

## **Global learning in Primary Education: moving beyond charity**

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### **Introduction**

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world all citizens should have an awareness and understanding of global issues, poverty and inequalities. Oxfam define a global citizen, amongst other things, as *'willing to act to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place'* (2005, online).

This paper considers small scale research carried out in three primary schools in Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire between September 2012 and April 2013 as part of a larger three year UK Government Department for International Development (DfID) funded project, 'The world came to my school today'. The overall purpose of this project was to raise awareness of, and promote informed action to address global inequality and poverty.

The focus of this research, therefore, is to investigate Key Stage 2 (KS2: 7 to 11 year olds) children's understanding of and responses to poverty and global inequalities by considering the following questions:

1. Is the world fair?
2. How can I make the world a better place?
3. What are countries and organisations already doing to make the world a better place?

This article presents children's responses to these questions and concludes that young children between the ages of 7 and 11 are:

1. interested in and intellectually able to begin to understand the complexities of poverty and global inequalities
2. able to consider a range of individual and collective responses to these inequalities that go beyond notions of a simplistic charitable relationship in order to explore ways in which they can be part of a move towards a more just and sustainable world.

### **The beginnings of a childhood construction of global social realities – moving beyond charity**

Renner et al. summarise Paul Farmer's conception of global inequalities '*as falling into one of three categories: charity, development or social justice*' (2010: 44). They suggest that charity uses a deficit model where the '*server operates on the 'served', using a deficit model, i.e. 'they' are seen as intrinsically inferior*' (2010: 44).

Charitable campaigns, such as Red Nose Day, have become an integral part of many primary schools' annual calendar. This feeds into the dominant discourse that charity through benevolence is seen as intrinsically 'good'. In this model the 'best' response to these existing inequalities is to enact change through charitable donations of money and/or time.

When describing the Make Poverty History campaign, Andreotti criticises the fact that '*the use of images, figures and slogans emphasised the need to be charitable, compassionate and 'active' locally (in order to change institutions), based on a moral obligation to a common humanity, rather than on a political responsibility for the causes of poverty*' (2006: 42). She then summarises Dobson in stating that '*justice is a better ground for thinking as it is political and prompts fairer and more equal relations ...*

*being human raises issues of morality; being a citizen raises political issues'* (2006: 42).

In this approach, *'research may be seen as a process of empowerment, politicization and consciousness-raising'* (Tisdall et al, 2009: 5) for children and teachers. Griffiths (1998) also claims that acknowledging a 'political' position can actually improve research rather than biasing it.

Although the activities in this research did not present current global inequalities as a combination of a postcolonial structural hangover coupled with current neo-liberal global capitalist economic policies, we believe this work began the journey for these 7 to 11 year olds from *'soft global citizenship education [to] critical global citizenship education'* (Andreotti 2006: 40).

### **Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology**

Our research was built on the following ontological principles:

- Childhood is socially constructed and dependent on time, place and context
- Children are expert agents who are capable of shaping the social world
- Children are already aware of the wider world through parents, peers, the news, marketing, popular culture and increasingly through access to the internet

The epistemological approach used children's voices, perceptions and beliefs in collaboration with their class teachers as the strongest basis of knowledge about their situated understanding of these complex issues.

This research was seen as participatory action research (PAR) with the teachers having a critical facilitatory role working with children as co-researchers. PAR was seen as the most appropriate methodology as it emphasises engagement and change. Our research began from the premise that children from 7 to 11 are intellectually capable of

understanding complex global inequalities and their role as global citizens in enacting future change. Reason and Bradbury claim that within PAR *'communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers'* (2008:1).

Tisdall et al develop this point in relation to children being co-researchers by stating that *'researchers should recognize children's agency, their citizenship as human beings now and not just in the future, and involve children as (the central) research participants'* (2009: 2). They go on to suggest the value of involving children in that *'research can also be a means of representation, a way to ensure that children's views and experiences are not only listened to but heard by other groups'* (2009: 5).

Our research methods were designed to engage children respectfully and consisted of teacher-child interaction through dialogue within existing classroom practices. The usual classroom teachers presented materials (stories, video, images and posters) to the children and then collected data by recording the children's engagement with these materials. It was fully recognised that the classroom teachers were better placed to understand the children's learning over time.

### **Research plan**

While exploring the three main research questions teachers delivered the following five sessions:

Session 1: Baseline evaluation - three research questions to measure children's initial understanding of global inequality and poverty (initial baseline data).

Session 2: Teacher facilitated activities designed to raise awareness of global inequalities – linked to 'is the world fair?'

Session 3: Teacher facilitated activities designed to explore active global citizenship – linked to 'how can I make the world a better place?'

Session 4: Teacher facilitated activities designed to introduce the Millennium Development Goals – linked to ‘What are countries and organisations already doing to make the world a better place?’

Session 5: Revisiting the three research questions to explore if the children’s attitudes towards and understanding of these complex issues has changed (final data).

Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed when the teachers collated all the children’s responses to give to the two authors to be analysed. Thematic analysis of initial and final session responses was undertaken to tease out the two main themes as exemplified by corresponding children’s quotes.

## **Research findings**

### **Is the world fair?**

This was devised as a values statements activity with the class teacher recording the children’s attitudes through a dialogue-based session.

The children were shown some statements and asked to put their thumbs up if they agreed with the statement, thumbs down if they disagreed and thumbs sideways if they were neutral or didn’t know. The activity began with gentle, comfortable statements such as apples are tastier than bananas and grew in sophistication until, after 6 statements or so the children were asked to judge the statement ‘The world is fair’. Children responded by making comments such as *‘we need to balance the world, some people have tonnes of things and some have nothing’*.

### **How can I make the world a better place?**

This activity was devised to record children’s awareness of the steps they could make to *‘imagine different futures and the role they can play in creating a fair and sustainable world’* (QCA, 2007: 2).

The children were asked how they can make the world a better place and were given a blank sheet of A4 paper and a supply of coloured crayons, pencils or pens to record their ideas. If the children required a prompt they were asked 'if you could change some things in the world to make it better for you and for other people what things would you do?' The children's responses were plotted on a grid consisting of four sections: Local sustainability / Global sustainability / Local social justice / Global social justice. Children responded by making comments describing actions they might be able to take such as '*make other people who are rasis [sic] stop*'.

### **What are countries and organisations already doing to make the world a better place?**

This activity was devised to measure the children's increased awareness of international efforts to reduce poverty, promote development and honour human rights.

The children were asked to write their response to the above question on the reverse side of the paper used for the previous activity. The children were able to name organisations working to make the world a better place, including Comic Relief, Children in Need, Charities, Red Cross, Cancer Research, British Heart Foundation and Poppy Day. Children responded by making comments such as '*stop wars ... feed starving people*'.

### **Children then revisited all of the questions following input.**

In order to analyse the findings the constant comparison method (Thomas 2009) was used to identify two main themes regarding the children's learning in the interpretative research data. These two themes illustrate emerging ways in which the project has found an increase in pupil knowledge and understanding of global development issues and the impact of their own decisions and actions.

## Understanding Poverty and inequalities

Ruane et al. (2010) found that the conceptualisation of the notion of poverty and global justice issues was understood by children according to their age and cognitive development and was dependent on strategies used by teachers as being age appropriate. Children in this small scale study were found to engage with the language of poverty and wealth, using such terms as rich and poor, at some point beyond the age of 7. Some children in this evaluation were able to engage with issues at a sophisticated level and some children had a conceptual understanding of poverty as the denial, or lack of, basic needs such as food, water and shelter.

When asked whether they thought the world was fair in baseline session 1, the children mainly referred to themselves and their own lives commenting:

- *The world is sometimes fair because you can sometimes have what you want but sometimes your mum says no*
- *The world is fair because your parents give you the things you need and protect you*
- *The world isn't fair because you can't always have what you want*

However by session 5, the children began to develop a wider understanding of global inequalities such as:

- *It's like a cake – some get this much – others this much*
- *Because everyone in the world doesn't have enough food, water or good houses. A lot of the world population is poor and some are rich*
- *We're rich because we have lots of things, but other parts of the world don't – poor houses, little food and unclean water*

Some children moved beyond an 'us rich/them poor' dichotomy and began to demonstrate a nascent understanding of the concept of relative poverty:

- *Even though we have things, still in some parts of the UK people have no money or a place to live. This is the same in other countries*

Two Year 5 pupils recounted in detail the difference between absolute and relative poverty. This demonstrated an exceptional understanding of the complexity of the issues illustrating that 10 year olds can develop a sophisticated understanding of complex global issues.

One participating teacher estimated that all the children in her class had developed their understanding of poverty reduction, sustainability issues and identity and diversity. About half the children in her class became much more self-aware and were able to have 'those big conversations' about global issues. Although the children's '*lives [were] saturated with media images about celebs that have everything, all the things they haven't got*' (Participating teacher), the children appeared to have developed a better understanding of their personal relative wealth in a global context.

### **Moving on from charity**

When asked how they could make the world a better place in baseline session 1, the children mainly wrote or drew about things that are personal and close to home. The issues they felt they could improve upon included:

- *raising money for charity*
- *give money to charity*
- *picking up litter*
- *asking others to deal with 'dog poo'*
- *encouraging slower driving*
- *recycling*
- *giving up smoking (parents)*
- *don't cut down trees*
- *put on a jumper to save on heating*
- *don't swear*
- *looking after possessions*
- *being kind*



*-don't drive short distances*

*- giving to the poor*

Fundraising and charity figured very highly and constituted over 70% of responses in session 1 under the Global social justice category. By session 5, however, the children's responses had widened in scope significantly, particularly in the 'global social justice' category. Although charity still figured highly, the children demonstrated a good understanding of wider possibilities, including lobbying the powerful, taking a strong stand against wrong-doers, reducing the voting age and having positive, can-do attitudes and values. In session 5 their responses included:

*- put up posters locally so awareness spreads - let 5 year olds vote*

*- help reduce illness and disease*

*- support the Red Cross*

*- have the same rights*

*- children to run a charity*

*- clean water for all*

*- share out money*

*- write to politicians*

*- change our Prime Minister*

*- stop wars*

*- equal chances for girls*

*- stop drug dealers*

*- more schools in Africa*

The change in emphasis, while not directly attributable to, was strongly influenced by the children starting to watch 'Newsround' weekly and having an opportunity to discuss a range of local and global issues. The children enthused about seeing other children their age being able to act to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place. This gave them a wider range of ideas and strategies and a sound understanding of the bigger issues. Through the project work they became more critically engaged with their role as globally-interdependent citizens, taking a greater responsibility for moves towards a more just and sustainable world.

When asked to consider what countries and organisations were already doing to make the world a better place in baseline session 1, the children overwhelmingly identified charities and charitable activity. By session 5, although charities still occupied a significant place, the children were able to name initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Send my friend to school, the United Nations and Unicef. This demonstrated a deeper understanding of the notion of poverty and global inequalities which face children their own age in the UK and internationally.

The change in emphasis was strongly influenced by the work the children had completed in class on human rights and the MDGs. Children now showed an understanding of child and maternal mortality rates, equal chances for girls and women, interdependence, sanitation and health, the right to clean water, education and medicine, the right to play and relax (and visit the beach) and the right to have a say and an opinion.

The children were particularly struck by the work on the MDGs and felt passionately about improvements in maternal health. The children were shocked at what they learnt and kept talking about some of the global inequalities identified for several weeks afterwards. At this point the class teachers recorded a perceived shift in the children's understanding and emerging appreciation that they should not take material possessions for granted in their own lives.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this qualitative small scale research, while indicative, deserve further exploration and can be added to a relatively under-researched area (Chafel & Neitzel in Oberman et al, 2014: 61). The research has demonstrated, in nascent ways, the beginnings of a childhood construction of global social realities in terms of:

1. an increased knowledge and understanding of the complexities of poverty and global inequalities and
2. the consideration of a range of individual and collective responses to global inequalities that go beyond notions of a simplistic charitable relationship in order to explore ways in which they could be part of a move towards a more just and sustainable world.

Unsurprisingly charity remained a focus of the children's responses.

However, the children demonstrated a good understanding of far wider possibilities for poverty reduction initiatives both individually and on the global stage. They were able to identify global strategies such as steps involved in the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations and Unicef, reducing the voting age, initiatives such as Send my friend to school and individual possibilities such as lobbying the powerful, taking a strong stand against wrong-doers, and positive, can-do attitudes and values.

Children in this project between the ages of 7 and 11 were able to engage with the language of poverty and wealth, using terms such as rich, poor, unequal, unfair, injustice and began to demonstrate in their responses a move away from a predominantly charitable understanding towards one that is a spectrum of both charity and social justice.

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