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Schooled in Democracy? Promoting democratic values as a whole-school approach to violence prevention

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Abstract

This article discusses a Europe-wide project which aimed to promote *Safer Schools* through utilising a Charter of ‘democratic principles’. This included the non-violent resolution of conflicts and the right to equal treatment and respect. The first part of this article discusses the empirical findings from original research conducted with five London schools (and their local partners) who participated in this project. It was found that most participants were positive about the project’s potential, with many ‘democratic initiatives’ cited as examples of how the promotion of a principled Charter could produce good practice in combating violence in schools. The second part of this article raises more fundamental questions about the role of democracy in violence prevention programmes. In particular, it questions the assumption of a direct relationship between (non)violence and democratic values, and asks whether it is possible to promote democratic principles within inherently undemocratic institutions such as schools.

Key Words: violence prevention, safer schools, democracy, education

Introduction

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In recent decades the potential of schools to have a positive effect on the development of problematic and criminal behaviour from young people has been increasingly recognised. Rutter *et al*'s (1979) work is often viewed as seminal in the educational field, whilst research for the Home Office has been influential with criminologists (Graham and Bowling, 1995). Research within the risk factors paradigm (see for example Farrington, 1996) has also been influential in reframing schools (and 'education') as both potential 'risk' and 'protective' factors in terms of the development of criminality. These ideas informed developments such as the *Safer Schools Partnerships* (SSPs) that began in high crime areas in the UK in 2002. SSPs were also part of street crime initiatives and centred around schools located in crime 'hotspots'. SSPs have developed in various formats and have been evaluated by the Youth Justice Board and others. Similar initiatives are more established in the United States but they are also developing in mainland Europe.

The research that informs this article is based on a *European Safer Schools Partnership*. This included ten countries and specifically the UK case study which was located in London. The initiators of this partnership had been involved in early SSPs in the UK and the educationalists were very much focussed on work that would address problematic behaviour in schools. This was then coupled with a wider European development that linked the promotion of democratic values with violence prevention. This was a heady mix of hopes, aspirations as well as practical commitment to concerns about behaviour in and around schools in many countries.

The link between democratic values and violence prevention remains somewhat elusive (see later). In 2004 the *Council of Europe* sponsored the development of a tool which aimed to link these two disparate ideals, and funded the process evaluation which would examine its implementation and effectiveness (in the short-term, at least). This tool was the 'European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence', a Charter which aimed to codify principles of democratic citizenship in an attempt to combat and prevent violence in schools. The Charter (see Box 1) was developed by both pupils and

teachers from 19 European countries. It listed seven key ‘articles’, explicitly drawing on the discourse of ‘rights and responsibilities’ which underpinned many policy strategies during the previous New Labour government (Lister, 2003).

Box 1

European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence ('The Charter')

1. All members of the school community have the right to a safe and peaceful school. Everyone has the responsibility to contribute to creating a positive and inspiring environment for learning and personal development.
2. Everyone has the right to equal treatment and respect regardless of any personal difference. Everyone enjoys freedom of speech without risking discrimination or repression.
3. The school community ensures that everybody is aware of their rights and responsibilities.
4. Every democratic school has a democratically elected decision-making body composed of representatives of students, teachers, parents, and other members of the school community where appropriate. All members of this body have the right to vote.
5. In a democratic school, conflicts are resolved in a non-violent and constructive way in partnership with all members of the school community. Every school has staff and students trained to prevent and solve conflicts through counselling and mediation.
6. Every case of violence is investigated and dealt with promptly, and followed through irrespective whether students or any other members of the school community are involved.
7. School is a part of the local community. Co-operation and exchange of information with local partners are essential for preventing and solving problems.

<http://www.esspd.org/pages.php?d=2&ids=10&idc=44&idse1=99>

The Charter was constructed to frame the activities for all who participated in school life, but it is clear that particular rights and responsibilities cannot fall equally between staff and pupils. Part of the programme therefore involved the allocation of resources *to enable staff to enable pupils* to become democratic citizens – at least *within* the school gates. Such resources were of the more ‘opportunity’ than the ‘fiscal’ kind. They focused on the nurturing of partnerships between schools and their ‘local partners’ (e.g. the police, education advisers and other local schools) and their ‘European partners’ (i.e. other schools across 10 European countries). National and international meetings were organised and funded, with the principle aim of enabling schools to share practices and initiatives which would generate ‘democratic values’ within each school.

The first part of this article explores the findings produced by the evaluation of the UK case study. This involved five participating London schools and focuses on the strengths and limitations of this *Safer Schools* programme based on a series of questionnaires and interviews with school staff and all the UK programme co-ordinators. Following this, the article goes on to discuss the wider implications of this programme, in terms of the theoretical basis for any assumed relationship between

democracy and violence. Further, it looks at what such strategies which centre on 'democratic citizenship' actually mean within UK schools, as these fundamentally operate within a 'non-democratic' hierarchy of power.

Evaluating the implementation and impact of 'The Charter': A UK case study

The UK-based process evaluation aimed to assess the implementation of the Charter and the capacity for schools to change in the direction of this Charter, from the perspective of adults (wide-ranging data on children's perspectives had already been collected by the schools and programme organisers). The research involved 17 semi-structured interviews; 5 with the UK strategic staff involved in the project (comprising one national and one European co-ordinator, together with three local authority education advisory staff). Twelve teachers who were involved in developing the programme within their schools (seven head/senior teachers and five teachers) were also interviewed. The schools comprised four primary schools and one secondary school, all based in an inner-London Borough with a diverse intake of children, in terms of educational and social needs. The population of the Borough has a high proportion of ethnic minority communities with over 190 languages spoken. The borough also ranked high in relation to the local authority deprivation index. Despite such challenges, all of the schools had performed well in recent OFSTED assessments, scoring particularly well in terms of leadership and management, and all had made significant educational improvements in recent years. Outside the school gates, data collected from the *Health Related Behaviour Survey (2009)* within the Borough found 22 per cent of pupils had experienced bullying in the past year (in line with UK and European averages) while crime rates (2007-2008) within the Borough were significantly higher than those found in England as a whole (in the case of Robbery, over six times as many).

Markers of evaluation were agreed during programme development. Interview questions tapped into these markers. These addressed: participants' reflections on the background of the programme; reasons for participation; experiences of being part of

the programme; the sustainability of the local and international partnerships; and whether the Charter operated as a vehicle for change. Analysis used *NVivo* software to explore the interview transcripts and identify common conceptual themes within these markers. It also examined any differences between co-ordinators and school staff, as well as those between primary and secondary schools.

Alongside this, the evaluation involved a wider survey of 119 school staff who were implementing the programme, albeit with varying degrees of awareness of doing so. Survey questions addressed: their awareness of the Charter (together with their agreement on the ‘democratic principles’ within it); their experiences of pupil behaviour (including violence) before, during and after the programme implementation; and their reflections on ‘enablers’ and ‘blockers’ to behaviour change in pupils. This quantitative data, produced by questions which requested both categorical (e.g. yes/no) and ordinal (i.e. using Likert scales from 1-4 to assess levels of agreement) responses, was subject to descriptive statistical analysis. The evaluation was further informed by documentary evidence and observations made by the researchers during their visits to the schools. For the purposes of this article, a brief overview of those findings most relevant to the ensuing discussion is provided below.

Defining ‘violence’

The concept of ‘violence’ in relation to the behaviour of children and young people in schools remains much debated by educationalists in the UK but has been more readily used in European research (see Debarbieux et al 2003). The programme training materials for the work in schools acknowledges this (Ortega *et al*, 2006):

In her report to the Council of Europe, Vettenburg (1999) concluded that there was no clear definition of school violence, which made it difficult, amongst other things, to ascertain whether school violence was on the increase or to make valid comparisons between different countries’ rates of school violence. However, as Debarbieux et al (2003) point out, there is now greater awareness

of the need to accept a multiplicity of definitions of school violence from a range of perspectives, including those of children and young people (p.2).

In other words the partnership acknowledged the lack of agreement and certainty about exact definitions of ‘violent’ behaviour; although the principles that underpinned a democratic approach to reducing this behaviour were more explicit (see ‘The Charter’, page x). For ‘violent’ behaviour we should read unwanted and highly problematic behaviour, that is aggressive and helps to make young people feel less safe in and around schools. It is behaviour that teachers have to respond to, it may challenge their authority and obstructs teaching and learning.

Violence prevention through enhancing democracy in schools: evaluation findings

The qualitative interviews with key participants produced a very positive response to the Charter and its associated activities. Participants suggested it provided a focus and clarity to their professional practices, which were often to already-existing. As one teacher explained:

“Circle Time, it actually was in existence before but now we know why we are doing it...because we have signed under that Charter where everybody has a voice and everybody has the right to a peaceful environment and that’s why we are doing it, if that makes sense?” (Teacher, Primary School)

Interviews suggested that new initiatives also emerged as a response to the Charter. These tended to emerge from existing resources and staff interests, and were voluntarily developed from within (rather than imposed on) the schools. For example, a *Suggestions Box* (a box where children could post ideas anonymously) was developed in some schools offering pupils a ‘voice’ on how things might be improved in the school. Ideas from the *Suggestions Box* were collected weekly and discussed by the *School Council* (introduced in two schools) which was chaired by pupils and had its own annual budget. Other new initiatives included the implementation of a *restorative*

justice programme, a *peer mentoring scheme*, the introduction of a *Dad's group* and the adoption of '*Miss Dorothy*', an activities programme sponsored by the Metropolitan Police to promote awareness of safety outside of home. Many of these initiatives were expected to continue, and further initiatives were planned for the future.

Increased awareness was frequently cited by the programme implementers as one positive outcome of the Charter. Increased *staff awareness* was enabled by the introduction of *Checkpoint questionnaires*, which monitored pupils' experiences of violence in school. To provide one example, the finding that problems of violence occurred particularly during break-times meant that staff could focus their efforts on safety in playgrounds. Increased *pupil awareness* included, for example, an increased *awareness of diversity*. This was fostered by participation in partnership meetings at both local and international level, where children met other children of different colours and cultures. However, given the ethnic diversity of children in the UK schools, this was cited as being of particular benefit to those children from the European schools which were notably less diverse. Staff also cited an increased self-awareness in the pupils themselves, for example, practices of *peer mediation* were encouraged to enable children to understand the impact of their behaviour on others.

Despite such positive outcomes, the key implementers also identified factors that hampered the prospect of the programme enabling greater change. For example, the establishment of local and international partnerships – and the sharing of good practice between them – was seen as a very good idea *in theory*. However, in practice there was insufficient funding to enable teaching relief to attend these meetings, or to train school staff on the good practice that had been learned. Indeed, the survey data of all school staff supports this finding. Nearly three-quarters (73 %) of staff reported having received no training on behaviour management within the previous year. This was a concern since these staff were at the forefront of implementing what was being advocated and learned from this programme. Furthermore, there was also little funding available to put some of the ideas into practice (e.g., one example of democratic 'good practice' was the provision of a 'quiet space' in the school playground, but there was no funding available to make such environmental changes). Other concerns included

organisational issues, including the poor matching of school partnerships. This was seen as particularly problematic when primary and secondary schools were matched with each other, as participants felt that the differences were too great to make good practices within one kind of school translate and apply to the other. Indeed, the Charter itself was written by secondary school pupils, and many of those in primary schools wondered if the language rendered the principles less meaningful for younger children. One of the Deputy headteachers emphasised that, rather than take the Charter ‘literally’, it was more about ensuring the application of values more generally – otherwise the Charter might just become another set of conditions for the children to adhere to:

“I think if you do just put up a bunch of articles, they become rules, very, very quickly, in children’s minds because that is what they are used to seeing.... and that’s not what we wanted, there are some good values and they fit well with our values, our school values so they are embedded well with them. But the children understand that process that the school has values.” (Deputy Head, Secondary School).

Perhaps understandably, the quantitative survey data of school teaching and support staff was less positive than the data produced by interviews with the key implementers of the programme. This evaluation took place two years after the project began (although implementation was an ongoing process during those two years), and during this time 74% of all school staff had ‘heard of’ the Charter, 51% had ‘seen it’, while only 33% had ‘seen it displayed in the school’. This gap between ‘democratic aspiration’ and ‘democratic practice’ was a continual theme within the wider school staff survey. For example, while over 90% of the staff either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with all of the principles within the Charter, significantly fewer agreed that these had yet been achieved. While of course this was a process evaluation, and one should not expect change to be achieved both immediately and fully, some of the principles were clearly more easily achievable than others: those articles which scored more markedly at the lower end of the achievement scale were Article 2 (*everyone enjoying freedom of speech*: mean 2.72), Article 4 (*all members of the democratically elected decision-making body have the right to vote*: mean 2.94) and Article 5 (*students*

trained to resolve conflicts: mean 2.64). However, there was still a large discrepancy in response here: while 27 per cent of staff agreed that the practice of training students to resolve conflicts was ‘not happening here yet’, 33 per cent of staff agreed that ‘we’re there’.

The biggest issue in terms of the capacity for change and sustainability of the work of the partnership, for both local authority education staff and school based staff, was time. This was particularly the case if education staff were going to be involved in training other schools, or for many classroom-based staff to attend training themselves. This inter-connected with the need for funds to pay for a supply teacher if events occurred during the school day.

“There is an expectation that the schools and partnership will help to train other schools within the local authority and sort of pass on the practice. But if I was going to do that, then I need a day to prepare the training and then a day to deliver it and that’s two days that I’m not working in school, so there needs to be funding to arrange that cover and I’m not sure that’s been thought through.”

(Teacher, Primary School)

To conclude, although this process evaluation demonstrated a range of positive experiences for the staff who had the time to be involved in its development, there was limited evidence of this really permeating to classroom-based staff. If there was limited capacity to do this within the participating schools, there is clearly a limited capacity to develop staff in schools outside this initial partnership. Whether such inconsistency is within-schools or between-schools, this evaluation evidence suggests that the promotion of democratic values as a whole-school approach to violence prevention is piecemeal in both promoting ‘democratic values’ and in enabling ‘violence prevention’. Indeed, the relationship between the two remains questionable, since there was little quantitative evidence from the *Checkpoint questionnaires* that violence and/or bullying had been reduced in response to the programme. By its very nature a process evaluation tells us nothing about long-term change, but the passion and belief in change from the implementers cannot be a substitute for a lack of correlation between the promotion of democratic values and the reduction of violent behaviours. It is to this issue which we

now turn.

Discussion and Implications

While an evaluation study exploring the effectiveness of promoting democracy as a whole-school approach to combating violence is clearly of interest within itself, both the findings and the ideology of the programme raise wider theoretical questions. Firstly, what is the relationship (if any) between *democracy* and *violence*, and what makes us think that the promotion of ‘democratic values’ can in any way combat or prevent violence? Secondly, is it even possible to operate a school within principles of democracy, given the inherent unequal power relations upon which UK schools operate?

Democracy, violence and schools

In his work in peace studies, Galtung (1996) talks about ‘negative peace’ and ‘positive peace’. For him, negative peace concerns the elimination of overt violence, and this is achieved through the use of coercive and punitive control. On the other hand, ‘positive peace’ involves the use of intrinsically democratic practices (such as State accountability or universal suffrage) which operate according to what might be termed democratic principles, such as *human rights* and *mutual respect*. As Galtung argues, in any society there is clearly a place for negative ‘non-democratic’ peace, not least because positive peace cannot thrive unless there exists a precondition of basic security. In many ways, Galtung’s binary of negative and positive peace mirrors Foucault’s (1977) notions of ‘sovereign power’ and ‘disciplinary power’. ‘Sovereign power’, dominant during the *ancien regime*, refers to power that was exercised at the site of the body through corporeal punishment, for example. ‘Disciplinary power’ refers to power more obvious in modern democracies and is exercised predominantly through self-governance and through the proliferation of a ‘discourse of democracy’. It ideally serves to produce ethical subjects. The ‘self-governance’ of children is perhaps what this teacher is referring to in her analysis of what the Charter has enabled:

“Because when there are issues in the playground – I mean, we’re not talking about fighting issues – the children tend to deal with it without having to come to us, and it’s only when it gets out of hand and they’re going to fight or go for each other, that they bring it to the teacher. So we’ve just stepped back and allowed the children to take the role more or less like a teacher.” (Teacher, Primary School)

Thus, at least at a theoretical level, the notion of a dichotomy between ‘violence’ and ‘democracy’ is convincing, not least because the notion of ‘violence’ itself intrinsically refers to actions which ‘violate the norms of democratic civility’ (Keane, 2004: 9).

Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that violence prevention strategies in schools which focus on external discipline, such as managing weapon entry or using surveillance cameras, are less effective than those which promote self-discipline. As Hyman and Snook (2000) found, those schools which operate within a climate of harsh and punitive discipline enable school violence, while the enabling of student agency and a sense of collective community (Plucker, 2000) has been found to reduce violence. Although predominantly from the US, such findings have been replicated in the UK, where Watkins et al (2007) found positive school cultures key to promoting the ‘violence-resilient school’.

Edwards (2001) advocates the promotion of schools as ‘moral communities’ (p. 252) which is underpinned by the notion of *social justice*, whereby the interests and rights of all individuals are protected and respected. In this way, he makes clear the links between democratic values inside and outside of school:

‘Schools should have the same purposes as our democratic society. When students play a significant role in directing their school experiences, they are practicing democratic living. Schools must clearly define their democratic purposes’ (p. 253)

Edwards continues that once schools operate according to their clearly-defined

democratic principles, children will then feel a sense of belonging and understand their community responsibilities. The Charter used in the present case study – which operationalises the ideal of responsibility to the *school community* (article 1) and its relationship to the *wider community* (article 7), and the promotion of *human rights* and *mutual respect* (articles 2 and 3), together with *student-directed experiences* (article 4) – might indeed be what Edwards has in mind. This might result in a sense of empowerment for pupils and a sense of being a stakeholder in the operation of their school, which children are unlikely to feel in the traditional, hierarchical structure. This would be more akin to the ‘disciplinary power’ of Foucault and the positive peace of Galtung which schools might ideally be aiming for.

The translation of democratic principles into operationalisable initiatives has been reviewed by Bickmore (2008), who identified a number of ‘democratic’ US educational programmes. She found that the most effective programmes in reducing violence in schools were multi-faceted, sustained, educative and those which worked to facilitate students and staff’s social and cognitive competence. She also found that such programmes had the side-effect of contributing to students’ academic engagement and learning. Regarding specific ‘democratic’ initiatives, Bickmore found that *peer mediation* reduced aggression and associated school exclusions, and that *group conferencing and restorative justice practices* significantly reduced violence. Furthermore, as a guiding principle, Bickmore identified ‘strong respectful relationships’ as serving both a motivating force in producing non-violent behaviour and as a resource for constructive conflict management.

While Bickmore’s review appears to put some flesh on the bones of the current evaluation study, there are clearly limitations in the extent to which it applies to both the UK and Europe. However, the initiatives discussed by Bickmore have also been implemented and evaluated in the UK, and while the findings have been replicated, for example in relation to *peer mediation* (Sellman, 2011) and *restorative practices* (e.g. McCluskey et al, 2008) such studies also stress the limitations of attempting to ‘bolt-on’ democratic initiatives within schools which remain fundamentally undemocratic. Indeed, this is why a ‘whole-school approach’ is essential to the promotion of

democratic values (Cowie et al, 2008). Therefore, it remains unclear as to what extent any changes within the present study can be attributed to an overall 'climate of democracy' within which the school operates – and to what extent any changes can be attributed to the insertion of specific 'democratic practices' within a school which fundamentally operates within non-democratic principles. This problem is alluded to in the following quotation from a headteacher:

“Children have transformed themselves because they got given the time to think things through, think their inequalities through, think that whole thing through, and come to the realisation this fair play, the citizenship, the democratic – you know, it’s not a democratic world we live in – school isn’t democratic really, in the true sense – if it was democratic, I wouldn’t be the Head. I wasn’t chosen democrat... you know, democracy-wise, was I? I was chosen – it wasn’t democracy. So it’s not a democracy that we’re surviving in. So we’ve got to say how to say this is democratic or not. It’s different to say – well, is it equitable? Do we give enough voice to the children? Do we give enough voice to the other players in society?” (Headteacher, Primary School)

Many of the teachers in the interviews reported that the democratic principles which underpinned the Charter chimed closely with the general ethos of the school. To a large extent this explains both why the school volunteered to participate in the programme, and why it was selected. This said, the quote from the headteacher above highlights some of the tensions involved when attempting to promote democratic values within an institution which is inherently hierarchical. While the programme has enabled the implementation of 'pockets of democracy', these nevertheless operate within a wider tapestry of unequal power relations, not only between staff and pupils, but between pupils themselves. Bickmore (2008) raises the issue that the communication techniques encouraged as a method of resolving conflict between pupils could be considered as 'impositional' by non-middle-class pupils. Similarly, one wonders how democratic was the process of selecting pupils to attend the international partnership meetings?

Conclusions

The formative evaluation that informs the debate in this article highlights some of the inherent difficulties in promoting and embedding change in institutions such as schools; not least that only schools deemed ‘successful’ were selected (and volunteered) to participate. One wonders what the evaluation might have found were the programme implemented in what is deemed a ‘failing’ school? In actuality perhaps a certain level of democracy (as defined by good staff-pupil relationships, or feelings of ‘safety’, for example) is necessary before such a programme can work. Nevertheless, this evaluation has indicated broad and positive support for the ideals enshrined in this school-based charter from both staff and pupils. A sense of ownership came across from interviews, perhaps resultant from the derivation of the principles from children as well as adult participants. This ‘whole-school’ buy in to the aspirations of the charter is a commendable foundation on which to build. What is lacking, clearly reflected in the interviews, is the policy commitment in terms of funding, to see these aspirations operationalised in the way that Bickmore (2008) has advocated.

It also raises questions about the role of schools in reducing violence and promoting democratic principles, as well as questions about the relationship between ‘violence’ and ‘democracy’. As noted earlier, it could be argued that the UK implicitly relies on the criminal justice system to address severely problematic children, when earlier intervention from a less-stigmatising educational system would be far preferable (from a quality of life as well as an economic point of view). In which case, schools should provide the backdrop and the building blocks on which to develop anti-violent communities. These issues are particularly pertinent at a time when political action and protests in countries like England and France include violent actions; as in the French student protests against a change in the retirement age and the English protests against the end of the Education Maintenance Allowance and increase in University fees: are democratic values always, and necessarily, anti-violent?

Finally, one further question which needs addressing is that, even if such programmes enable democracy within schools, can such democratic principles work to shape processes outside the school gates? After all, as noted by Martin et al (2011), children actually feel safer *inside* school, and the risks they face on leaving this environment are

often sidelined.

That said, at the level of the school and classroom, the connection between these principles and a positive learning environment are obvious. So, whilst the connection between the classroom, the school and the promotion of a non-violent and more democratic world outside the school is difficult to establish, at another level it is aspirational and moves schools and educational institutions towards a stronger focus on important values that could lead to a better resolution of inter-personal conflict.

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