

A democratic approach to learning in RME

School/Centre: Stonelaw High School

Age range: S3

Education for citizenship contexts: young people's participation, curricular areas

Exploring a participative learning style

This case study describes one approach to promoting citizenship through a democratic approach to learning in a religious and moral education class of S3 pupils in Stonelaw High School, Rutherglen, South Lanarkshire. Pupils were given a genuine say in the methodology and content of their learning. The key objective was to discover whether a participative learning style and citizenship curriculum content in core RME altered pupils' citizenship values. Outcomes included pupils' establishment of their own fair trade cooperative business and joint working with pupils in Trinity High School and Rutherglen High School.

Pupils were invited to express preferences about learning styles and the teacher acted on these. One pupil explained how she felt about involvement in a democratic class:

'It was really good because the teacher was letting us in on the whole learning bit. It was ... quite scary at the same time because somebody is saying, "How would you like to be taught?" and we've never been asked that before.'

Pupils wanted to learn from visiting speakers. To show their potential to be responsible, independent citizens, teams chose and organised seven speakers.

Developing international links

Pupils were also keen to make international links: these were established with schools in South Africa and Pakistan. E-mail friendships developed and opinions about world problems were shared. A videoconferencing session has been held between pupils in Stonelaw and in Pakistan. One pupil said, 'I've gained an insight into the world and the life and concerns of teenagers in different countries. It's really brought our learning alive.' Pupils are discovering that developing friendships between young people in different countries is key to international understanding.

Pupil responses to independent learning

Independent learning in teams of pupils' own choosing was popular. Teams chose their investigation topic and felt more motivated: 'I just think you try harder. It's more special to you if it's something you've picked.' One team's reason for their topic choice mirrored part of the teacher's rationale for developing a democratic classroom: 'We chose to do war through the eyes of a child because ... war is something that world leaders choose, the people don't get to choose, so children are just thrown into these things and need to be listened to.' Eighty-seven per cent of pupils believed they were learning better because the teacher was involving them.

Attitudes and actions on a range of citizenship issues were measured by comparing survey responses at the start and end of the academic session. The questionnaire was given both to the experimental group and to a control group of three S3 classes who were not learning democratically. Typical findings were that the experimental group became more accepting of asylum seekers in Britain and more sympathetic towards homeless people, with a higher percentage buying 'The Big Issue'. They developed a more positive stance towards the British government helping developing countries. The control group became less tolerant and less generous.

When asked to identify benefits to themselves and peers from involvement in the democratic class, positive dispositions were highlighted. Fifty per cent of boys, others noticed, seemed more mature, respectful, tolerant or confident. Sixty-six per cent of girls, it was claimed, had enhanced confidence, independence, conscientiousness and/or respect. These findings suggest that treating pupils as participants in learning may well be the most effective way to develop emotional literacy, an important requirement for effective citizenship.

This small-scale study rooted the theory of the democratic classroom in reality, showing that the democratic approach is possible, practical and rewarding. It must be stressed that the democratic approach is not an easy option. Prerequisite to its success are mutual respect and trust. Trying to meet pupils' expectations involved a great deal of unseen work, so its introduction, where appropriate, should be at a manageable pace. It would be damaging to pupils' perception of democracy if teachers embarked on it half-heartedly and empowerment was not delivered.

Impact of the democratic class

The impact of the democratic class continues. The most significant positive attitude change has been demonstrated in pupils' enthusiasm for buying fairly traded products. The following session, involving other year groups, pupils from the experimental group set up a Young Co-operatives Fair Trade business with three intertwined strands of learning which are important elements in education for citizenship - business skills; cooperative, democratic working; and appreciation of fair, ethical trading. In five months, sales reached £5000, with the profits supporting education projects in developing countries. A joint fair trade project with pupils in Trinity High School and Rutherglen High School was developed. To raise community awareness of ethical trading, pupils from the three schools set up a stall together in the local shopping arcade during Fair Trade fortnight. Such cooperation and support between schools is welcomed by all involved as an opportunity for pupils to change society for the better locally as well as globally.

Contact details

Website

'Never too young to learn democracy!', the full case study by Henry Maitles, Head of Social Studies Education, University of Strathclyde Faculty of Education, and Isabel Gilchrist, RME department, Stonelaw High, Rutherglen, can be accessed at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003459.htm

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