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Has global education the potential to influence social identity and attitudes in a divided society?

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Background

Global citizenship education has been suggested as a strategy to overcome the limitations of national citizenship and to prepare for living in increasingly diverse and globalised societies. The political and moral agenda embedded in global citizenship education is intended to challenge power imbalances, negotiate identities and, ultimately, to achieve greater equality, justice and democracy via individual and hence societal transformation. In societies with community divisions, global citizenship may be particularly relevant as it offers the opportunity to critically explore identities, institutions and conflict in a wider, less threatening context than the contested local arena, where such issues may be deeply contentious and regarded by teachers, parents and pupils alike as too sensitive for educators to address in the classroom.

Northern Ireland may currently be characterized as a society emerging from a lengthy political conflict, but with persistent intergroup divisions and the society is also dealing with increased diversity as immigration has risen since the peace agreement. As such, Northern Ireland may provide an enlightening case study in which to examine pupils' social constructions, attitudes and identities in the context of local and global citizenship education, which was incorporated into the revised Northern Ireland primary and post-primary curricula in 2007 . However, the variation in the ways that teachers incorporate local and global citizenship into their everyday teaching practice, taken alongside the variations between the community and school contexts in which this practice occurs, suggest that pupils in Northern Ireland have substantially varied experiences of local and global citizenship education, and hence are likely to be influenced by it in a range of ways.

Research Questions

Taking account of the particularities of community context, school ethos, and teachers' approaches to local and global aspects of their teaching practice, the research which forms the basis of this paper aims to explore the extent to which pupils in a divided society, who are receiving local and global citizenship education, actually consider themselves to be local and/or global citizens. It is also intended to explore pupils' social constructions of concepts related to global education and if and how it influences their attitudes to diversity in both local and global contexts.

Methods

Using a mixed method design, the research involves a questionnaire survey and focus groups with primary and post-primary pupils in the Northern Ireland's divided education system. The sample included pupils from schools comprising the main school sectors in Northern Ireland, where education is almost completely segregated by religious denomination, with around 95% of pupils attending either a Controlled (mainly Protestant) or Maintained (mainly Catholic) school and at post-primary level by ability into Grammar and Secondary schools. The questionnaire assessed the pupils' perceptions of what they learn about concepts of local and global citizenship education, how important they believed this learning to be, and their attitudes and the extent to which they considered themselves to identify with a range of different groups representing identities ranging from local to global categories. The focus groups were used to explore similar issues in a more in-depth and pupil-centred way, allowing the participants to discuss what they considered to be relevant issues and their own experiences and attitudes. Questionnaire data were coded and analysed statistically and focus group data were transcribed and analysed thematically. Data were compared in order to explore possible differences relating to gender, age, community background and school type.

Frame

Using social identity theory as a theoretical framework, the development of global citizenship with its associated knowledge, attitudes and a sense of global identity may be viewed as potentially overcoming established and oppositional local identities thereby promoting peaceful intergroup relations. However, particularly in contexts of societal divisions, the historical attachment to, and at individual level emotional investment in, local identities, is often construed to have a zero-sum relationship between local and superordinate identities. which theoretically may be more conducive to positive intergroup relations. To date, few studies have examined the ways in which global education actually influences pupils' constructions of local and global citizenship, their attitudes to diversity and their sense of local and global identity.

Research findings

Results are described in the first instance to provide an overview of pupils' self-reported identities, attitudes and social constructions from both a qualitative and a quantitative perspective. Differences found between groups are then explored. These are then discussed by drawing on social identity theory to consider the extent to which reported experience of and perceived importance of various aspects of global education is related to attitudes and to both local and global identities. The discussion also highlights the context specific nature of how global education is experienced by pupils in different school and community environments and its potential influence on their social identity at local and global levels. This theoretical interrogation of the data based on social identity theory suggests that a complex web of factors influences pupils' notion of global citizenship and that a zero-sum construction of the relationship between local and global identities may therefore be overly simplistic.