



AN CHOMHAIRLE MHÚINTEOIREACHTA
The Teaching Council

Irish Schools as Communities of Practice for Citizenship Education: The Experiences of One Primary School

Research by Niamh O' Brien (2009/10 Bursary Scheme)

Overview of Research

Questions about developing citizenship education and promoting active citizenship are to the fore in educational and political agendas. This research probes the day-to-day processes by which adults teach children about citizenship and includes responses and perspectives from children and key partners in education.

Rationale and Aims

This research project aims to:

- determine what is happening in citizenship education in the primary school where the researcher is a class teacher
- establish an understanding of children's attitudes towards citizenship education
- explore the views of teachers in relation to the teaching of citizenship education
- find out what parents think about existing practice in schools regarding their children's citizenship education.

There is scant qualitative research on this topic in Ireland at present and this provided a rationale for the research.

Theoretical Context

The researcher presents an extensive theoretical context for her research topic. Part 1 of her research explores a wide range of significant and influential writings relating to citizenship, childhood and education. Initially, she traces the historical trajectory of citizenship and she later examines some of the historical perspectives which underpin an understanding of citizenship. Issues such as civil liberties and human rights, the practice of democracy and inequalities in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity are discussed. In Chapter 2, the research topic is presented from an international and national perspective. The evolution of the construct of childhood is discussed and the status and rights of children as citizens and members of the community are considered in terms of their practice of active citizenship. The Irish perspective on citizenship education is articulated as reflected in the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

Design and Methodology

A multi-method approach was used in this study. A variety of participatory techniques including photography, mapping, story-telling, decision-making charts and a diamond ranking exercise were used to engage the children in research conversations. Group interviews with children, involving various strategies such as 'community of enquiry' approaches, were used to encourage children to talk about philosophical and moral issues.

One-to-one interviews were conducted with nine teachers, a school principal and seven parents. The interview schedules were designed to explore the perspectives of participants and so differed somewhat in focus between parents and teachers.

Findings and Recommendations:

The findings of the study on children's perspectives on citizenship and education are presented in Chapter 4. A key finding relates to the difficulty children experienced in articulating their rights as citizens. They were able to identify their responsibilities without difficulty. They also pointed towards the opportunities provided at home and school to practise democracy and referred to the power relations which exist at school.

Chapter 5 analyses the perspectives and responses of teachers and parents to citizenship and education. Teachers highlighted the challenges to planning, implementing and promoting the citizenship education programme. The views of parents in relation to citizenship education are discussed in terms of their understanding of citizenship, their practice of citizenship at home and their perceptions of the teaching of citizenship at school. The latter part of chapter 5 explores a consensus of opinion between teachers and parents on the development of citizenship education.

Recommendations are made for practice, policy and research and provide a useful impetus to stimulate professional discourse on this topic and potentially influence change in practice in this field.