

Exploring professional values: a case study in a primary school

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Introduction

Childhood can be defined as a transition through a series of pre-defined stages, each discernible by their own essential features and characteristics (Devine, 2003). However, children are no longer viewed by society as passive beings that are to merely be moulded by those around them, but are now seen as being active in this process; they must be seen as social actors in their own right (Thomas, 2004).

Children are now undisputedly regarded as active social beings with the capacity to engage critically with both their social and personal environment. In modern Western societies one of the defining features of childhood is the compulsory attendance at school (Devine, 2003). However, teachers are also instilled with the authority to exercise control over the time of a child's life at school, instilling in them both values and skills necessary for their lives as they grow up.

The purpose of such a doctrinal educational regime is to begin to prepare the child with the skills and attitudes which will enable him or her to effectively and competently take their place in society. It also fosters the development of the child's individuality and their independence, enabling him or her to discover their own talents and interests. (. As such, input by school children is vital to the fair running of a process that will have such a gargantuan impact over their whole lives. Thus, this case study will therefore look at the aims of a primary school, the values, the institutional policies in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and

the opportunities, challenges and barriers to implementation of the institutional aims and its policies.

St Francis School: its values, aims, and the work that they do.

Primary schools are constructed, administered and shaped by adults specifically for children. As social institutions they therefore play a central role in the construction of a child's perception of themselves, the social world and of their place within it (Devine, 2003). They are a highly social environment wherein both teachers and students identities are simultaneously challenged and affirmed. Moreover, they provide a space where children can form relationships with their peers, which will bring them both challenges and opportunities.

To demonstrate and analyse these distinct integers and aims, I am therefore going to describe a study I have conducted of St. Francis Catholic Primary School.(St. Francis School) a wherin I interviewed ateacherfrom year two of this Catholic voluntary aided primary school. By way of background St. Francis School is much larger than an average-sized primary school. There are two large classes in each year group all the way from Year 1 to Year 6; also there is an Early Years Foundation Stage that comprises two part-time Nursery classes and two full-time Reception classes. In sum, it is a large mixed school with 457 students and the age range of the pupils is between 3 and 11 (St. Francis School).

The proportion of pupils with special educational needs supported at school is much lower than average(Ofsted, 2013).

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The aim of this school is to work in tandem with the parents and guardians for the benefit of the children and rely on them for both support and co-operation in all that the school tries to achieve (St. Francis Primary School). Through this it is intended to provide a stimulating environment in which effort, talent and personal success can be rewarded, special needs are met, and cultural diversity is celebrated. Thus children should leave the school prepared for the world and feel confident, valued and respectful members of society as a whole. Overseeing this operation there is a governing body that has the sole responsibility for admissions to St Francis School. The Governing Body is made up of four distinct categories of governors, with 16 members in total. The main task of the governors is to have a strategic role in running the school and to act as a “critical friend” to the head teacher by providing advice and support (St Francis Primary School).

The primary school teachers work with children aged between the ages of 5 and 11 by which time most of these children will have already achieved 80 per cent of their intellectual growth (Alexander, 1986). The teachers are required to teach all of the subjects which are in the national curriculum and is therefore under an obligation to conceive, plan and implement the whole curriculum during that period of the year.

Consider the institutional policies in relation to the UNCRC. You may do this either by a document search that includes the organisation’s website, leaflets, policies, documents and/or interviews.

Analysis of the St. Francis School policies in relation to the UNCRC

Until the 19th Century a child was not a legal entity, no statute law (Acts of Parliament) referred specifically to children. It was only during the course of the 20th Century that this was introduced under the Children Act 1975, that started to consider a child's wishes and feelings in a very limited way. It was indeed only with the introduction of the Children Act 1989 that the law began to view children completely as individual people with their own right to a say in their own lives (Thomas, 2004).

The idea that children should be treated seriously as a person in their own right, with a voice – both to express and to be heard – is relatively new and was only finally given legitimacy in the UNCRC which has now been endorsed by most of the world's nations, alongside the spread of universal schooling, it is one of the most powerful globalizing influences of the modern age (Woodhead, 1997) and was ratified into UK law in 1991.

The UNCRC is seen as an important advance as it is not just a generalised statement of good intention, but recognizes the child's capacity to act independently, giving not just protection, but also enabling right, such as the right to freedom of expression and association – this is an overarching theme that St Francis School has at its core. Article 12 UNCRC states “ shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNCRC, 1989 art. 12) and thus can be seen as the fulcrum of the whole Convention and is a fundamental tenet of the St Francis School ethos..

At St Francis the planning of every aspect of the school takes into account the views of the student, this does not mean adapting completely, but recognizing the most powerful overarching ideas that are presented. The teacher thus believes that no student is too young to contribute ideas to the good running of the school.

At St Francis', Child Protection and the prevention of abuse is also a key priority and thus in line with the UNCRC. Commitment to equality of opportunity and an entitlement to learning for all means that Child Protection issues are vital to ensure that the school is a safe and secure environment for children to develop. Indeed, as is stated in Article 3 of the UNCRC "the best interests of the child must be a top priority in all things that affect them" (UNRC, 1989).

The Opportunities, challenges and barriers to the implementation of the institutional aims and policies at St Francis School

Children and schools are, due to the system, relentlessly evaluated in terms of productivity, efficiency and competitiveness. However, children also evaluate each another in their own social world and must be seen as, active in the determination of their own social lives (Thomas, 2004).

Article 3 UNCRC provides "that all the actions concerning the child should take full account of his or her best's interests". As such St Francis School much make sure that the teacher – student ratio in actual class sizes remain high. However, St Francis School faces challengers in light of the fact that the normal level of resourcing available to a primary school means that there

are always limitations on what can be done and on the range of experiences which can be offered to children (Pollard, 1985). Due to such limitations of material resources, children will often have to fit in with the procedures, routines and activities which the teacher develops in order to manage the situation, an issue that onobservationSt Francis School faces. Therefore, as classrooms are highly evaluative settings, where a child is routinely evaluated and thus can feel exposed and vulnerable, praise is therefore a necessary requirement of a teacher and as a means of obtaining classroom control (Pollard, 1985).

In light of these observations and challenges, the following are a series of questions I asked a year two teacher on the eleventh of April 2013 at St Francis School. These questions will be accompanied by the teacher's answers as well as my observations and analysis on each answer as well as thoughts pertaining to these issues raised:

Question: How would you assess your ability to makerelationships with children

Answer: I believethat I am firm but fair and all children appreciate that so we form good relationships. It is important to me that I feel that I have a good relationship with my students.

Observation: It is evident that the exercise of power and the maintenance of control are central elements in the vibrant interplay between teachers and their students, however, developing a positive relationship with the children is an important aspect of a teachers' role, -providing support and guidance

as children progressed through the school (Devine, 2004). It is evident here that this teacher has the correct attitude and balance for a healthy educational environment.

Question: Do you find that training courses are beneficial to your career progression?
Answer: They keep you up to date on educational developments and give ideas..

Observation: On-going teacher training is a vital tool in ensuring their success. It would indeed be shocking if a teacher was not to respond in this way.

Question: Do you think that the National Curriculum was a good idea?

Answer: Yes, because it provided a starting point for all children that is the same nationally.

Observation: The National Curriculum represents the precise terrain over which a child's competency is tested against (Pollard, 1985). However, even in light of the UNCRC the curriculum is still wholly devised and implemented by adults, and reflects their concerns and priorities in education of the children.

In a school setting, the increasing pressure on the education system to teach young people as a whole class for long periods of time each day, together with the emphasis on literacy and numeracy, has resulted in a somewhat reductive curriculum in which there is little room for play which can be seen as a challenge for all primary schools. Although when playing,

children will demonstrate and develop skills and ideas. As Drummond (2002: 229) suggests, through play and its capacity to allow children to rehearse and express fantasy, they are able to construct a bridge between inner and outer worlds and set out on the path to becoming fully rational and functional human beings.

Thus, break-time provides children with the best opportunity to have fun in school, the playground, is where children will have sufficient independence and freedom from adult supervision and where childculture can grow and flourish (Devine, 2004).

Question: How do you ensure that all children are involved in learning, and what strategies do you use to encourage group work amongst other students?

Answer: Manipulation is a strategy with which teacher seeks to motivate children to act in ways which will satisfy the teacher goals. Generally if children are friends and are not too disruptive I would leave them together but I usually put somebody who is good beside someone who is weak because if there were two weak children seat together I would have to move them because I do not think they will help one another.

Observation: Within the classroom, friends are indeed an important source of support when learning proves to be challenging and peers can provide correct answers and relieve the tedium of lessons through secret games and activities.

Question: How would you handle a student who is a consistent behavioural problem in your class?

Answer: There are school systems in place for that e. g traffic light, but also I try to understand what is causing that behaviour in the first place.

Observation: Behavioural problems although serious issues can be overcome. Seating arrangements can vastly improve this issue as the layout of the furniture and the positioning of individual children can control a pupil's interaction and facilitate learning. The teacher's priorities for children's learning are reflected in the this deliberate structuring of the classroom space to provide an environment where their behaviour is easily monitored and controlled.

A system of rewards and punishments are usually employed in an attempt to normalise the children behaviour in line with the teacher goals (Devine, 2004). Most children

Question: How do you ensure that equal opportunities policies are implemented in the classroom?

Answer: The work environment at St. Francis is accessible to all children equally

Observation: This teacher wanted good opportunities for all students, those of high academic ability, and those with learning difficulties to develop their talents as fully as possible and to make all students feel valued. As stated in

Article 29, “ Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full”. St Francis School therefore confirms to this.

Question: What strategies do you use to manage children with special educational needs and what can you do to help this child reach his or her potential?

Answer: I utilise distinct plans encompassing specific goals and objectives for the student which will often include strategies to help the child succeed as well as various special arrangements if necessary, for example pictures and audio clips.

Observation: This is in line with Article 23 of the UN Convention which gives “ mentally or physically disabled” children the right to education and sufficient tailored care to allow them to lead “ full and decent lives”.

Conclusion

The education system should both celebrate and allow difference and diversity to flourish providing the right opportunities to every child in order to allow them to achieve their potential. A good school like St. Francis School should encompass the distinct challenges involved in the education of all children and offer effective and developmentally appropriate opportunities for each child, with no barriers (Wall, 2004). Indeed, recognising the position of children as sentient beings with the right, as citizens, to be heard in all matters affecting them in school is evidently a fundamental tenet of the St. Francis School ethos – critically engaging with children about all aspects of their education. Thus, this essay contends that a climate of inclusion for

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children's voices can be promoted by involving them actively in decisions related to the organisation of their time and space in the classroom (Devine, 2004).

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)