

Commissioned Research Article

Title: Democracy in action

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Produced by citizED
(supported by the Training and
Development Agency for Schools)

SUMMER 2006

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DEMOCRACY IN ACTION:

A WHOLE SCHOOL PROJECT
AT WILBERFORCE PRIMARY SCHOOL, LONDON W.10

CONSULTING PARENTS AND CHILDREN ABOUT THE ETHOS OF THE SCHOOL &
IMPLEMENTING INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Hilary Claire (with thanks to Angela Piddock, Jane Thomas and Helen Hopkins)

This report describes a project which puts the spirit of democracy into practice, in a multi-cultural/multi-ethnic inner London school, in a disadvantaged community. It is underpinned by the ideas of a 'Rights Respecting School' which explicitly refer to the citizenship concepts of rights, respect and responsibility. Its relevance to Citizenship Education emerges as one reflects on the experience of consultation and democracy for the staff at the school, its pupil and its adult community. Democracy only works if people are motivated rather than apathetic when they are consulted about issues affecting them, when they feel their concerns are of interest to people who make decisions and that their views will be taken seriously, and when they are involved in those decisions. All these characteristics were met in the whole school project.

It is called '*Democracy in Action*' because the following citizenship concepts were addressed-

- Consultation with all children as part of democratic process: giving all children, including the youngest – a voice about the most basic experiences of school life
- Opportunity for all children to see and think about the results, and to experience themselves as members of a community
- Consultation with parents/carers to find out more about their perspectives on ethos and practice of the school
- Opportunity for parents/carers to feel they are part of a whole school community, through seeing the parent survey results displayed publicly
- Practical action taken as a result of the findings, giving children and parents/carers a message that their voices are heard and valued.
- Opportunities through the School Council for children to evaluate the success of the measures taken in response to the project.

Introduction

This article describes a whole school project in an inner city London primary school. The majority of children and parents in the school community have English as an additional language. Many are recent arrivants in England, and a good number have had troubled experiences in their countries of origin. In this context, the efforts of the school management team to liaise with and support parents, and to involve them in the life of the school, are more

than the implementation of DfES requirements to work closely with parents and carers in their children’s interests. Rather, these initiatives at grass roots level can be seen as contributing to the democratic ethos of wider society. Adults and children in this school are learning through direct experience, to ‘do democracy’ in decisions which affect their lives.

How the project was managed

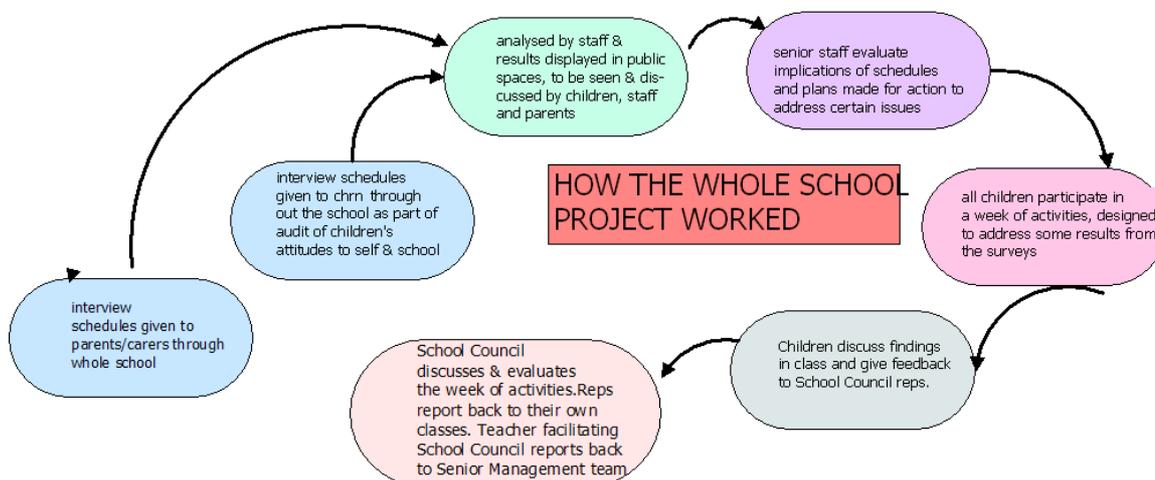
During the project which began in the summer term 2005 and continued through the autumn term, all the children and their parents/carers completed interview schedules about their attitudes to school, children’s learning and their relationships with teachers.

The results were analysed by members of staff, and displayed in prominent public places round the school, so that parents/carers and all staff, as well as children, could look at them and consider their implications.

The project was designed not just to audit parents’ and children’s feelings about school, but more importantly, so that staff could use the survey material to plan and implement improvements.

The project illustrates how PSHE and Citizenship link together in some respects, particularly with regard to school ethos:

- Some items on the questionnaires were about self esteem and thus contributed to the school’s PSHE policy and planning.
- Other aspects of the two schedules quite clearly addressed Citizenship concepts:



Stage 1a): all the pupils in the school complete interview schedules

Every class in Key Stage 1 completed the following questionnaire in small groups, in class, with the classroom assistant giving support. The children coloured in smiley and frowning faces to show their responses. The totals for KS1 are shown. (N= 104; there were some *nul* responses which explains why not all rows add to 104.)

	☺	☹
My friends help me with my work when I need it	83	7
My work is put on the wall for other children to see	92	7
My teacher likes my ideas	93	9
My teacher helps me with my work	87	12
I am happy in the playground	89	11
Sometimes my teacher lets me choose what to do	86	16
When children argue the teacher sorts it out fairly	90	8
Sometimes other children say unkind things to me	66	38
My school is a friendly school	87	7
I think our classroom rules are fair	90	5

Every class in Key Stage 2 completed a slightly different questionnaire in class, supervised by their teachers who went through each question and checked the children’s understanding. Children used ‘Yes’, ‘Sometimes’ and ‘No’ as the categories except for the question which asked them to rate their school out of 10.

The combined results from the whole of KS2 are given below (N = 201):

	Yes	Some times	No
Can you make your work better if you really try?	172	25	4
Is your teacher pleased with your work?	70	120	6
When you have something to say in front of your teacher do you feel shy?	38	49	110
Do you like writing stories or doing creative writing?	154	32	16
Are there things you want to change about yourself?	85	31	88
Are you good at mathematics?	99	83	21
When you have something to say in front of other children do you feel foolish	16	28	155
Do you think your teacher knows how you feel?	59	72	58
Does the teacher notice when you work hard?	91	100	10

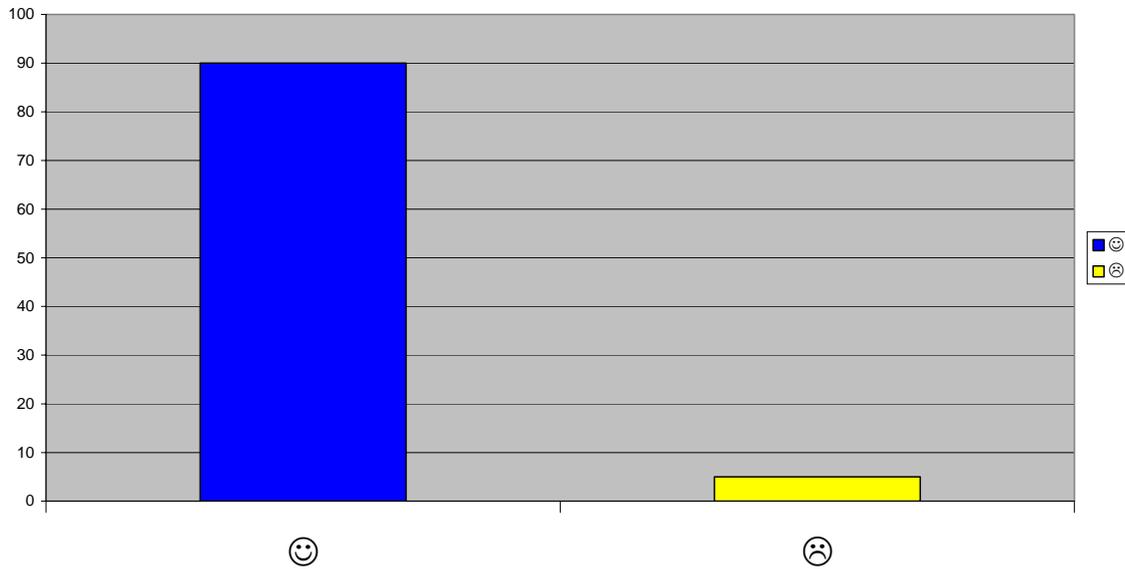
What rating would you give your school (from 1- 10)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
12	8	1	13	32	18	10	15	24	68

The results were displayed in the following ways in the entrance corridor to the main school, and the entrance lobby to the KS1/Nursery building. The staff thought bar charts and pie charts were visually easier to follow and interpret, particularly for parents who might not be literate or familiar with mathematical conventions.

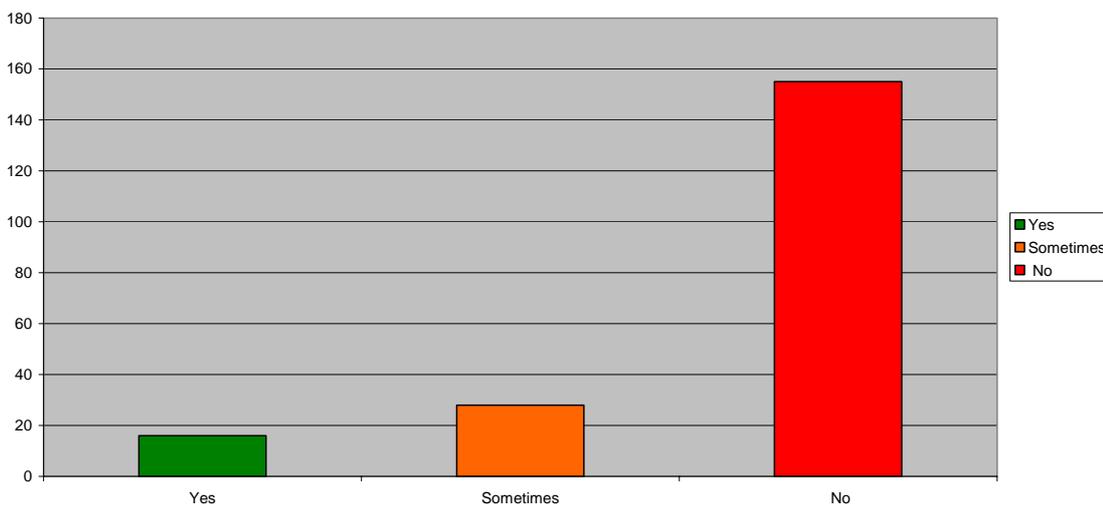
One of the KS1 survey questions displayed graphically:

I think our classroom rules are fair



One of the KS2 survey questions displayed graphically

When you have something to say in front of other children do you feel foolish



Stage 1 (b): The parents/carers survey

The purpose of the parents'/carers' survey was to find out what they thought about the school and to reinforce the message that the school was a community school which cared about parents' views and feelings.

The questionnaire below was given to all parents at the end of term parents/carers evening when their children's reports would be discussed with the teachers. Choosing this occasion meant there was a very high turnout rate (95%) since reports are not posted but given to parents personally, along with one-to-one discussion. In the week before the evening meeting the school liaison officer Lukhfa Uddin, who is multilingual and speaks the main languages in the school community, had made a determined effort to meet as many parents as possible, to explain about the survey and to translate it. On the parents' evening itself, she was available to help translate or fill in the questionnaire with parents. Some parents helped one another. Others took the questionnaire home and returned it later. She made sure that teachers knew where she was on the evening, and could refer parents to her. In the days following the parents' evening she stationed herself at the doors of the classrooms at home time, to follow up parents whose responses hadn't been received.

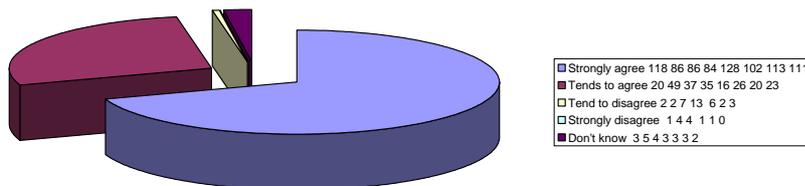
	Strongly agree	Tends to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school	118	20	2		
My child is making good progress at school	86	49	2	1	3
Behaviour at school is good	86	37	7	4	5
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home	84	35	13	4	4
The teaching is good	128	16			3
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on	102	26	6	1	3
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem	113	20	2	1	3
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best	111	23	3	0	2
The school works closely with parents	97	38	1	0	3
The school is well led and managed	99	31	4	1	6
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible	103	32	4	0	3
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons	85	31	8	2	14

The results of the survey were taken to a Governors' meeting for their information. Although the schedule gave a very positive picture, the exercise was not just self congratulatory. Senior staff looked carefully at the negative end of the results and perceived that there was a significant number of parents dissatisfied with the range of after school activities. This was raised at the parents' evening and though the parents were given the opportunity to look right through the school at the options available, the staff still feel that they need to consider more activities.

They also noticed that a number of parents did not feel their child was getting the right amount of work. In addition to dealing with this in 1 – 1 conversations with teachers, the staff interpreted this to mean that parents required greater understanding of appropriate expectations. So along

with the pie charts showing parents/carers the combined results of their surveys, the staff also put up sheets demonstrating the writing policy at the school. This chart showed, for every year group (starting with Year 1) a sample of typical writing, good things about this work and next steps and finally a column with ideas about how children could be helped at home.

The school works closely with parents



Above: One of the questions from the parents' surveys displayed graphically in both KS1 and KS2 buildings.

Next steps: The parents' survey will be repeated this summer at the end of year Parents' evening, but the questionnaire will be refined. Although the school liaison officer will again be involved, the questionnaire will be translated into community languages.

Running the survey a second year will give the school an opportunity to see if there have been any changes and also, through refining the questions, see if different issues arise.

Stage 2: The follow up in the school – Friendship week –

After the surveys had been analysed the school management set aside a staff meeting to consider what had arisen. They felt that though the broad sweep of the children's surveys was positive, there were sufficient negative responses in the KS1 questionnaire about playground and friendships to warrant a follow up. Though the KS2 survey had not asked similar questions and had not raised similar issues, the staff felt that a whole school approach was justified, particularly as the current Y6 was somewhat challenging. They decided to organise a 'friendship week' with a *smorgasmord* of activities available to all the children.

Activities in the friendship week:

- *Circle times*- A visiting teacher led circle time during the week in all year groups through the whole of KS 2. Although the school had been running circle time already, the head and senior staff felt the sessions could do with revitalising.
- *Workshop on friendship and bullying* for all classes in KS1 and 2, led by a visiting drama group who educated children about bullying behaviour, including emotional and verbal bullying as well as physical bullying.
- *Learning to make a video* – all year groups in KS2
- *Addressing playground issues* - Year 6 discussed in circle time how they could sort things out when things went wrong, particularly in the playground. The children came up with ideas, and pointed out the dinner ladies were not always working positively with them.
- *Co operative games* - older children learned games which they taught to the younger children

- *Line dancing* – two teachers organised a cross phase ‘line dancing’ session on one of the days
- There was a *special assembly* about friendship and the whole school learned a song – the idea being that this would help bonding in the school community
- *Letter writing* – children wrote letters to their friends and posted them in a special letter box in the school
- *Parachute games* - Outside coaches came and taught different groups some parachute games
- *Slogan competition* – the whole school became involved in a slogan competition on friendship.

Stage 3: School council evaluates friendship week

Shortly after the friendship week, each class was asked to discuss and evaluate the week. Their representatives on the school council would give feedback at the next council meeting. This would be written up as an article for the school newsletter by a small ‘executive committee’ supported by a teacher.

During this school council meeting (which I attended) children were paired, (a KS1 child with a KS2 child) to talk about the aspects of the week which had been enjoyable, memorable and in which children had learned something. After a few minutes in talk partners, the children spoke to the whole council.

Along with reports on the enjoyable aspects of the week one child reported that her class felt the ‘friendship stops’ weren’t working properly. The Councillors suggested that ‘buddies’ should be elected for one term only, not a whole year and the teacher asked the reps. to take this message back to their own classrooms.

Interviews with a two Year 6 children about the surveys

On the day that I was in the school learning about the project from the staff, I took the opportunity to interview a boy and a girl from Year 6 to get their thoughts about the questionnaires. It is impossible to say that their views were typical of their year group – let alone the school - but this is not the point. Rather, the purpose of my interview was to get some qualitative feedback in support of the quantitative data, and to find out how they had responded to the experience of having their views about school elicited in this way. ‘Having a voice’ is a central concept in citizenship education, implying that children are consulted, feel empowered and are given positive messages about the value of their views in the wider institution.

The interview is set out below:

HC: How did you feel about being asked these questions?

H (girl aged 11): I felt really safe and they cared about us.

M (boy aged 11): When they gave us the questions they were really calm and they helped us. They explained it all.

HC: Were there any that were hard to fill in?

M: Some were a bit hard. You couldn’t say ‘half and half’ about some things or what you meant when you put a tick. You had to say ‘sometimes’. I wanted to say some bits are good, and some are not so good, so I put ‘sometimes’.

HC: What do you think might happen now they’ve done the surveys?

H: It was good. We felt they were going to try and change things.

HC: What about the graphs that are up in the corridors. Did the teachers talk to you about them?

H: The teacher – Jane – told us about them. Each colour means something. When we go past we look at them. I was surprised at some people saying they didn't work hard!

HC: Do you work hard?

H and M: Yes!

[HC has the set of graphs about feeling shy, teacher appreciating their work, understanding them etc. spread out in front of children on the table.]

HC: Tell me about these graphs. Yes H?

H: My teacher writes good comments.

M: I try and improve things when she writes comments.

HC: What about the one about feeling shy?

M: If it's a new person they don't like to speak in front of others. You need to know each other.

H: I used to be very shy. We have assemblies, we show our stuff and you have to speak. You keep on doing it and you get used to it.

M: Sometimes I'm shy. People need to relax you and help us know each other, and say where you come from, and your personality. The teachers help with this.

[HC asks about graph showing children who would like to change something about themselves.]

HC: What do you think children might want to change about themselves? Think of someone in your class who might say 'yes I want to change', but don't tell me their names.

M: Probably behaviour.

H: Yes, you want to be able to work harder and think about your work.

M: They might want to change their personality. Be helpful, be chose to go and help the younger children. They want to become calm.

HC asks about graph asking if they feel foolish in front of other children.

M: sometimes people do laugh. Most people ignore it if people say something foolish.

H: When teachers ask questions even if it's wrong you know you've tried your best. You don't feel foolish because you tried.

HC asks about graph asking if teacher knows how you feel. Asks for examples of negative, positive and sometimes.

H: Children keep their feelings in. They don't always want others to know.

Graph showing rating for school.

[HC points out that though vast majority chose 10 or high number, if you added the numbers below 5 there was a substantial minority and asks why people might rate the school less well.]

H: Someone spoils the lesson and you have to stay in. You feel upset and I'm being punished for others.

M: The people whose behaviour is bad is about half, But the good ones have to miss out [because of them]. PE – you have to miss out because of some people.

Commentary

The school as a community to which children are committed, which values them and grants them a voice

In order to bring out the Citizenship concepts that the interview illustrates, I will comment in the light of five points summarising the benefits of ‘Rights Respecting Schools’. This is a framework based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasises the language and ethos of Rights, Respect and Responsibilities, in a whole school context. (For more information about Rights Respecting Schools, see www.hants.gov.uk/education/childrensrights and the preamble to ‘A framework for Human Rights Education for the younger age group’ www.citized.info/primary/.)

A ‘Rights Respecting School’

- (i) Promotes pupils’ self-esteem and self-confidence
- (ii) Supports pupils’ moral, social and cultural development;
- (iii) Promotes positive relationships and behaviour, including countering racism and other forms of abusive and discriminatory behaviour and harassment;
- (iv) Develops effective global citizens;
- (v) Contributes to overall school improvement, including better learning and improving academic standards

M and H felt safe and valued by the teachers and that everything about the survey had been explained. If they are typical, these attitudes, valuable in themselves in a democratic environment, also allow the school to feel confident about the validity and reliability of the survey results.

In the interview M used the construct ‘calm’ several times. This is relevant to citizenship education because of what the opposite would imply – tension, fear, inappropriate leadership, lack of trust or confidence, even chaos. So though this response might seem to relate to PSE rather than Citizenship, I believe it indicates how PSE supports the important characteristics of democratic society, through emphasising positive personal experiences of participation.

H noted that the surveys will probably lead to positive change – ie she felt she had some voice in how things might be managed in the school. M agreed.

Both children commented that their teachers wrote helpful comments on their work which helped them improve. This provides anecdotal evidence about formative and proactive assessment procedures, which involve the children themselves and is a characteristic of a school which respects and values children.

The children appreciate efforts made by teachers to encourage mutual respect and tolerance. It also indicates that they understand that children work better in relaxed environments, where they feel trusted.

Ability to evaluate the questionnaire procedure

M’s comments about the interview schedule itself reveal that this boy could appreciate when a questionnaire is limited. This is an important understanding from the perspective of citizenship, in which consultation needs to make space for nuances and individuality.

Children’s views on their own behaviour

The comments about ‘changing themselves’ provide an insight that H and M feel that children with behavioural issues are in fact aware of them, and would like to change. This suggests that the school is successfully promoting a sense that behaviour is not fixed, that children can improve, and that teachers are giving a message that they expect and believe children can improve.

The Head was interested in the response about the unfairness of being kept in for other children's misdemeanours, and decided to raise this in a staff meeting.

Concluding remarks

The importance of a democratic environment and a whole school approach within a Rights Respecting School is increasingly recognized in educational circles. Lessons which develop skills or enhance knowledge about citizenship issues in a piecemeal fashion within the main curriculum may be necessary, but they are never sufficient for Citizenship Education to work effectively in developing young people's real expectations and understanding of democracy. Designed to address the ethos off the school and involve all children and the parental community in consultation which leads to change, whole school projects like this are essential.