the political, socio economic and cultural challenges in the society. Findings from this study reported significant gaps in articulated policy and actual practice in relation to citizenship education. It also reported that the framework used to promote citizenship education was the formal curriculum of the school system. There are significant challenges for teacher education identified in the EDC. A number of difficulties were observed in initial teacher education about training for citizenship education, suggesting that teacher training/education does not give enough support to citizenship education. The question of which teachers are responsible for citizenship education shows a general pattern in Western Europe. Primary school citizenship education was taught by general subject teachers. At secondary level where specialist teachers teach citizenship education it often appears alongside the main specialisation such as history, social and political science and geography. Teachers as citizens and educators require education to adapt to new approaches that will enable them to engage reflectively and critically with a profound number of changes in the society. (Bîrzéa et al. 2004).

There are several key issues for those who work in teacher education. Findings from recent studies show how more detailed research is needed on the impact of prior cross-cultural experiences on student teachers' attitudes. Holden (2005) argues for the importance of letting the students' prior experience of cultures and countries other than their own to become an innovative resource for courses in teacher education. Korhonen (2005) discusses the importance of citizenship education as a part of teacher education. Interviews with student teachers showed knowledge in global citizenship on a general level based on students' experiences as children.

Teacher education in Sweden has recently been reformed, and the question of how to include citizenship education and improve scientific knowledge in undergraduate courses in teacher education has become of great importance. Discussions about how the gap between theory and practice, as well as questions about the progression of student teachers' scientific knowledge during their education has raised important issues about the ability of teaching for tomorrow (Prop. 1999/2000:135). Student teachers who participate in the project Children's concerns for the future follow a programme for three and a half years of study. The programme includes three semesters of studying general pedagogic subjects together with primary, secondary and upper secondary student teachers. Those courses are focusing on topics such as democracy, and values on which Swedish society is based, such as individual freedom, the equality of all people, the inviolability of human life and ethical attitudes. Apart from those courses the student teachers follow courses which focus on pre-school children's development, cross-cultural understanding, citizenship in a global perspective, mathematics, technical science and general science.

The study

In this study we want to find out:

- The concerns of pre-school children in this new millennium,
- The views of pre-school children in a local and global perspective.

During a course about cross-cultural understanding in Swedish pre-schools, the research project Children's concerns for the future was introduced to the student teachers, who were invited to participate by conducting interviews with pre-school children. These students made their third semester study the understanding and interpretation of different theoretical perspectives and research on citizenship education in pre-school.

Nineteen student teachers participated in the project studied earlier reports, research findings and the semi-structured questionnaires sent by the project manager Catherine Holden. Careful preparations for the interviews were made. Lectures on interview methodology were made by two lecturers with experience in the field. Literature about techniques to interview young children was studied, as well as ethical aspects for research (Gustafsson, Hermerén & Petersson, 2005; Kvale, 1997; Pramling & Doverborg, 1991). The semi-structured questionnaires were revised for children of pre-school age. There were many discussions involving students and colleagues in the Department of Education and Psychology before agreement was reached on the revised version of the questionnaires. The method used was individual interviews.

Questions for pre-school children:

1. How would you like it to be when you have grown up, when you are as old as your parents etc.?
2. What do you think it will look like in this town when you have grown up?
3. What do you think it will look like in the world (in other countries) when you have grown up?
4. Are you worried something might happen to you when you have grown up?
5. Are you worried something shall happen here, in this town where you live, when you have grown up?
6. Do you believe you can do something to make the world a better place?
a) much b) little c) nothing
7. If we pretend we're opening a door and looking outside. Perhaps we can see what it will look like when you have grown up. What do you see? Please, draw a picture of how it looks.

The interviews took place during the student teachers' teaching practice in the course. Every student started with a pilot interview to learn about the situation, how to ask the questions and to respond to the answers from the child. The interviews were recorded and some children also drew pictures about the theme. Lectures about how to transcribe the recorded data were held. The interviews were carefully transcribed by the student teachers, supported by the lecturers in the course. One lecturer listened through the recorded tapes and read the transcript made by the teacher students. After being translated, where we tried to keep the substance in the interviews as much as possible, the interviews were sent to the project leader at Exeter University for analysis. An analysis was also made at the Department of Education and Psychology in Gävle.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary results indicate similarities from previous research on primary and secondary pupils' view of the future (Hicks & Holden 1995). When pre-school children talk about their own future they all seem optimistic. They talk about what kind of work they're going to do, who they will live with, how they will live – for example in their own houses with gardens. Their future is characterised by a good job and material well-being. It seems that their hopes are related to things they would like to have now, even the weather (the interviews took place in November).

Interest in the local area indicated that some children are familiar with the environment and their responsibility to it. They spoke about litter and to put litter in dustbins. Their answers also showed an interest in how they would like the environment to look, for example it should be green with a lot of trees and flowers and animals. In the discussion

about the world some children indicated they were aware of natural disasters. They mentioned the tsunami and houses falling down and roads being destroyed. The answers also indicated that the children found it difficult to talk about the world – some children had been abroad on holiday and related their answers to those experiences.

The questions about fears for the future indicate views of accidents, dangerous animals, more violence, thieves, fire, war and also car-explosions. Mostly all children answered that they can do a lot to make the world a better place. Their answers related in many ways to their experiences in everyday life, for example to put money in a moneybox, clean up, comfort people, have fun etc. The pictures they drew all made the future appear to be fine: there was a yellow sun, blue sky, green grass, butterflies and toys.

Student Teachers' experience

When the data collection and transcript were complete there were plenty of discussions about the experiences of the student group. Those discussions were documented by the lecturers on the course and together with the result of the final evaluation, the students show interesting findings:

- more understanding of children's views about the world around them.
- knowledge about children's perspectives of the world, local questions, their hopes and fears for the future.
- initial knowledge about research.
- knowledge about the difficulties to interview young children.
- knowledge about the importance of being aware of different theoretical perspectives.
- knowledge about ethic rules in research.

Conclusion

The experience from this study and preliminary results raise interesting questions. The result indicates how children's experiences of everyday life are closely connected to their visions of the future. It is important to think ahead and the future seems to be something to be concerned about. The answers pre-school children gave show their concerns are not dissimilar to those found in primary school. The preliminary findings showed pre-school children to have an optimistic attitude which suggests the importance of further studies on what those young people care about.

This study also raises questions about teacher education and the progression of citizen education among the student teachers. The evaluation of this project indicates student teachers' interest in being involved in research projects during their education as well as the proceedings in their own learning process.

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