

# AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION THROUGH THE INCORPORATION OF ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY INTO THE CURRICULUM: THE RESULTS FROM AN INITIAL CASE STUDY

**Wendy Booth**

Social Ethics Research Group, University of South Wales, Newport U.K  
Email: wendy.booth@southwales.ac.uk / w.a.booth@hotmail.co.uk

## Abstract

In today's social and political climate, the need to find effective methods for dealing with issues associated with multiculturalism, diversity and community cohesion is essential, particularly within the realm of education in plural societies, and the Citizenship curriculum in schools provides an ideal starting point. An interdisciplinary approach is suggested as the way forward in this paper through the compulsory incorporation of social psychology into the Citizenship curriculum in schools, with evidence to support this from an initial case study carried out in the U.K.

Teaching secondary school pupils about the notions of conformism and in-groups and out-groups, including the impact on the human psyche, as well as the real social issues which face many marginalised and divided communities, may help to break down barriers to peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, fostering tolerance is a mutual process, for just as majority populations have to learn how to live alongside various ethnic minorities, so too must these ethnic minorities integrate and work alongside the wider population where they live. Just as importantly, in divided communities where reconciliation is being sought, reducing tensions and dealing with the socio-psychological impact of past events is crucial. The education system should be the starting point for addressing the complexities of this range of issues in order to prepare young people to be good citizens and to be able to positively contribute towards the society in which they live.

This paper will examine the aforementioned issues and suggest ways in which the Citizenship curriculum can be adapted to meet the various needs in question, whilst drawing on a pluralist approach. It will examine how and argue why particular elements of social psychology should be incorporated into the secondary school curriculum on a compulsory basis. The initial findings from the research carried out to date will also be discussed. These findings, which are from a case study involving a Welsh Valleys (rural) school in the U.K, appear to be positive so far, suggesting that introducing this type of interdisciplinary approach within schools may be beneficial as, for example, an addition or alternative to intercultural contact.

The new curriculum which has been designed and utilised in the case study takes an inter-disciplinary approach that involves incorporating social psychology into the Citizenship curriculum through a set of eight to ten lessons depending on individual schools' time frames. One important aspect of the curriculum is to develop the pupils' critical thinking skills as they learn about various sociological and psychological theories and experiments. This is famously explained by Wright Mills (1959 p.7) as facilitating "the capacity to shift from one perspective to another- from the political to the psychological" (Wright Mills 1959 p.7).

**Keywords:** Education, citizenship, multiculturalism, ethno-cultural empathy, toleration

## 1 BACKGROUND

The aim of the research is to examine the impact of incorporating certain elements of social psychology into the secondary school Citizenship (Personal Social Education in Wales) curriculum, on a compulsory basis, through the trialling of a set of eight to ten lessons aimed at year 10 (age 14 to 15). Citizenship is taught in a variety of forms across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Island. In Wales where this research is being carried out, it is contained within Personal Social Education (PSE) lessons, as well as the Welsh Baccalaureate, and it is also required to be taught to some extent across every subject area; often it comes under the banner of ESDGC (Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship).Therefore,

teachers in UK schools are used to facilitating lesson content in this area. Furthermore, as Osberg and Biesta (2007 p.32) claim, the purposes of school are twofold: "to teach the young how to take care of the world" and "to facilitate the emergence of human subjectivity" (cited in Moss 2010 p.20).

One issue which arises in the context of citizenship is whether it is morally correct to introduce such a curriculum. I would argue that is morally wrong not to do so, as in plural societies, in order for various groups to co-exist peacefully, some teaching about this matter is not just necessary but essential. Raz puts forward the argument that "the state must protect a variety of ways of life standing in opposition to one another as a consequence of its right and duty to cultivate and protect the moral quality of its members' lives" (cited in McKinnon 2006 p.63). Education is an area in which the state is able to take such positive action, as shown by the Crick Report (1998) commissioned by the UK Labour government in 1997 to strengthen citizenship education. The Crick Report claims that citizenship education should not only teach about civic society, but "also implies developing values, skills and understanding" (Crick 1998 p.13), which shows the importance of critical thinking skills- a key component of the curriculum which is being trialled. According to Englund (2010), "Pupils/students should have opportunities to expand their competence and literacy in terms of understanding and deliberating upon plural ideas and arguments in communication; a communication which is about both sharing and contesting different ways of apprehending the world and ideas from different standpoints." A range of socio-psychological topics are included in the newly designed curriculum, one of which concerns group dynamics and the notion of in-groups and out-groups. This is key to understanding others, because as Ignatieff (1999 p.83) explains, the individuality of the person within a group that is despised is usually completely overlooked, with only membership of the group taken into consideration.

One of the core objectives of the lessons is to foster ethno-cultural empathy. A definition of empathy has been put forward by Baron-Cohen (2011 p.11) as follows: "Empathy begins when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention", or put more simply: walking in the shoes of others. Empathy in this case focuses on ethnicity, yet in a broad sense, with no particular race, religion or culture singled out, but simply the idea of group dynamics and the idea of 'the other' in society. Previous studies which have examined ethnocultural empathy have usually taken place with an older cohort, for example, Rasoal et al (2009) carried out research with a sample of 365 healthcare programme Master's students and found that those who had studied Psychology in the first semester "had significantly higher general empathic skills and ethnocultural empathic skills compared to students in the other study programmes" Rasoal et al (2009 p.2). While Rasoal et al (2009) included those already enrolled onto Psychology programmes, this research will examine the impact from a cross section, which should provide more validity, as those who actually chose psychology may have had a tendency to be empathetic from the start. Moreover, it will be interesting to examine the impact of lessons on those of school age and the resultant implications for further research and policy makers.

## 2 RESULTS

The results from interviews carried out with teachers, as well as the focus groups with pupils, are very positive overall, with any criticisms focusing mainly on the structure of the lessons rather than the actual content. Prior to the lessons being implemented, consultation took place with the Head of Physical Social Education (the equivalent of Citizenship in Wales); seven teachers, and one learning support assistant. The feedback was positive and some of the comments are as follows: "The case studies look really good;" pupils will "really engage;" "I like the idea of in-groups and out-groups," and "It will help to meet our targets in this area." These comments were confirmed by the interviews carried out with two teachers who went on to actually teach the lessons to their Year 10 cohort. One of the interviewees described the difficulties faced by the school due to it being a Welsh valley's school and therefore located in a rural area: "They don't have that interaction with other children from different races and ethnic minorities" and as many of them come from third generation unemployed families, "Getting them to change the way in which they view the world is difficult." This suggests the need to engage the sociological imagination of the pupils, as described by Wright Mills (1959 p.7).

The second interviewee said they were pleased with the content of the lessons, explaining that the pupils found it engaging and wanted to know more, and that "It helps them to think for themselves and not be told what to think." Also, it "Helped them look at themselves as human beings and look inside themselves and how they are. Do I just go along with everyone? Little personal questions." This suggests that the critical thinking skills of the pupils were encouraged, and that they were given the opportunity to contemplate the implications of the social and psychological studies being looked at in the lessons. Furthermore, when asked if the lessons should be rolled out to other schools, the response was "Definitely. I really enjoyed it. At the moment we're doing prejudice with year 9 and I'm already stealing parts of your lessons to do with them."

This shows that the teacher views the content as being suitable for high school pupils and useful to meeting their objectives. The second interviewee also mentioned that the lessons are relevant to bullying in general in the sense that pupils sometimes go along with it, suggesting that the scope of the lessons is broad, which again was one of the aims.

During the focus group which was held with six pupils- three male and three female- they explained that in the past they had had lessons on social identity and respecting others as part of the Welsh Baccalaureate and Religious Education. When asked how important such lessons are, one female pupil explained that it is important in order to understand people and because "You can't just go around saying things and not know why it hurts them." One of the male pupils pointed out that it is important because the pupils may want to go and work in Cardiff or Newport which are "multicultural societies." Therefore, this pupil understood a key objective of the lessons, which is to prepare pupils for the wider world. This was the main reason behind designing the lessons for Year 10 pupils, as at age 14 and 15 they are on the brink of going into further education or employment where such knowledge is essential in a multicultural context.

They mentioned a number of topics when asked if they found the lessons interesting: the Milgram experiment, as they were shocked by how many people went to the point of 'killing' someone; Jane Elliot's experiment because she "turned discrimination around on white people"; the media, particularly the example of an innocent black man being stopped and searched, and the idea of in-groups and in-groups, as well as conformism. Regarding the Jane Elliot experiment, one male pupil explained: "The one word she kept trying to knock into them was superior- she made the pupils with brown eyes or blue eyes feel superior, and I think when they felt superior they felt above the rest and I think that was the main idea." This shows an excellent understanding of the Jane Elliot experiment (Frontline PBS 2013) and that it is suitable for this age group, as they both grasped the concept and found it interesting. Another pupil explained how "There was the photo that looked like normal smiling people having fun and behind there was millions of people just being murdered and they didn't care because they were being told by a higher authority that it's fine," again showing a good understanding of the concept of conformism despite the brief nature of the lesson on this topic. Similarly, another pupil (male) commented: "We talked about the genocide and how the people were brainwashed into believing certain things." When asked if there was any change in thinking, most agreed that there seemed to be an impact on the class. One male pupil explained concerning the Milgram experiment that "We all say about ourselves we would never do stuff like that but put in that position where there's someone higher than you and someone lower than you then you are put in your place and you feel pressured into doing it." This is the type of critical thinking that it was hoped the lessons would achieve. However, one female pupil did say that some pupils took it as a joke, which is a concern and something which the individual teacher would need to use their professional expertise to deal with. Even so, one of the female pupils stated: "I think most people feel the same way about it, but it's like a refresher." Another male pupil explained that they were not racist before and so "It hasn't really changed my opinion on the topic." However, overall, the comments were very positive and several of the pupils claimed to have learnt things which they knew nothing about before, which reveals the difference between these lessons and the lessons they had attended in this area in the past, as described above.

Some minor suggestions were made on how to improve the booklet such as through the use of colour and making changes to the layout. All pupils confirmed that they think it would be beneficial for the lessons to be taught in other schools, for example so "everyone will know about it and everyone will see," and when asked if it had increased their level of tolerance they all replied "yes/yeh," although it needs to be borne in mind that they may have felt pressurised to some extent into doing so due to the nature of focus groups and the presence of an interviewer. One of the pupils spoke about a television programme which they had watched the night before that clearly related to the content of the lessons, which seems to show that the content of the curriculum sprang to mind after it was taught and outside of school.

A further two schools will also be involved in the same way, thus providing two additional case studies. One of these schools will include a diverse ethnic mix in order to find out what the impact of the lessons is in such a school, including the impact on the ethnic minority pupils themselves with regard to attitudes other groups in society. Questionnaires have also been utilised, although these have not been analysed in this paper as the research is on-going, and these will also be distributed as part of the two other case studies.

### 3 CONCLUSION

The importance of education and its role in encouraging good citizens is flagged up by Moss (2010) who describes education as "fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and

young people, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life. This is education as a process of upbringing and increasing participation in the wider society, with the goal that both individual and society flourish" (Moss and Haydon 2008 p.2 cited in Moss p.17). This perhaps sums up the research described in this paper, which is an attempt to foster toleration and ethno-cultural empathy through the secondary school curriculum. The results so far are positive and it will be interesting to examine the data from the further two case studies to be carried out, particularly in a school with a diverse ethnic mix. In the long term, it is hoped that this research will lead to further studies in this area and provide useful information for educators and policy makers.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Baron-Cohen, S. (2011) *Zero Degrees of Empathy* Penguin England.
- Ignatieff, M. (1999) *Nationalism and Toleration* In: S. Mendus ed *The Politics of Toleration* Edinburgh University Press Edinburgh.
- Englund, T. (2010) Educational Implications of the Idea of Deliberative Democracy in Murphy, M. and Fleming, T. Eds *Habermas, Critical Theory and Education* Routledge London.
- Frontline PBS (2013) *A Class Divided* Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 2014].
- McKinnon (2006) *Toleration A Critical Introduction*, Routledge Oxon.
- Mills, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press Oxford .
- Moss, P. (2010) *We cannot continue as we are: The educator in an education for survival* Thomas Coram Research Unit London Institute of Education University of London.
- Moss, P. and Haydon, G. (2008) *Every Child Matters and the Concept of Education* (Viewpoint Issue 17). London: institute of Education, University of London.
- Osberg, D. and Biesta, G. (2007) Beyond presence: epistemological and pedagogical implications of 'strong emergence', *Interchange*, 38, 1,31-51.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1998) *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools (The Crick Report)* London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA].
- Rasoal, C. Jungert, T. Hau, S. Edvardsson Stiwne E. Andersson, G. (2009) *Ethnocultural Empathy Among Students in Health Care Education*. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 32 (3), 300-313. doi: 10.1177/0163278709338569 SAGE Publications.
- Raz, J. (2001) *Value, Respect and Attachment* Cambridge University Press Cambridge.