

**A CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE
REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE**

SOCIAL STUDIES – MODERN STUDIES AND POLITICAL LITERACY

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Social Studies – History, Geography, Modern Studies – asks some of the key questions facing schools, and indeed society: how has our society been shaped and what are the major social, political and environmental questions facing us? As these are such challenging questions? As there is little agreement about them, the issues raise as many questions as definitive answers for parents, pupils, teachers and educationists, indeed most of the population.

Modern Studies (and links to political literacy): a futures agenda

Linked in to, at the very least, the political literacy strand of education for citizenship, there are minimal and maximal interpretations of the role of a subject such as Modern Studies. Evans (1995) summarises this as:

Minimal interpretations emphasise civil and legal status, rights and responsibilities...The good citizen is law-abiding, public-spirited, exercises political involvement through voting for representatives...Maximal interpretations, by contrast, entail consciousness of self as a member of a shared democratic culture, emphasise participatory approaches to political involvement and consider ways in which social disadvantage undermine citizenship by denying people full participation in society in any significant sense.

In a situation where many adults feel that many young people are deeply alienated, The most recent studies of political and civic attitudes internationally, (Angvik and von Borries, 1997; Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta et al, 1999 and 2001) have somewhat contradictory results. These studies found that the young people involved (14-15 years of age) had very positive attitudes towards some issues, such as voting/democracy in general and equal rights for women but were far less positive on other issues, such as voting rights for immigrants. The youth of some countries (in particular Hungary, Belgium, Finland, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic) showed a relatively high level of consent with the proposition that voting rights should not be granted to any immigrant.

It is within this perspective that the issue of the changes in central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and the May 2004 expansion of the EU become important. The new democratising governments in these countries understood quickly the need for political education, realised that for their populations the very idea of such could be threatening

and also found themselves cash starved for major changes. In Hungary, for example, the process has been taken to the level of establishing courses on Education for Democracy now being taught in schools. The course involves education around the following areas:

- history and social sciences
- introduction to legal issues
- critical reasoning
- ethics and moral instruction
- community based learning
- understanding the global dimension
- pluralism and multicultural education (Julian and Kozma, 1995:76-78)

When political knowledge/understanding and values in Britain is examined, the evidence (Chamberlin, 2003; Hahn, 1998; Holden, 2004; Maitles, 2000; Mercer, 1973; Stradling, 1977) has been disappointing, particularly in terms of inspiring methodologies. Recent research undertaken in Scotland suggests that whilst there is significant difference between S4 students taking Modern Studies and those who are not in terms of political knowledge, there is no substantial difference in terms of the development of positive attitudes (Maitles, 2000; Maitles, 2003). This suggests that History and Geography also play a role in terms of the development of political/social values and, unsurprisingly, media and home influence play a central role in determining pupil values in controversial areas, particularly where teachers do not encourage discussion around these types of issues. Interestingly, for classroom practice, Holden (2004) found that knowledge and understanding in primary schools was greatly influenced by school projects or discussions around current news; for example, she found much more knowledge about Afghanistan (post 9/11) than of European neighbours.

Further, cynicism towards politicians is very high, particularly amongst young people (Chamberlin, 2003; Hahn, 1998; Maitles, 2000). Whilst there may be elements of a moral panic about this political alienation, it must be put in the contexts of both a long term trend of a decline in the participation rates of adults in voting and party membership and of a number of government and/or media panics about young people over the last decade – child mothers, street crime, drug use, elderly frightened to go out, binge drinking (Hall, Williamson and Coffey, 1998; Jones, 1995; Macdonald, 1997; Rees, Williamson, and Istance, 1996) and, now, ‘hoodies’. Yet, whatever the facts above may show about participation in formal politics, there is also evidence that although young people are alienated from formal politics, many are active and interested in single issue, environmental, political, developing world and animal welfare issues (Chamberlin, 2003; Hackett, 1997; Mulgan and Bentley, 1997; Roker, Player and Coleman, 1999; Wilkinson, 1996). Even very young children can tell you about Greenpeace or The Big Issue and indeed can explain what these types of organization are about (Save the Children, 2000; UNICEF et al, 1999). It can be summed up that ‘they are not interested in (formal) “Politics” but they are in (campaigning) “politics”’ (Maitles, 2003). Indeed, in the schools, the ‘make poverty history’ wristbands are popular and widespread. Chamberlin (2003) found that her generally disinterested and cynical school students knew how to organise a single issue pressure group campaign and ‘responded to the call for action with much more enthusiasm than they had previously shown...they had

confidence in their ability to achieve their aim'. This has implications for curriculum strategy.

Whilst it is true that pupils don't just learn about democracy, they live it, they also need to learn about it. It has been well articulated (Advisory Group, 1998; Cheung and Leung, 1998; Cohen, 1981; Cowan and Maitles, 2002; LTS, 2002; Maitles and Cowan, 2004; Maitles and Deuchar, 2004; Ross, 1987) for some time that elements of political and citizenship understanding should be introduced early in the primary school and this has been recognized in Scotland. Media images in a global age means that young children are seeing these issues and keen to discuss and try to understand them. Indeed, as Holden (1998) points out, it is entirely possible that these types of issues can be better discussed by younger pupils as young children tend to have 'a strong sense of social justice and they want to be active in working for change', whilst by the time they finish secondary school 'these same pupils may be sceptical, possibly even cynical, admitting that they are unlikely to participate in democratic processes'. Bruner's viewpoint (1960) (cited in Short, Supple and Klinger, 1998) and backed up Holden (1998), Maitles and Cowan, (2004), Maitles and Deuchar (2004), Ross (1984), Ross (1987), White (1999) that 'young people can be taught anything in an intellectually honest way at any age,' implies that the main issue may not be the ascertainment of the right age to teach/learn these types of issues but the methodology that is used. Supple (1991) claims that this is the age when pupils 'may be especially receptive to antiracist initiatives'.

Practical reasons for teaching controversial social/political issues to primary pupils, include the fact that the pupils generally have far fewer teachers per day/week, offering more opportunities to adopt a cross-curricular, multi-disciplinary approach, than the secondary. Integrated approaches in the secondary sector from, for example some states in the USA, provinces in Canada and Australia: Hartoonian, 1997; Print, 1996; Wright, 1996), have suggested some improvements but there are clear quality issues involved in a crude single teacher delivery in the current Scottish context (Maitles, 1999). Nonetheless, there are serious implications for more (or better) collaboration between subjects in secondary education.

In terms of classroom approach, there is much recent evidence that, when asked, pupils prefer active learning opportunities (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003; MacBeath, 2004; Maitles and Gilchrist, 2005; Ritchie, 1999; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Save the Children, 2000 and 2001); HMI have concluded (1992, 2000) that Modern Studies classrooms do use a variety of methodologies to enhance this. The full realisation of developing informed pupil skills and attitudes towards the controversies involved in democratic life will require both shorter-term and longer-term strategies on behalf of all members of a school community. This kind of approach has been introduced in social studies topics in primary schools, particularly in London (Birkett, 2003; Hofkins, 2004).

The Advisory Group Report (1998) and LTS Review Group (2002) strongly endorsed the need for developing pupils' awareness of contemporary, controversial issues (what we might term a futures agenda) and for enabling the skills of decision-making, reasoned argument and critical approaches to evidence. By so doing, pupils may emerge not only

with a fuller understanding of democracy, but also with an ability to live democratically in adult life. Hahn (1998) found that where there was the opportunity to explore controversial public policy issues in an atmosphere where several sides of an argument can be aired and where points of view are encouraged even where they differ from the teacher's and other students', then there is a greater likelihood of the development of the kinds of skills needed for democratic life. Hahn concludes that groups where this is encouraged showed 'comparatively high levels of political efficacy, interest, trust and confidence than their peers without such experiences'. Further, these students were more likely to develop attitudes that have the 'potential to foster civic participation'.

We should be in no doubt that this is an easy strategy. There are many constraints on schools which work against the discussion of controversial issues. Firstly, there are teacher worries about their skills to handle open-ended discussions which they might not be able to control or direct. The IEA study of political consciousness in 28 European countries (Torny-Purta et al, 2001) found that in many countries secondary teachers are afraid to tackle controversial issues because, almost by definition, the discussion becomes multi-disciplinary and they are uncomfortable in that zone; secondly, there are structural constraints in schools from the lack of tradition in discussion to the physical layout of classrooms; thirdly, there are external constraints ranging from the assessment driven agenda in schools to worries about what parents might think about controversial discussion, to the influence of the mass media and politicians to what might be perceived as influencing pupils one way or another. Nowhere is this more problematic in Scotland, Northern Ireland and parts of England than over an issue such as sectarianism and/or the peace process in Northern Ireland. Yet it is vital that this kind of issue is not avoided Smith (2003), particularly if there are to be teeth behind the Scottish Executive's anti-sectarianism strategy. As Agostinone-Wilson (2005) and Ashton and Watson (1998), suggest, the teacher needs to be confident enough and have the honesty and confidence to suggest to pupils that they are not just independent observers but do have a point of view, which also can and should be challenged

Whilst this is an area of some discussion in Britain, Wrigley (2003) points out that in Germany, teachers are encouraged to allow discussion around controversial issues, present a wide range of views and be open about their own standpoint whilst allowing for all views to be challenged. In the very slim curriculum guidelines in Denmark, teachers are encouraged not to overplan so that, in discussion with their pupils, issues deemed relevant for discussion can be included. However, in analyzing how high school students understood the place of classroom discussion, Hahn (1998) found that students in Netherlands did not try to persuade each other, even when discussing highly controversial issues that they felt strongly about, whereas in German and US state schools and English private schools there was strong argument and persuasion. Interestingly, she found that there was virtually no discussion on controversial political issues in the state sector in England even in social science classes where she gathered that 'the primary purpose was to prepare for examinations'.

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