Democratic experiences for children in an urban primary school - a critical autoethnography
Killen, Andrew; Holligan, Christopher

Published in:
Democratic Experiences for Children in an Urban Primary School - A Critical Autoethnography

Accepted/In press: 27/04/2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Democratic Experiences for Children in an Urban Primary School
A Critical Autoethnography

Andrew Killen and Chris Holligan
Division of Education, University of the West of Scotland

“There were specific moments that reinforced for me that the democratic approach to leadership was working: interactive whole school assemblies, confidence of upper school pupils through dialogue with staff and participation in shaping curriculum. I have now experienced that increased democracy does improve relationships...” Journal:

Abstract

The research is an autoethnography recounting my experience of working in an urban primary school as a senior and head teacher. Over a two-year period, during which time I held a senior leadership role, I recorded my experiences in a daily journal. My focus was on children, especially children living in areas of disadvantage. My intention in this study was to question how democratic schools are for children. I chose to focus on the experience of children through the interactions and relationships in school structures. The article looks to highlight the challenges that face the teaching profession and the ways in which the pressures associated with education currently conspire against developing agency and a democratic culture for children to enjoy wellbeing.

I was inspired by my readings of prominent intellectual critiques, Michael Apple, John Dewey, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, Giroux, Gramsci and Michael Young are exemplary figures, formative of my philosophical cultivation. In ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Freire (1972) claimed that no curriculum was ever neutral and that in order to empower the learner, teachers are required to adopt themes and issues familiar to their students.

The Scottish Government (2014:37) also state ‘to seek children’s views about matters that affect them’ in line with articles 3 and 14 of United Nations Rights for the Child (UNCRC). Scottish Government highlighted issues of inequality: ‘Children from poorer communities and low socioeconomic status homes are more likely than others to underachieve’ (Scottish Government, 2008:9) and Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, argues for the need to unlock the door to a successful future for Scotland’s children living in challenging socioeconomic conditions (Scottish Government, 2015). Scottish Government (2016) is the most recent of seemingly endless consultations on the significance of child poverty. Scottish government launched initiatives such as ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ (2012) which is aimed at supporting children within a more equitable system, however, Suso and Ellis (2014) highlight that children from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds continue to have poorer attainment than their peers. I sought to understand if the reasons for this seeming intractability of raising attainment connected with cultural practices and professional norms and teacher behaviours in school. Apple (2008,242 highlights the plight of an inner-city school, a claim that resonates with findings of studies set out in the next section. He argues:
The curriculum and those who planned it lived in an unreal world, a world fundamentally disconnected from my life with those children in that inner-city classroom.

**Keywords**

Children; Democracy; Education; Citizenship; Relationships; Power

**Presentation 20 minutes**

Summary – Autoethnography – Democracy – Children’s voice – Policy – Adults – Relationships