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Citizenship and diversity: special educational needs

Una O'Connor

Introduction

This chapter will focus on some issues relating to pupils with learning difficulties that have emerged as an inherent feature and by-product of the citizenship curriculum. In particular, it will consider current debate around the introduction and delivery of a citizenship curriculum to pupils with learning difficulties; differentiation; and the (potential) impact on pupil empowerment. This is by no means a definitive list; rather it represents a preliminary overview of issues that merit some consideration within the overall implementation framework for citizenship.

From the 1980s onwards, national legislation and reform has increasingly sought to make specific provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) a component feature of inclusive educational policy. Associated policy definitions have been articulated in inclusive terminology that is characterised by cross-references with equality, anti-discrimination and human rights language (DfEE, 1998, 2001; DENI, 1998, 2005a, 2005b; Scottish Executive, 2002, 2004; DfES, 2001, 2002, 2004). For schools in Northern Ireland, the most significant policy developments have been the new statutory arrangements for special education and the revision of the terms and conditions to identify and deal with disability discrimination (DENI, 2005a, 2005b; Equality Commission, 2006).

Overall, the fundamental philosophy of policy reform has been, generally, that of social inclusion and, specifically, that of proper and equitable access to education for all pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities (Ainscow, 1999; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). However, some reservations persist that ambiguous and rhetorical inclusive strategies, coupled with limitations in individual and institutional capacity to respond to diversity, have instead prevailed to limit the participative experiences of children and young people with SEN in the mainstream environment (Giangreco *et al*, 1998; Hornby, 1999; Croll and Moses, 2000a, 2000b; Slee, 2001; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; EDA, 2003).

Background

Over the past five years, the number of children with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) in primary, post-primary and special schools has risen by just over 25 per cent.¹ At the same time, a large proportion of children have been identified as having additional learning need(s) that require supplementary support and intervention, but without a statutory statement.² Corresponding statistics indicate that the numbers of these children in primary and post-primary schools is approximately 4-5 times higher than their statemented peers.³ The incremental rise in the numbers of pupils with learning difficulties has occurred alongside a contrasting decline in the overall pupil population. Figures across school sectors reveal a drop of between 2 and 6 per cent; in addition, the projected drop of 9 per cent at post-primary level by 2010 may impact significantly on the composition and constitution of schools, as well as on the generic profile of the pupil population. It is a situation that, while underlining SEN as an integral yet distinct aspect of education, also queries educational standards, in particular the nature and quality of provision (Norwich, 2002).

It is acknowledged that pupils with learning difficulties are not a homogeneous group (Lawson *et al*, 2001). Although there may be some commonality in learning needs, pupils will often have particular requirements, behaviours and approaches to learning – even pupils with the same learning difficulty (Norwich, 2002). It is also acknowledged, however, that young people have a greater fundamental connection through their *sameness* than through their *difference* (Gross, 2002).

Education is an evolving, organic process that is inextricably linked to, and reflective of, cultural, social and political reform. Undeniably, changes in provision for children with SEN have been introduced at a time of significant change within the education system in Northern Ireland. The next decade will certainly see significant shifts in the composition and function of schools as well as in where, what and how pupils learn. The introduction of a common curriculum framework from September 2007 is intended to be strongly pupil-centred, with the needs of the individual child at its core (DfES, 2004). The revised curriculum will confer fixed expectations and accountability measures for the way in which schools fulfil their institutional responsibility to all pupils through their school development plans and self-evaluation strategies, as well as through individual education plans (EPs) and pupil profiles (CCEA, 2007).

¹ DE Statistics and Research, 2007

² DE Statistics and Research, 2007

³ DE Statistics and Research, 2007

Embedded within the arrangements for the revised curriculum is the stipulation that pupils with SEN should have access to the same range of learning pathways available to other pupils (DfES, 2004). The premise of equitable provision has been underpinned by a fundamental principle that the interests of the child should be at the heart of all decision-making and should be based upon informed choice by both pupils and their parents. It is inevitable that the collective changes within the education system will have short- and long-term implications for all pupils, not least those with SEN. Clearly then, the meaningful inclusion and education of children with SEN has become a common issue for many teachers, in particular appropriate access to a full curriculum and opportunities to develop their knowledge, aptitudes and skills (build on their strengths).

The citizenship curriculum

In September 2007, education for Local and Global Citizenship was introduced as a core statutory element of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum. In the primary sector, citizenship features within the learning area Personal Development and Mutual Understanding; in the post-primary sector, it features within the learning area Learning for Life and Work. In the post-primary sector, Local and Global Citizenship is addressed through four key concepts: diversity and inclusion; equality and social justice; democracy and active participation; and human rights and social responsibility.

The overall aim of the revised curriculum is 'to empower young people to achieve their potential, and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives' (CCEA, 2003). The three inter-related curriculum objectives are intended to provide learning opportunities 'to help young people develop as individuals; as contributors to society; and as contributors to the economy and environment' (CCEA, 2003). The aim and objectives are intended to promote and encourage a variety of learning experiences, through active and participatory pedagogies – including enquiry-based and values-based approaches – that nurture informed and inquisitive pupils rather than passive learners.

Generically, the remit of citizenship curricula has been defined as part of a broader social agenda that 'promotes social cohesion whilst at the same time, recognising diversity' (Pavey, 2003:58). This includes the function of education as a social tool to prepare young people to manage their own lives, relationships and lifestyles through offering pupils sustained opportunities for personal development, including autonomy, independence, decision-making, participation and self-efficacy.

In Northern Ireland the relationship between the revised curriculum and social cohesion and diversity lies in the extent to which young people are empowered with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes to navigate their future educational, employment, social and political prospects, and take their place as informed and participatory citizens. Concurrently, the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship has underlined the importance attributed to developing young people's understanding of how their lives are governed and how they can participate to improve the quality of their own lives and that of others through democratic processes (CCEA, 2007).

Regular or special citizenship?

It is acknowledged that while there is a utilitarian element to some models of education, any discussion of its fundamental purpose reveals its values-based, humanistic background (Garner and Gains, 2000; Gilmore *et al*, 2003; Pavey, 2003). A key consideration in the development of any curriculum (citizenship included) is its relationship to and compatibility with a generic framework of entitlement, commonality and differentiation (Norwich, 2002). Given the increasing ability range of the pupil population in many mainstream schools, the potential dilemma of access to a *regular* or *special* version of the citizenship curriculum has generated some speculation on the inextricable connections between the learning outcomes of citizenship lessons, the quality of provision in relation to SEN and the relationship with the values of education.

It is argued that the concept of educational need should be modelled on both the commonality and individuality of needs, and that associated provision should seek to ... 'accommodate the greatest diversity without high visibility identification' (Norwich, 2002:499). A recurrent concern in the implementation of a programme for citizenship has been the concern that not all pupils would be able to access the content in a meaningful way, particularly the more abstract and/or conceptual elements of the curriculum (Pavey, 2003). In Northern Ireland, an alternative resource has been developed for the special school sector. An experienced team was established to examine the statutory requirements and minimum entitlements of Learning for Life and Work (including Local and Global Citizenship), with the remit to refine and connect these into thematic units (with appropriate resources). Although the resource was developed in the first instance for the special school sector, given the diversity of the pupil population in post-primary schools (particularly secondary schools) there is a sound argument for its universal availability to all schools.

Citizenship and efficacy

The expectations of citizenship and of what it means to be a citizen carry equal weight for children, most notably in legislation, where their equal access to protection, provision and participation has reinforced their status as citizens (Verhellen, 2000). A key challenge in the implementation of a differentiated citizenship curriculum to pupils with learning difficulties is that '... in assuming complexity of conceptualisation of some issues, does this deny pupils' rights and opportunities for empowerment and, unintentionally, shelter and protect rather than enable?' (Lawson, 2003:118). Such commentary is a customary reaction to the application of reductionist connotations that can perpetuate expectations of what a child with SEN can achieve (Croll and Moses, 2000b; Pollock-Prezant and Marshak, 2006; Haller *et al*, 2006). With regard to citizenship education, it is an apposite and potentially far-reaching argument, particularly where '... there is a danger of disabling some pupils by not considering some more complex or abstract issues as possibilities and thus foreshortening expectations' (Lawson, 2003:118).

However, with the prominence of the inclusion agenda alongside a greater emphasis on a rights-based approach within both citizenship and inclusion, it is contended that standardised pre-conceptions of how much (or little) understanding pupils with learning difficulties will have of the conceptual aspects of the citizenship curriculum is inaccurate and outdated. Instead, it is argued that a rights-based agenda (whether in relation to citizenship or to inclusion) offers greater awareness of entitlement for teachers and pupils alike, while the associated powers of advocacy, efficacy and empowerment are integral outcomes of a successful citizenship curriculum.

For these reasons, educators have a responsibility to use their skills to find ways of making the conceptual framework accessible, so that young people with learning difficulties are not denied access to those aspects of regular adult life, and are empowered to take more control of their lives (Pavey, 2003:59). In consequence, an alternative position is articulated around the fundamental philosophy that teachers should nurture '... high expectations for all young people and should provide suitably challenging opportunities for each young person to take part fully and effectively in lessons, to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible' (CCEA, 2007).

Differentiating for citizenship

Within the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum, it is stipulated that, to ensure pupils with additional learning needs are not denied appropriate

learning experiences, curriculum planning and assessment for pupils with special educational needs must take account of the nature, extent and duration of the difficulty experienced by the pupil. The revised Northern Ireland Curriculum contains an access statement that outlines how learning opportunities can be adapted or modified to provide all young people with relevant and challenging work appropriate to their needs. Importantly, it is stressed that in many cases necessary action for curriculum access can be met through greater differentiation of tasks and school-based interventions as set out in the SEN Code of Practice (DENI, 1998).

Access to learning, by necessity, requires teachers to be active participants (Wenger, 1998; Bourke *et al.*, 2004). The challenge for teachers in diverse classrooms is to engage all students in high-quality learning activities (Johnson, 1999; Murphy *et al.*, 2005). Teachers' attitudes and motivation towards pupils with learning difficulties and their willingness to respond to difference often correlate with lack of knowledge, confidence and skills, and with the type and severity of learning difficulty (Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996; Ainscow *et al.*, 2003). As a result, their understanding of, and reaction to, diversity is often reflected in the nature of instruction that takes place in classrooms (Johnson, 1999).

At the same time, consideration of differentiated approaches to teaching citizenship, by necessity, requires some reflection of what defines the essence of citizenship (Lawson, 2003). The key characteristics of the Local and Global Citizenship curriculum as enquiry-based and experiential represent a move away from prescriptive approaches to education that tended to stifle rather than empower. The intention to nurture active and inquisitive learners is a pivotal aspiration, particularly since behavioural patterns of exploring issues, questioning established orders, and defending one's own viewpoints are integral components of autonomy and self-efficacy. It is particularly important that these initial experiences take place in a safe and managed environment, particularly for those pupils who have had little (or no) opportunity to engage in open and honest discussion on issues that affect their lives. For this reason, the guiding principle in any differentiation is that the curriculum (whether citizenship or other subject areas) is sufficiently flexible to be adaptable to pupils' needs, without compromising learning (Lawson *et al.*, 2001).

The provision of opportunities for all pupils to experience success is vital in order for them to enjoy learning and develop their self-esteem (EDA, 2003). For pupils to acquire knowledge, and to develop skills and understanding that best suits their abilities, the application of a range of strategies is advocated. Generically, this can include the identification of teaching techniques (e.g. multi-level instruction; activity-based

experiential learning; student-directed learning; co-operative learning; peer collaboration and heterogeneous grouping); teaching approaches (e.g. adaptation of age-appropriate materials that continue to challenge knowledge, skills and aptitudes); the learning environment (e.g. suitable time to complete tasks); and resources (e.g. access to ICT and other technology).

What should not be overlooked in the differentiation process is that the strategies employed for teaching children with learning difficulties commonly benefit *all* children, regardless of ability (Johnson, 1999; Frederickson and Cline, 2002; Gross, 2002). It is a valuable reminder that diversity is a reciprocal process, since a child with SEN is potentially a teacher to his/her peers, teacher, school and community.

The challenge of heterogeneity

Acceptance of difference implies non-discrimination. It is the manifestation of a physical, social, emotional and cultural base that empowers children with learning difficulties to grow to their full potential and to confidently enter the adult world (McDougall *et al.*, 2004). The fundamental benefits of diversity, articulated in social, political and educational policy, essentially reiterate the philosophical values base that characterises inclusion (Gilmore *et al.*, 2003). The development of positive or negative responses to difference is not a simplistic process; often it is a composite assimilation of learned influences, acquired through direct and indirect interactions with other people and events (Scheepstra *et al.*, 1999).

The ratification of greater equality and inclusion legislation within education policy has meant that the pupil profile in mainstream classrooms is more heterogeneous than ever before. Although diversity can exist in terms of religion, gender and ethnicity, the presence of children with learning difficulties constitutes one of the largest groups. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that children with learning difficulties may also represent one or more of the other forms of diversity. Dealing with difference is one of the most recurrent challenges for many teachers. Comparative studies on inclusion have recurrently found that teachers were generally dissatisfied with preparatory arrangements for an inclusive classroom and felt insufficiently skilled to respond to a diverse pupil population; this was most apparent amongst teachers in post-primary schools, where the more rigorous demands of curriculum and assessment often assumed priority (Bennet *et al.*, 1998; EDA, 2003).

It is a prospect, then, that can become more complex in the teaching of diversity. The key theme of Diversity and Inclusion contains specific reference to disability and difference. Although the broad thematic area of

disability has been a popular option for many teachers, it is one that has increasingly challenged some citizenship practice, particularly when diversity is manifest in the classroom population. What is important, then, is the confidence to address the generic framework of diversity through universal concepts of respect, acceptance and acknowledgement of individuality. This is an important consideration, particularly since research has identified implicit and explicit exemplars that, just as many children with learning difficulties know they are 'different', so too do other children.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate the duality of the citizenship curriculum, in that it is both challenged by, yet can offer opportunities, to young people with learning difficulties. The diversity of learners is now a fundamental characteristic of all classroom environments. It is a potentially rich and rewarding climate in which to fully and meaningfully engage with the diversity of citizenship. This requires citizenship educators to respond confidently and imaginatively to the diversity in their midst.

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