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'Heaven help the teachers!'

Parents' perspectives on the introduction of education for citizenship.

Education for Citizenship is now statutory for secondary schools in England and recommended for primary schools. It has been the subject of much debate amongst the academic and professional world and builds on concerns that young people are not receiving sufficient education in values, that they are not well informed about current issues and do not see themselves as active citizens in a democracy (many failing to vote at 18). Put more positively, it aims to educate young people to be active members of society, well informed and prepared to participate on many levels. Perhaps more than with any other curriculum area, the influence of the home in terms of social and moral development and attitudes to political literacy is significant and yet the current debate has paid scant attention to the views of parents.

This paper aims to re-dress the balance, reporting on a study into the views of parents of children in both primary and secondary schools. This was part of a larger study into the current beliefs and practices of teachers and children with regard to education for citizenship. The research focus was the parents' understanding of and support for education for citizenship and the findings raise questions about the interface between teacher and parent, home and school and have implications for the successful implementation of this new curriculum area.

Background

The strands of citizenship education have been identified as: social and moral education, community involvement and political literacy. Social and moral education covers such aspects as taking responsibility, valuing others and considering moral dilemmas in primary schools and studying 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues' in secondary schools (DfEE/QCA 1999a p14). The second strand, understanding community, asks primary children to understand the role of community groups, the effects of anti-social behaviour on communities, and is extended in secondary schools to include 'the world as a global community' (DfEE/QCA op cit). Political literacy is also to be covered in both primary and secondary schools. At Key Stage 1, pupils are taught to 'take part in simple debates about topical issues' and at Key Stage 2, they must 'research, discuss and debate topical issues, problems and events,what democracy is, and about the basic institutions that support it locally and nationally' (DfEE/QCA 1999b pp137-9). At secondary level there is increased emphasis on understanding democracy and the institutions that support it, together with a greater understanding of topical, political and controversial issues.

Teachers' perspectives: 'You worry about the parents'

Recent research (Holden 2000) in two primary schools indicated that while both schools felt they had good programmes in place for social and moral education, they covered the teaching of community and topical, political issues less well. Experienced teachers were more likely to feel confident to tackle these areas, as exemplified by a Year 6 teacher who covered 'death row' in the USA, pollution,

the Bosnian war and the United Nations as these issues arose, whereas by contrast a younger teacher said she only 'did circle time' with her class as this was what she had covered in her Initial Teacher Education course. She said she would not discuss anything which could be considered controversial as this 'would be contentious and.....you worry about parents and whatever' (p122).

Many teachers re-iterated this concern that teaching about political or controversial issues might bring them into conflict with the home. Furthermore, when talking about social and moral education as an aspect of citizenship education, they feared that what they did in school was not valued by many parents. One said she tried to give her pupils 'a different set of ideals but they are undermined as soon as they get out of school'. Many of the teachers felt that parents operated different moral codes, condoning 'bad language' and encouraging children to resolve conflict by physical violence.

As a result of these common concerns about parents' values (and actions), a number of questions arose in relation to education for citizenship:

What do parents know about education for citizenship in schools?

What do they understand of what is happening in this area?

How do they feel they this relates to what they do at home?

What do they feel schools ought to be doing in educating for citizenship?

The research was thus extended to include the parents from these two schools along with a feeder secondary school so that the full age range was represented. It is this extended study that is reported on here.

Other recent research: schools and parents

Research into parents' attitudes towards schooling indicates that they are generally satisfied with their child's education, but want more information and more involvement so that they can help their child in the learning process (Hughes 1994). Teachers, however, are often unaware of parents' views and of their desire to be better informed, as their sense of their own professionalism leads them to believe that what they are delivering in terms of the taught curriculum is appropriate. Many teachers are unaware of the extent to which parents help their children at home and some hold stereotypical views of particular groups of ethnic minority parents (Holden et al 1996). For some teachers there remains a perception of particular groups of parents as problems, who work against rather than with the school (Docking 1990, Crozier 2000). Indeed, Vincent and Martin (2002) identify an 'entrenched deficit approach to parents' (p7) where, particularly in multiply-disadvantaged areas, they are regarded as 'needy'.

This lack of awareness of the views of parents (and an assumption that parental values may be at odds with those of the school) is particularly pertinent to the introduction of education for citizenship as social and moral education starts in the home and the values of the home will undoubtedly influence the values the child brings to school. Whether parents take an active interest in current affairs or politics in general is likely to influence the views of their children, and how parents feel about their community will affect their children's disposition towards involvement in local initiatives. We need to know, therefore, what parents' attitudes are to these areas of the curriculum. We need to know what they see as important, what they see as their domain and what they see as the school's role.

Such knowledge will enable providers of citizenship education to understand how their work may be built on and supported by parents or conversely it may alert them to the need for more dialogue with parents and the wider community in order to ensure that education for citizenship is implemented effectively.

The study: perspectives of parents

Methodology

This extended study built on initial qualitative research with teachers and children in two schools. It was extended to include parents in these two schools and in a third school. The sample was:

School A: a large primary school a multiply disadvantaged area with high unemployment, poor housing, a drugs problem and a history of social unrest.

School B: a village primary school serving local farmers and commuter professionals

School C: a large comprehensive serving a market town, several villages, isolated farms and the outlying areas of a city.

What is missing from the communities represented here is the black voice: the schools were in the South West of England and are representative of the 'white highlands' (Gaine 1995). These parents thus provide us with a snapshot of the views of particular types of community at a particular point in time.

In Schools A and B, three parents were interviewed from each of Reception, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6 classes, giving twenty-four parents in total. All were mothers. In School C, twelve parents (three fathers, nine mothers) of pupils in Years 7-9 were interviewed. In all cases the parents were selected to reflect a range of children's ability and social class. Parents in Schools A and B were interviewed in school, parents in School C were interviewed in their homes.

The interview questions were centred around the three strands of education for citizenship: social and moral education, education for and about the community, and the teaching of political literacy and the law. A fourth question covered the teaching of topical issues. Taking each strand in turn, parents were asked what they thought the school did in relation to this area, what they did in the home and what they thought should be done in school. Thus with reference to political literacy, for example, the interviewer asked the parents if they knew that teaching about democratic processes (parliament, elections etc) was now a part of the curriculum, if they had had any information about this from the school, if they discussed politics at all at home, and if they thought schools should cover this area. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to probe for inconsistencies and ask for specific examples concerning their child and their child's school. All interviews lasted from 30 - 40 minutes and were tape-recorded with the parents' permission. They have been analysed using constant comparative technique (Miles and Huberman 1984).

Findings and analysis

The presentation of the data is necessarily part of the analysis and the issues raised have been discussed alongside the findings. One cannot generalise from a group of thirty-six parents, but there were nevertheless times when the parents seemed to respond as with one voice and times when they held opposing views. Quotations

have been selected to reflect this diversity, with the analysis focussing on the implications of what the parents had to say.

Education for Citizenship: Social and moral education

None of the twenty four primary school parents had heard of education for citizenship. When it was explained to them that social and moral education was one aspect of this, most were familiar with this term but only three were aware of any specific curriculum input in this area. The majority of the parents thought social and moral education would come through the ethos of the school, its values, rules and its code of behaviour. They said this information came in a number of ways, for example from assemblies, newsletters home, from seeing class rules pinned up, and from what their children told them. The majority said they supported these values and the behaviour policies of the schools. The two parents who expressed reservations about what the school was doing had doubts about the occasions when a whole class was punished for the wrong doing of a few, and misgivings that certain children (who had problems at home) were not subject to the same sanctions and were treated more favourably than their own. Secondary parents were less likely to know what was being taught in school: one thought social and moral education would be covered in Religious Education, another equated it with drugs education and two mentioned the ethos of the school and school rules. Most of the secondary parents were not at all sure what the school did in this area, with one saying simply 'I don't know'.

All parents said that they themselves taught their children the difference between right and wrong and how to behave: most were surprised that it was even a question as it was considered something you did automatically from day one and something necessary for family cohesion and social integration. As a follow up to this, parents were asked whether they thought children learnt the same values or morals and the same social skills at home and at school. Initial reactions were that these were the same, especially in terms of being taught about sharing, caring for others and knowing right from wrong. Four of the parents of secondary pupils added that they talked to their teenagers about the dangers of drugs and too much alcohol and tried to discourage swearing. All thought that they reinforced what was taught at school and in two cases said that what they did at home was more important.

Differences arose when the parents from School A, the inner-city primary school, mentioned 'the street' as an area where values might not be consistent with those in the home. There was a recognition that children did swear when 'playing out' but that this was 'playground talk' and not to be brought into the house. Playing out in the street was seen as a place where children learnt to stand up for themselves, where fighting was allowed (and sometimes even encouraged). One mother explained:

Like in school.... when they're out in the playground they know there's an adult there that's basically there to oversee them. Whereas I could be doing tea or whatever and they're outside, out the front, playing, then they come in and say well 'so and so's done this' so I say 'why don't you hit them back then....?' It's a contradiction completely to what you teach them when they're at school ... but they've got to learn to stand up for themselves....

She concluded that although this was ‘a bit contradicting’, children knew how they had to behave in the different places and so it was not a problem for them. Thus ‘the street’ emerged as a third area of social and moral learning. For these parents, behaviour in the street and in the home was very different, and their children (they said) knew the difference.

Parents at School B, the village primary school, did not mention this third area of learning – neither did the secondary school parents (School C). Parents from these two schools felt that teachers were ‘telling them the same as we’re trying to instil at home’ and that there was no difference in the messages received by the children. One said that it must be a joint process: ‘if the parents don’t do it, the school hasn’t got a hope’. Many of these parents said that their children discussed ethical issues at home as a result of discussions at school. ‘When we go shopping for instance’ said the mother of a Year 6 boy, ‘he’ll say, “Miss says do we need it, is it essential, is it something we really have to have?” He’s in tune with environmental things’.

It appeared then, that in general parents supported this aspect of citizenship education, with many feeling that they were aware of the values and ethos of the school even if they had little idea of how this area was approached in the taught curriculum. All thought that what they did at home supported the work of the school but wanted to know more about what was actually done in the classroom. There are implications here for home-school communications as the lack of parental knowledge about schools’ delivery of this aspect of citizenship education parallels the lack of teacher knowledge about parents’ views found in the earlier study (Holden 2000). The indication from some parents from School A that codes of conduct in ‘the street or playground’ could be very different from those in the home (and would not be sanctioned in the home) underlines this need for mutual understanding as it was evident from the earlier research (op cit) that some teachers took conduct in ‘the street’ as the norm and were unaware that such behaviour was not allowed at home. Some of these teachers were working on a deficit model: they felt they were teaching values not taught at home and did not realise the extent to which parents supported what they were trying to do. Increased dialogue seems much needed in this area.

Education for citizenship: Community involvement

One of the intentions of the new citizenship curriculum is that children should know more about and be more involved in their local communities. There is a recognition in the Parekh Report (Runnymede, 2001) that Britain is now a ‘community of communities’ and certainly the catchment areas of these three schools represented very different, albeit mono-ethnic, communities as described above.

As part of the interview process, parents were informed that education for citizenship included an emphasis on learning about and being involved in the community. They were then asked whether they thought this should be an aspect of the curriculum and what they thought their child’s school did about this at the moment.

Parents from School A did not feel that the school needed to do more in this area. It was seen as already doing enough, with two parents mentioning the mother and toddler groups held in the community centre. Instead there was much anger as the parents expressed their opinions that the local area was unsafe for their children, because of gangs, crime and drugs, with 'loads of needles in the park'. Many said their children were not allowed in certain areas because of these dangers. There was a common view that a lot of work needed to be done to improve the local area and facilities for children and that this should be a top priority for the council or government. Attempts in the interviews to elicit parents' views on what they felt about schools increasing their involvement with local communities failed in the presence of such strongly held views about poor local facilities and a poor environment. As one concluded:

If the government wants a community group sort of thing then they've got to clean the streets.

Unsurprisingly, given the differences in the local environments of the schools, the parents from the village school B felt very differently. All mentioned a strong village community with jumble sales, cubs, brownies and money raising events organised by the school for charity. Reservations from two parents focused on the possible insularity of this and the need for children to know about 'the wider world'. One parent regretted that she could no longer interest her son in the local church which she felt was an important part of the community. There was a general feeling that the school was sufficiently involved in the local community and did not need to do more.

Parents from School C were again the least well informed. Ten of the twelve had no idea of what the school might be doing in terms of community involvement and felt this was not an area of high priority for the school. One felt teachers had 'enough on their plate trying to do what they're doing... there's possibly more important things to consider'. Another did not see it as a priority for schools as 'if you're bringing up kids properly at home they should have an awareness of that anyway'. One mother was, by contrast, in favour of children being more involved in the community as 'it might do them good, show them the value of things, looking after other people's property and respecting other people's things' but she was not sure how the school could go about this: 'I don't know how they'd get the children to do it'.

Only one parent was very enthusiastic about community involvement: this was a father who felt passionately that 'learning to live together in the community and good moral standards is much more important than passing exams'. He had encouraged his son to write to the village council when changes were proposed to the park and wanted to know if citizenship education would include this kind of action. He supported this new area of the curriculum and wanted more information about what the school was doing and how his sons might be involved.

The general lack of enthusiasm for this aspect of education for citizenship (with a few exceptions) suggests that if schools are to teach about the community and involve pupils more actively in community projects, then there is work to be done in explaining to parents the rationale for this and the benefits it may bring. Many value the work of their local community (e.g. parents from School B) but do not

see it as a central part of a school's work. This does not bode well for this aspect of citizenship as already research into current provision in secondary schools indicates that few schools have links with the local community and that where they do, limited numbers of children are involved. 'For schools to provide opportunities for all pupils to play a role in the community will require a great deal of additional organisation' (Chamberlain, 2003). Parents, as members of the community, could be key players in helping schools to find opportunities for community links and as such are an untapped resource, but there will need to be a shift in perspectives if this is to happen.

Education for citizenship: Political literacy (understanding democracy and the law)

Teaching about democracy, political processes and the law is perhaps the greatest challenge for schools. Unlike social and moral education, it is an area new to some secondary and nearly all primary schools and thus the first part of this section of the interview was spent explaining this aspect of citizenship education in some detail.

Parents in School A expressed surprise that this was now an area of the primary curriculum and most did not support its introduction. Two parents said such topics were 'boring' and 'stupid' and might 'overload their brains'. One said she had enough trouble getting her son to school as it was without this and another said she wouldn't want any aspect of the current curriculum to be left out to make way for such teaching. The basics of reading, writing and maths were seen as far more important and nearly all the parents felt this was seen as an area for secondary schools, if at all.

The responses of parents from School B were more mixed. Three of the twelve felt that children could learn about political institutions and democratic processes in primary school and one quoted her daughter's awareness in support of this:

When the election was on ... and all the posters were up and everything, Sarah- she was only 5 then- she said to me, she looked at the pictures in the newspapers and she said 'choose that one' it was Tony Blair. She said 'I like him cause he's got a nice smiley face...choose him'.

However, the other nine parents said that although it might be important for children to know about politics, this should wait until secondary school as there was already too much pressure on the primary timetable. One mother admitted that she herself had grown up 'very naive about politics' and for this reason wanted her daughter to be taught 'what they can achieve by using their vote' – but in secondary not primary school. A couple of parents supported the idea of school councils, partly as it would 'stop the kids moaning' about problems at school and give them more insight into how the school was run, but two felt this again should happen at secondary school as children of primary age would 'rather go out to play or do recorders'. There was little appreciation of school councils as a means of modelling democratic processes.

The range of opinion from parents with pupils at School C reflected that found in both the primary schools. Two parents said categorically that they had no interest

in democratic processes or politics and could not see the point of this being taught at school. One of the mothers justified her response:

To be honest I don't really know how parliament works. I've never been told. I only pick up bits from the TV and when it comes to voting they're all much of the same. They all make promises that they never keep so they're all a waste of space.... The government needs to do more... it's just not interesting.

Most of the other parents were in favour of political literacy being part of secondary schooling, partly as a result of their own lack of knowledge. One mother cited her eldest son who, like her, had left school ignorant of political systems. At the last election when he was 18 he 'hadn't got a clue- not a clue' about who to vote for. . However, unlike the previous mother (above) she felt this was a reason for change and that there was a place for such teaching in the curriculum. A father echoed this, citing his own schooling:

They should be taught about our system and how it evolved... how we've arrived at where we are now. I can remember in history being taught about whips and the three political parties and how they evolved...they don't seem to cover this now but they should.

Another parent was concerned about the way in which politics would be taught. He said that it would be dangerous to learn just about democracy- 'our political system isn't necessarily the right one' – so pupils needed to be taught to think about the system, to debate and to challenge. He thought it was important to help young people feel they had a say- otherwise 'they're disenfranchised'. This could be done by school councils, being involved in the community and 'a better understanding of the system we live in'.

The majority of the secondary parents supported teaching about the law. This was seen as 'making children aware of the system', informing them so that they knew their rights and the consequences of breaking the law. One mother cited the visits made to a court by her son's school. She thought that such visits 'might shake them up a bit- you know- to say this is what happens and this is what could happen if you do this'. The only reservations from parents came from those concerned about where it would be fit into the already crowded school day.

In summary, while some parents supported teaching children in primary schools about political institutions and democratic processes, most felt it should happen in secondary school if at all. Even parents who were more supportive questioned the benefits of school councils. There was more support for such teaching in secondary schools, but the few parents were opposed to such teaching per se raises concerns about a cycle of ignorance where disenfranchised parents may help create disenfranchised children. Again, there is a need to communicate with parents about how) the basics of political literacy might be taught, including information on the teacher's role, and the benefits this can bring.

Education for citizenship: teaching about topical issues

The interviews with parents from Schools A and B took place soon after the crisis in Kosovo, and parents from School C were interviewed shortly after the events of

September 11th, 2001. Thus events both topical and controversial were in the news and parents were asked whether they thought children should be taught at school about these events or local controversial issues, and whether they discussed such things at home.

Again, opinion was wide ranging. Parents in School A were divided between those who felt that their children were too young and should be protected and those who tried to explain topical issues to their children and felt schools had a role to play. Two parents reflected the views of those who said they were 'not interested in the news'. They said they avoided watching or discussing anything to do with Kosovo, as 'it was a bit frightening for a kid' and in any case children were not particularly interested. However, a mother of a Year 6 girl said her daughter had started to ask about Kosovo:

She can't understand why our ships are going off somewhere... and I try to sit down and explain about ethnic cleansing and that, but I'm a mother, you know, I didn't pay that much attention in history.... If there was someone else who was more able to explain why, it would be nice, because there's lots of questions they're asking. You know, why are they collecting these clothes? Why are there people running? And you're well like, there's this mad man.....

Three other parents endorsed this, saying that if children asked questions they would do their best to answer but that teachers could also help. None thought topical issues or current affairs should be a timetabled subject but something the teacher should discuss as and when they arose.

Parents at School B were much more likely to discuss topical and controversial issues with their children. Many said their children would ask about events they saw on the television and one said she had no choice: 'they discuss it anyway... You get told more than what you actually take in yourself and then you get told you're thick if you don't know it!' Although one parent expressed concern that children might be 'taught one bias', there was general support for the debate of topical issues in school:

I think children are more aware because there's more TV these days, isn't there, and they watch it on the news and I think they question it, don't they? So then if you bring it into school and debate it, I think it's a good thing.

Only one of these parents voiced concerns about starting such discussions too young and 'taking their childhood away from them'.

All parents in School C supported the teaching of topical issues at secondary level, but four of the twelve said they thought it could be tricky to teach, voicing concerns about teachers' confidence and skills in this area. One parent, like that in School B, was concerned about teacher bias as she felt the teachers had not handled the Afghanistan crisis well:

I know one teacher put the fear of god in them saying all kids over 16 were going to get called up. They came home and said are we going to have to go to war? And I said no.... It's a difficult one. They'll probably try to be unbiased

but I mean their views are going to come across, because you know a child might say, what's your personal view? The thing is, I don't know the teachers well enough....

Another mother said it was important that teachers received 'adequate training', as it would be 'nearly impossible' for them to be impartial. Two fathers had clear ideas about what was needed. For one it was all about helping children to extract information and weigh it up, for another it was not about issues per se, it was about 'the ability to debate and start thinking about these issues'. The latter concluded that this was about the most difficult thing to do with teenagers. He shook his head and said resignedly: 'heaven help the teachers!'

As with the introduction of political literacy, it seems that parents of secondary pupils support this aspect of citizenship education which is a positive finding. However, the responses from some of the primary parents (School A) again raise questions about perpetuating a cycle of ignorance, where parents who have no interest in topical issues or current affairs pass on this indifference to their children. In addition some parents from both primary schools worried about destroying childhood innocence by introducing such discussions. This again points to the need for more home-school dialogue as it may be that schools have to explain to parents the importance of helping children make sense of what they see in the media as part of preparing them to be informed global citizens. There is also a case for schools establishing guidelines or criteria for teachers to use when debating topical, controversial issues (QCA, 1998) which are known to both teachers and parents, thus assuaging the fears of both about bias and sensitivity.

Social class

This paper would not be complete without referring explicitly to the differences of opinion between parents in terms of social class. Parents from School A were mainly unemployed and lived in an area of severe economic and social deprivation. Parents from School B were drawn from professional and farming families. The catchment area of School C was mixed and the parents interviewed ranged in occupation from a cleaner, a builder and a book keeper to a nursery teacher and chartered surveyor. It does appear that the opinions of the parents reported above vary along lines of social class. The parents of School A (and some in School C) were more likely than the other parents to reject the teaching of topical issues or political literacy and admitted that behaviour that would not be allowed at school might be condoned in 'the street'. They also held very strong opinions on what needed to be done to improve the local community. However, these parents strongly supported the values of the school, contrary to most teachers' beliefs.

Crozier's work with working class parents in secondary schools has relevance here. She comments that these parents had aspirations for their children just as middle class parents did and supported their children at home by, for example insisting that homework was done, but that this was often not recognised by teachers. Their involvement with schools tended to be less visible, which was often interpreted as indifference. Crozier maintains that this is not indifference, but difference: 'different practices, different ways of being and different values-not in the sense that working class parents do not value education, but in the sense

that they have different expectations of the home-school relationship' (2000, p30). These comments resonate with those from our findings. The teachers in School A felt that parents held different values and to some extent undermined their work on social and moral education (Holden, op cit), whereas the parents claimed to be supporting teachers. It may be a case of different practices and different perspectives- but with shared aims.

Conclusion

The parents in this research were largely ignorant of what was going on in schools with regard to citizenship education but held clear views about this area of the curriculum and wanted to know more. All supported social and moral education in schools and felt that what they did at home underpinned this. Some agreed with teaching primary children about topical and political issues, but there was more support for this in secondary schools. A minority of parents felt such issues were of no interest to them personally and had no place in schools and some were concerned about teacher bias. Many were hesitant about the value of schools teaching about or fostering involvement in the community, seeing this as an area outside the school's remit or concluding that the school already did enough.

These findings have implications for schools trying to prepare children for participation both at school and in the community as informed and active citizens. Brown maintains that we need to help schools create a citizenship curriculum which builds on what is already done in the home and is truly democratic, being 'inclusive of parents, all staff and governors, as representative of the community' (2000, p117). Vincent and Martin argue that this applies to middle class communities as well as parents from disadvantaged communities. What is needed, they say, is better dialogue between all parents and teachers so that we 'develop a "democratic habit" which is supported by facilitative structures and is culturally embedded' (2002, p3).

From this it follows that there is a genuine need to establish dialogue and trust between teachers and parents. Schools will need to find out just what their parents think and as a result teachers may need to address some of their own preconceptions. It may follow that, as with these parents, there is work to be done to convince some parents of the value of political literacy and in particular the value of community involvement. There may also be a need for teachers and parents to look together at how each contributes to social and moral education in order to arrive at mutual understanding.

There is another side to this argument. If we take on board listening to parents in a bid to become truly democratic, then it follows that parents may use this voice to veto aspects of citizenship education of which they disapprove: for example community involvement or political literacy in primary schools. Such concerns, however, should not be a justification for ignoring parents' perspectives. Good debate is healthy and controversy is preferable to apathy, even if the end result may be a compromise for both sides.

Indeed, if we do not engage in such open debate, genuinely listening to parents' perspectives and creating a curriculum which has the support of home and school, then one of the dangers is that citizenship education will become just another

academic subject, its success judged by GCSE grades. It is only by working with parents that we can meet the original aims of the citizenship curriculum, namely to educate young people whose actions and values will be reflected in home, school and community.

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