

## Democratic Experiences for Children in an Urban Primary School

### A Critical Autoethnography

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*“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 socio-economic 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**