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The introduction of Human Rights Education - A Case Study of a Primary ITE Provider

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Background

Cowell, Howe and McNeil (2008) cite a lack of citizenship training in Initial Teacher Education. Children wish to discuss controversial and emotion-laden issues in school contexts, but there is often a lack of confidence among teachers and trainees in approaching controversial issues to facilitate this (Claire and Holden 2007). It has been suggested that teachers need to be trained to listen to children and to respect the participatory rights of their students (Rudduck and Flutter 2000). In the recommendations of the recent Rose Review, respecting others' rights and responsibilities is promoted as an 'essential skill for learning and for life' (Rose 2009).

The University of Winchester has a long tradition of teacher education, reflected in its mission statement 'to educate, to advance knowledge and to serve the public good'. This paper is a report on the pilot phase of a curriculum initiative in collaboration with UNICEF UK, Amnesty International UK and the British Institute of Human Rights. It is an opportunity for trainee teachers to learn about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its relevance to schools. The design and implementation of this initiative has prompted us to reflect on and refine a values-based approach to social justice, to address issues of student professionalism and engagement, programme cohesion and student and tutor voice. Our learning and teaching agenda addresses effective pedagogy, for both students as learners and students as developing teachers. Thus we explore our practice, our constructs of Right Respecting Education (RRE) and enjoy a critical edge within a practical initiative.

Our location in Winchester makes us ideally placed to draw on local school practice. Hampshire Education Authority, the source of the greater proportion of the University's partnership provision for school placements, introduced a citizenship education initiative, 'Rights, Respect and Responsibility' (RRR) into primary schools in 2004. RRR uses the UNCRC as the basis for curricula, pedagogy and school policies. It aims to create school environments in which all are aware of and respect the rights of others with particular attention to the voice of children and their right to participation. They prioritise classroom practices that are inclusive, supportive and participatory; environments that have been found to be conducive to high levels of student learning and engagement (Covell, McNeil and Howe 2009).

Research Questions

The aim of the innovation was to:

- consider HRE as a context for underpinning educational values of our ITE programmes
- pilot HRE as a context and tool for student induction to the Faculty and ITE courses
- establish a network: a community of schools (already involved in implementation of the RRE approach in a local context), NGOs and a partner HEI
- 'join up' practice in the context of other current educational initiatives such as Every Child Matters, Education for Sustainability, the Global Dimension
- contribute to existing current faculty work on student teacher identity.

Thus, we:

- explore the experiences and perceptions of student teachers
- explore the experiences and perceptions of tutors

- formulate recommendations for future work.

Methods

We developed two models of delivery and associated data collection: one for the 2009 first year cohort BA Primary Education (QTS) (200 students), which involved input from UNICEF and Amnesty International, local teachers and University tutors in the form of a Lead Lecture, workshops, a two phase induction programme and follow up in Professional Studies seminars. PGCE students (cohort of 65) followed a similar, yet necessarily different pattern. The case study draws on data collected at the University of Winchester during the academic year 2009-10 in the form of student written course evaluation data, tutor course evaluation data, focus group interviews with students and staff, and a record of electronic discussion groups.

Frame

Covell, Howe and McNeil (2008) found that young children can understand their rights and responsibilities in ways that are meaningful to their everyday behaviour and that rights-based whole school reform has the capacity to improve pupil learning in a wider sense. We use three of the evidence-informed principles of 'effective teaching and learning (TLRP)' (James and Pollard 2006) as a frame for data collection and analysis:

TLRP Principle 1: effective pedagogy equips learners for life in its broadest sense

TLRP Principle 6: effective pedagogy promotes the active engagement of the learner

TLRP Principle 7: effective pedagogy fosters both individual and social processes and outcomes.

These principles prompt us to consider issues of student engagement and autonomy, and encourage us to ask some difficult questions of our own practice as pedagogues.

Research findings

The Department for Education and Schools (2005), in developing a global dimension in the primary curriculum, emphasise that education plays a vital role in helping young people recognise their contribution and responsibilities as citizens of a global community. We have developed a model to incorporate RRE as central to our wider provision. As with most curriculum changes there have been tensions. We run a large programme, staffed by a diverse team, at a time of significant curriculum uncertainty. We are subject to rigorous standards in the context of achievement of QTS (TDA 2007).

James and Pollard (2006) suggest that learning processes do not fundamentally change as children become adults. This continuum is evident as we consider ITE students as both learners and developing teachers; in distinct yet simultaneous roles. Our findings also reflect the contingent nature of learning and teaching, valued by TLRP; the interventions of teachers or trainers are most effective when they are planned in response to how learners are learning. In our pedagogy we have been both reactive and proactive; we have planned activities to address perceived need and mood and bridged induction, Professional Studies and curriculum subjects. Thus we echo the TLRP approach and attempt to broaden what is to be learned, beyond skills and curriculum subjects, and to give prominence to the importance of learning relationships.