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## **Developing frameworks for evaluating education and training approaches that encourage professional recognition of children's participatory rights**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper reports on a study of part of a higher education and training programme for trainee teachers and for teaching assistants. This strand of the training aims to encourage professional recognition of the entitlement of children as key participants in shaping their learning. The discussions in this report draw on interviews with a small sample of students (5 trainee teachers and 5 practising teaching assistants), half of whom come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The study followed the submission of their final assignments on two education and training modules – 'The Voice of the Learner' and 'Global Citizenship for Sustainability, Change and Development'. These modules develop the students' skills of active learning and critical reflection with respect to conducting personal enquiries into children's capacity for agency within school settings, their local environment and the wider world. The data derive from the students' responses to questions about power relations in education and the development of independent learning identities following their own experience of participatory enquiry within the modules. The data begin to portray the students' differential capacities to understand the significance of children's own participation as learners in context. To some extent the data take the form of life story accounts. Analysis of the data is informed by a conceptual framework within which ideas about personalised culturally based pedagogies (Freire) and the development of action competence (Jenson & Schnack) are juxtaposed and explored. Findings begin to identify factors which indicate that students' previous experience and level of intercultural competence may affect their capacity to engage in supporting children and young people's participation in active learning and reflective citizenship. Freire P (1970) *Cultural Action for Freedom XL May/August: Harvard Educational Review* Jenson B & Schnack R (1994) 'Action competence as an educational challenge' *Didaktiske Studier Royal Danish School: Copenhagen*.*

**Key words:** *Participatory rights, Education and training, Learning identities, Power relations*

### **Introduction**

There are two reasons why it is timely to review the nature of training in England to support children's participatory rights through education. Firstly following the recent election in the UK there is currently no agreement about what form 'education in citizenship' and 'education for participation' will take in the primary stage for September 2011. Secondly there are less favourable conditions in higher education where many teachers and teaching assistants are trained, as a result of the difficult

current economic situation. This paper reports on a small scale study of selected aspects of higher education programmes for trainee teachers and for teaching assistants that aim to encourage professional recognition of the entitlement of children as key participants in shaping their learning and ways of being with the wider world. This study draws on responses from a small sample of trainee teachers and teaching assistants and re-opens discussion about the pedagogical relationship between action and reflection.

Recent government intervention to reform children's services has encouraged professionals to engage in higher levels of consultation and participation with their clients to improve the appropriateness of their services. This emphasis upon children's participation has developed from both economic and cultural changes. Sinclair has identified three agendas that have fuelled the move towards children's participation: the consumer movement, the children's rights agenda and our changing constructions of children (Sinclair 2004:107). The consumer movement acknowledges that children form a major group of service users and therefore recognises the need to involve children and young people in 'shaping policies and services in formal and public arenas outside the family and home' (Hill et al 2004:78). The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) determined a minimum standard for children's rights and clarified for all working with children that they have a responsibility to ensure that structures, systems and programmes are in place that enable children to participate in matters concerning them. The UN Convention has led to many child focussed policy initiatives as all governments are monitored on their capacity to engage in the children's rights agenda to ensure that 'participation is the keystone of the arch that is the Convention' (Badham 2004:153). Change in our experience and understanding has led to the construction of children as competent social actors involved in shaping their environment, rather than as objects of social control. The concept of children as competent citizens is widely accepted in Norway where Kjørholt has proposed the concept of children as resources for the development of communities.

'Children seem to be key persons both in environmental protection and in the processes of constructing viable local communities.' (Kjørholt 2002:75).

Most recently The Cambridge Primary Review (2009) has drawn attention to the importance of children's agency and rights exhorting professionals to avoid 'tokenism or fad' and make them a 'reality in policy, schools and classrooms' (Cambridge Primary Review Briefings 2010).

### **Background research into matters of concern to children**

There have been efforts made within the educational community to ensure documentation of children's current concerns that could form a basis for their participation and action. Quentin Blake's 'The Sailing Boat in the Sky' captures and communicates the concerns expressed by a group of children and young people in the South of France in 2002 – and the themes of bullying, stereotyping, warfare, environmental depletion, poverty, and addiction are represented as challenges that can be addressed through human (young people's) collaboration, solidarity, responsiveness and courageous action. The story poignantly reminds the readers (young people) that the causes of some problems can lie within themselves as the protagonists in the story

review their initial prejudicial thinking about an old woman with a greenish complexion who turns out to be the grandmother of one of their own group of heroic global activists. Hicks and Holden's earlier research in 1995 and Holden's more recent study (Hicks & Holden: 2007) has indicated that concerns such as these are identified by children and young people – and that their levels of optimism for the future diminish as they mature (Hicks & Holden 1995).

Further illustration of children's capacity to identify social and environmental concerns and to consider their role in addressing them is provided through the annual Children's Parliament held at the University of the West of England, Bristol. School councillors from as many as 15 schools (Primary and Secondary) meet at an earlier convention to identify themes that they would like to explore during interactive workshops on the day of the parliament. One such workshop 'Standing up against stereotyping' was facilitated by Clough working with three volunteer UG Initial Teacher Education students. Two of these students were from the Bristol Asian communities of Bristol. The focus for discussion at the workshop was negotiated at the outset; how are children who are new arrivals to the city included in school life? The process included two stages. The presentation by groups of children of puppet shows that told the stories of some of the challenges faced by new arrivals on their first days in school followed by consideration by the children of measures that they could introduce themselves to ensure their inclusion.

While the children's puppet show presentations revealed some of the stark realities of classroom and playground interactions through which newly arrived children's well being can be put at risk by their actions as hosts, the same children were able to reflect responsively about these situations in critical and creative ways. Their recommendations extended beyond possible acts of kindness to making changes to the taught curriculum and to reviewing the skills and knowledge sets required of teachers to meet the needs of newly arrived children. This case from the children's parliament is referenced here as an example of a learning space where children can practise their engagement in critical reflection about everyday actions. Such opportunity for dialogic experience – actions (or representations of actions) followed by reflection on action is seen in this paper to be fundamental to the development of children's participatory capacities.

### **Context of the study**

The report on the enquiry process that is presented here allows exploration of aspects of an initial teacher education programme (for trainee teachers) together with relevant aspects of a Foundation Degree programme for Higher Level Teaching Assistants and learning supporters (FD HLTA). We have selected those aspects that are intended to prepare these professionals as facilitators of children's participation, including reference to 3 modules as follows:

*'Developing Global Perspectives on Change and Development'* on the Initial Teacher Education programme. Trainee teachers are required to undertake an enquiry of a social / environmental issue, to identify the contested nature of the issue and to make some recommendations about how their own enquiry might stimulate pupil led enquiries in

their future classrooms. The module engages the students in keeping a separate diary about the impact of their everyday actions on the global environment. These have taken the form of personalised critical reflections on the theme of 'Myself with the Wider World'. An example is presented below.

'Almost everything I do or own is, in some way, connected to other parts of the world. For example, some of the fruit that I eat is imported from South America and the tea I drink from Asia. I own a car that burns fossil fuels and so contribute to global warming. I wear clothes and own items that have been manufactured in other parts of the world before being transported to the UK. This has generated work for people but has also resulted in lengthy transportation. .... I am connected globally in almost everything I do or own, yet on reflection, most of my connections appear to generate a negative impact on the globe, through the waste or products that result from my actions'.  
(Clough N 2010: 95)

In these ways the themes of cohesion and sustainable development were explored through shared enquiry processes and there was consideration of the implications of their findings for developing pedagogical approaches that would promote children's engagement and participation.

'*The Voice of the Learner*' is the opening module on the FD HLTA work-based learning programme, designed to enable teaching assistants to reflect upon their professional experience within a range of theoretical and policy frameworks. This first module aims to encourage teaching assistants to understand their role in relation to children's entitlements to participation. It includes a small scale enquiry, listening to learners to ascertain their perceptions and views on chosen aspect of educational experience and supporting these learners through an intervention project for which they share responsibility.

The third module '*Educational Contributions to Sustainability at Local and Global Levels*' encourages these same teaching assistants and learning supporters to engage in a critical review of the impact of their own lifestyle on the environment. Simultaneously they conduct enquiries about actions for sustainability being taken within the educational context where they are employed.

### **Identifying points of focus for evaluation from the literature**

The study of these students' developing understanding of participation – their own and that of children and young people – is set against a review of selected literature that pinpoints a particular issue for teacher trainers – the meaning and significance of action competence. Previously Clough has written jointly with Holden (Holden and Clough 1998) that the teacher's role is to assist children's participation through the development of action competence. Drawing on Jensen and Schnack (1994: 6) it was emphasised that the value of pupils' actions lay not so much in the changes to the situation that might follow, as in the educational process itself. We wrote 'the teacher's role is thus to have the courage to listen to children's concerns, engage them in debate and support their

developing understanding of citizenship through assisting participation' (Holden and Clough 1998).

Experience of facilitating participation at community level and a re-reading of Freire's seminal text *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1970) has led the current authors to consider reflection *in action* as an essential process in developing action competence. It is the process of personal re-appraisal that stems from critical reflection on actions (and these might be everyday current actions) that engenders higher levels of participation.

Critical consciousness is brought about not through intellectual effort alone but through praxis, through the authentic union of action and reflection.  
(Freire 1970: 48)

The process of critical reflection in action can be supported through opening up the learner to new ways of seeing the world and to new ways of being with the world.

The act of knowing requires a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection, and from reflection upon action to a new action. For the learner to know what he did not know before, he must engage in an authentic process of abstraction by which he can reflect on the action-object whole, or more generally on forms of orientation in the world. (Freire 1970: 13)

Thus the key to higher levels of participation and self actualisation is through forms of dialogic engagement that permit transitions from the starting point of the learner's own situation as it is reappraised. The dialogic engagement may be with another and / or again take the form of internal review.

Dialogue may be **external**, between two different people, or internal, between an earlier and a later self. These two types of dialogue can be distinguished as spatial (A->B) and temporal (A->A') communication acts' (Bakhtin 1981: 426)

It is the process of dialogue that in Bakhtin's terms sustains internal learning as contradictions continue to emerge, with the effect that meanings are not always resolved. It can be argued that entertaining incompleteness and uncertainty is itself an enticement to further participation - reflection in action. In this way participatory education is understood as situational and rooted in the learner's own cultural experience. Thus inclusive participatory education is not easily referenced to external criteria such as pre-identified learning outcomes of the kind that are found in nationalised curriculum requirements.

### **Presentation of data**

Nine teacher trainees participated in interviews following the completion of the module and their written assignments. Two were from the BME communities and there was one mature student in this group. Their responses included these salient points

- Their knowledge about professional expectations found in policy documents with regard to participation and education was strong

- Recognition that children of all ages are frequently more capable than is sometimes acknowledged and high aspirations for learners provide an appropriate stimulus
- Recognition that encouraging learners' participation is a specific teaching skill that applies across all aspects of learning. Children can be motivated through such participation.
- Recognition that building trusting relationships with learners was essential. This requires the development of a holistic view of the child and their experience of life. Observations and interaction with them in the playground and outside the classroom was seen as useful.
- Recognition in one case that making first hand contacts within the newly arrived communities from Somalia and with the local organisations that offer support enhanced her understanding about how to mediate new cultural knowledges within the classroom and made her aware of the complexity of issues facing immigrant populations
- Anticipation that although they might promote themselves as committed to supporting children's participation in learning at an interview for a first job, other expectations of them as beginning teachers might put their intended practices at risk in some schools
- In some cases the commitment to supporting children's participation in learning was very high

Six Higher Level Teaching Assistants were interviewed following completion of the two modules identified. Three were from the BME communities in the city. All respondents were mature students. Salient points that arose included;

- Concern that the dialogic / communicative processes should be inclusive of pupils with special educational needs and / or with some impairments in their communicative capacities
- Recognition that participation with respect to sustainability was complex at community level as it ran counter to the aspirations of some for achieving improved material conditions in their lives
- Recognition that learning for sustainability ran counter to managerialist principles - associated with national assessment regimes – causing their commitment to participatory approaches to be downplayed.
- Recognition that attentive listening to children is also a fundamental expectation within Islamic traditions
- Recognition that their own personal struggles to absorb new learning and concepts into their own lives was paralleled in the learning experiences of the children. The learning was conceptualised as 'walking the road'.

### **Developing a framework for evaluation**

Data from this pilot small scale enquiry corresponded with the categories in Table 1 below which will support discussion and analysis about qualities that need to be developed during training in order to ensure that adults working with children are effective in promoting their participatory rights.

| Capacities to be developed in training  | Sources of evidence   |
|---|---|
| The capacity of trainee teachers and teaching assistants to reflect critically on their own situation and their own participation within the wider world    | From their own enquiries and documentation of their own dialogic encounters within community settings. Here it was noted that those with rich and varied life experience were able to draw on these personal resources.                       |
| Understanding of trainee teachers and teaching assistants of the significance of participation for learning   | From enquiries into the significance of opportunities for dialogic engagement as a basis for all learning. Also from their analysis of policy documents that advocate the participatory rights of children as learners across the curriculum. |
| Understanding of trainee teachers and teaching assistants that participatory pedagogies are situational and rooted in the learner's own cultural experience | From linking their own learning and personal development with the experiences of children as participatory citizens.  |

**Table 1*****Summaries and recommendations***

Preliminary analysis of data indicates an apparent distinction between professional and personal bases for pedagogical innovation. First stage evaluation of the different arguments cited by respondents to legitimise participatory educational practices indicates that they are variously premised. While some respondents refer to desirable outcomes that are asserted by others, for example in policy documents and national curricular frameworks, other respondents are drawing on their own experience of sustained personal and culturally-based learning. Thus the frames of reference could hardly be more differently based. On the one hand *professional rationales* are derived from communications within a hierarchic / assertive strategy that provides a state controlled pedagogical framework for measureable participation. Links are established between UNCRC, programmes of study for citizenship education and the Every Child Matters strategy. The latter has established a series of commands for teachers to be responsive to children's developmental need to become independent, confident learners and responsible participatory citizens. On the other hand *personal rationales* have also been uncovered in the early analysis of data that suggest that those who have had critical life enhancing experiences, for example through migration, planned progressive entry into higher education, rich engagement in community enterprises, are able to draw strength from such informal learning experiences as a basis for their own educational participation. This level of engagement is dynamic but less predictable. This dichotomy is similar to that identified by Stake – 'a difference between personal knowledge versus the study of objective measurements' (Stake 2010: 1) building on his earlier distinction between criterial actions (based in standards) and situational actions (based in experience).

For the purpose of this study we may note that the forms of participatory pedagogy that are discernible from the two training programmes can be evaluated in two ways. They



can be evaluated through the application of identifiable professional criteria, for example Programmes of Study for citizenship education related to learners' levels of confidence. Alternatively they can be evaluated through personal situational analysis, for example the extent to which the learners feel that they have contributed to the resolution of a social / ecological problem that they have identified themselves.

There are echoes here from the earlier work of Stenhouse (1980) who recognised the power of personal / situational actions as a basis for pedagogical innovation. The notion shared above of participatory pedagogies that are situational and rooted in the learner's own cultural experience can be traced from Stenhouse's identification of the pedagogical challenge for those promoting participative forms of education.

The construction of personal perception of our world from the knowledge and traditions that our culture makes available to us is a task that faces not only the teacher but also the student (learner), and teaching rests on both partners in the process being at different stages of the same enterprise. (Stenhouse 1980: 106)

Within this small scale study reference has been made to the possibility of parallel enquiries conducted by trainee teachers / teaching assistants and by children / young people. Indeed this provides a basis for reciprocal dialogic exchange between teachers and learners of the kind advocated by Freire and cited above. The findings from this small scale study suggest that there is potential value in bringing together trainee teachers and teaching assistants where they are following programmes concurrently. This study has indicated that the complementary experience, knowledge and skills of these two different groups could be brought together to great advantage, not only for each group of students but also ultimately for the children and young people with whom they will work in the future. Indeed the findings of the study can be used to confirm that the advancement of children's participatory skills is an issue for the trainers of both teachers and teaching assistants and that trainers should establish further levels of cooperation across the wider workforce for children and young people.

This summary contributes to the evaluation of education and training that encourages professional recognition of children's participatory rights. A framework begins to emerge from discussion about the relationship between personal, professional and political dimensions of education for participation. Assisting participation involves an educational process that progresses from actions to internal and external dialogues (Clough 2010) not only within the safe horizons of the classroom environment but also within learning partnerships that can be established in the wider community. The implications for higher education providers of training are that their own education and training curricula should include opportunities for dialogic engagement. This has been argued by Clough and Tarr (2010) where we propose that teachers should develop 'flexidentities' to enable them to become dialogic learners within the communities they serve. There is a necessary role for higher education institutions to embed their education and training programmes within the community engagement initiatives they have launched.

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