An enquiry into children's political consciousness through Roleplay Learning

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ABSTRACT

In today's complex world, it is increasingly important for children to develop an understanding of the multifaceted and intersecting socio-economic and political forces that shape their lives. This includes systems of government and economy, and also the impact of military conflict, systemic injustice and climate change. This paper explores aspects of a participatory research project undertaken in a semi-rural school in south-west England. Utilising Roleplay Learning (RL), a game-based methodology employing roleplay and dramatisation, the researchers were able to elicit and discern children's social, cultural and political perspectives. The results of the study suggest that children's speech, interactions and reflections demonstrate nascent political consciousness, and that RL holds potential as an approach for researchers seeking to describe and evaluate complex aspects of children's thinking.

KEYWORDS

CHILDREN

CITIZENSHIP

ROLEPLAY

CONSCIOUSNESS

POWER

INTERSECTIONALITY

1. INTRODUCTION

It is often claimed that democratic governments need educated citizens to operate successfully (Brennan, 2009; Hannon, 2022). In fact, it could be argued that citizens ought to be fully educated and competent for their views to be regarded as legitimate (Bartels, 1996; Nishiyama, 2009; Paterson, 2014; Choi, 2019). In applying the notion of 'an educated citizenry' to children and young people, we need to be conscious of, and sensitive to, individual identity, morals and views, and the variability of life experience, all of which can impact on emergent political consciousness (Erikson, 1968; Sharp *et al.*, 2007; Martínez *et al.*, 2017). Coupled with this, we need to be cognisant of how broader sociopolitical issues (abusive economic systems, global warming, racial or gender-based discrimination, or conflict) can affect children and young people. In fact, it could be argued that individual experience itself, within complex sociopolitical contexts, makes the development of political consciousness an educational imperative (Schofield, 2006; Battaly, 2018): all individuals should, for instance, be aware of, and advocate for, their fundamental rights and freedoms (Diamond, 2008, 2011; Fukuyama, 2012). Principally, therefore, educational processes should be aimed at the development of self-empowerment, critical thinking skills and, ultimately, social freedom.

This research sought to elicit and interpret the nascent political consciousness of children aged 7–8 in a state-sector school in south-west England. Following a game-based, roleplay intervention (outlined below), researchers explored the children's awakened and awakening political consciousness, employing a constructivist–interpretivist lens to understand the meanings children make about the politics of their world.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Studies of children's sociopolitical awareness suggest that most have a sociopolitically naive or pre-political perspective about the world, which inhibits their capacity to comprehend governments and authorities. According to such studies (Mathé, 2017; Jerome, 2018; Jerome & Lalor, 2018), England's national curriculum and citizenship education have yet to establish sufficient paradigms for children to critically comprehend core sociopolitical knowledge. This begs the question, therefore, of precisely what children are taught in schools. In November 2014, the Department for Education issued guidelines on establishing fundamental British values across all institutions (DfE & Nash, 2014). However, this framework, which was intended to assist schools in clarifying their duties across this subject area, depicted British values within the aftermath of the eradication-of-multiculturalism discourse (Kundnani, 2007; McGhee, 2008; Keddie, 2014). The narrow conception of Britishness portrayed presents a misleading perception of actuality for youth who have yet to understand history and ideology (Freire, 1993; Fairclough, 2001; Lockley-Scott, 2019).

Furthermore, a 2021 petition to 'teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum' (Jikiemi-Pearson, 2020) was rejected by the UK Government and Parliament (Long *et al*., 2021), despite having attained the 100,000-signature threshold in 48 hours.

Parliament argued that there already existed a statutory thread at Key Stage 3 labelled 'Ideas, political power, industry, and empire: Britain, 1745–1901' within the history curriculum. It was assumed that this was sufficiently mandatory and that schools would make decisions about how to engage students in their learning in this area. This governmental position raises a debate upon which English education depends significantly: the issue of professional autonomy. Even though pedagogical freedom is necessary for optimal education and the ability to tailor lessons to all students, leaving the topics of knowledge entirely to the educator's judgement can result in a biased interpretation and an incoherent student experience (Raya, 2007; Schwimmer & Maxwell, 2017).

2.1 UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDREN'S SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS

From a sociological perspective, models of socialisation linked to developmental theory have been used extensively to examine how political awareness develops (Piaget, 1928; Weinstein, 1957; Crain & Crain, 1974; Berti & Bombi, 1981; Berti *et al*., 1982;), and traditionally these have portrayed children performing a passive component in the dynamic (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2004; Moran-Ellis *et al*., 2014). These studies are limited as they give narrow consideration towards children's agency in engaging with sociopolitical concerns, both in their personal lives and across a broader sociocultural spectrum (Moran-Ellis *et al*., 2014). In contrast, more contemporary studies (Loughland *et al*., 2002; Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2004; Inguglia *et al*., 2005; Mayall, 2008; Furnham, 2016) illustrate a break from the developmental perspective. Such studies suggest the following in relation to children's sociopolitical awareness:

- Children do not necessarily have first-hand contact with fundamental processes and organisations such as the financial systems of banks and businesses, frameworks in law courts, or political ruling systems. Therefore, their knowledge is inevitably delimited by their experience and awareness.

- Children's comprehension across sociopolitical domains can be influenced by the sociocultural milieu wherein they reside. According to research in this area (Emler & Dickinson, 2004; Hirschfeld, 2004; Webley, 2004; Inguglia *et al*., 2005), there is extensive heterogeneity in children's knowledge of the economy, society, politics and class based on their socio-economic position, race, nationality and so forth.

- Children's conceptual frameworks regarding social organisations and communities are not emotionally impartial, which could be the consequence of children's perceptual connection with specific social groups (gender, ethnic or national group); this can cognitively influence children's factual understanding in specific fields (Barrett, 2004; Hirschfeld, 2004; Inguglia *et al*., 2005). Therefore, there is a possibility that these perceptions perform a key motivational influence on the development of sociopolitical awareness, inhibiting an objective judgement.

Such imperatives, taken collectively, frame a significant deviation from the classic perspectives such as the Piagetian, and indicate that modern research frames children's acquisition of sociopolitical cognition from an eclectic range of perspectives (Loughland *et al*., 2002; Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2004; Mayall, 2008; Furnham, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

An innovative methodological approach was developed as part of this project. This involved children engaging in Roleplay Learning (RL) – linked to user-centred learning design (Krug, 2000; Altay, 2014; Labrador & Villegas, 2014) – with the key

objective being to simulate sociopolitical contexts that children could engage in and comment on. Combined with the RL sessions, children were also invited to participate in focus groups to provide feedback on their experiences as well as to keep records of their thoughts and feelings in reflective journals.

Thirty-five Year 3 children (aged 7–8) from a semi-rural school in Devon in the south-west of England took part in four one-hour-long RL sessions. Team-taught by the lead researcher and class teacher, each session depicted a distinct sociopolitical context (session 1: a communist social community; session 2: the development of a constitutional monarchy; session 3: the capitalist system; and session 4: an anarchist model).

In short, the four sessions comprised the following activities. Participants were involved in activities linked to themes of political development, authority and power, and socio-economic organisation as constructed under critical theory. The RL opened with a story about lost children seeking to meet their essential physiological and safety needs, introducing participants to the notion of basic necessities (McLeod, 2018), where the need for water, food, shelter and clothes, as well as the importance of healthcare and education, were highlighted. Throughout the sessions, the game objective was to engage in four tasks linked to the means of production, each of which represented a basic necessity (with the exception of education and healthcare). Children volunteered to participate in the activities as representatives of different social or political groups.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Social phenomenology analysis was employed to derive both a qualitative and interpretative postulation of the children's social behaviour, and an examination of their subjective perspectives, which are often overlooked (Boyatzis, 1998; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir Cochrane, 2006). From this analytical approach and through identifying motifs within the data via meticulous examination, fundamental themes emerged linked to the nascent sociopolitical consciousness of the participants. The focus here is on analysis of the latter two sessions, which reveal (from session 3) children's perspectives on power, authority and structural imbalance, and (in session 4) their ideas about fairness and equality, intersectionality and wider global issues.

4.1 SESSION 3: PERSPECTIVES ON POWER, AUTHORITY AND STRUCTURAL IMBALANCE

The goal for participants during session 2 was to establish a governing body modelled on the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom. As a result, in session 3 participants engaged in a society characterised by both government and private ownership of the means of production; therefore, children had to comprehend how to operate in a society employing money, taxation, profit and legal frameworks. During session 3, therefore, participants engaged in the roles of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and law enforcement officers to represent the basic social–legal components of the capitalist system. Throughout the session, situations of inherent unfairness and exploitation occurred, including imbalances in power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and law enforcement officers and the proletariat; additionally, alliances of bourgeoisie and law enforcement officers occurred.

It was evident that RL enabled children's perceptions of abuse and power to be elicited. In the reflective journal, for instance, participants who roleplayed the bourgeoisie noted their favourable position, enjoying the fact that they need not work, and the ideas associated with profit-making; those who portrayed the proletariat, however, had diametrically opposed views. Furthermore, because the roles of the working class, the bourgeoisie and police officers were

all easily recognisable, children's knowledge of social organisation in a capitalist system was conspicuous: they were all cognisant of an environment of hegemony and economic disparity, which aligns with Marxist conceptualisations of capitalism. Participants who took on the role of the bourgeoisie were committed to their characters and indulged in the exploitation of their employees. Furthermore, these children formed an alliance with participants acting as police officers to facilitate them in guaranteeing that their workers followed their boss's orders. In contrast, when the participants representing the proletariat faced abuse and pressure from both the bourgeoisie and the police, their resentment towards authoritative figures developed significantly.

In Marxist narrative, capitalism is divided into two basic classes (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), and class struggle is postulated as the root of exploitation and exclusion (Dunayevskaya, 1964; Draper, 1987; Ng, 2015; Chambre & McLellan, 2020). Through a Marxist view, the role of law enforcement officers is rather vague, equating merely to another tool for preserving the ruling class's hegemony (Joseph, 2002; Bargu, 2019; Foucault, 2019). The experiences of children in this research, therefore, mirror reality – as perceived through a Marxist perspective: from reported incidents of police brutality, where they continue to abuse their authority despite public opposition (Nelson, 2001; Worden, 2015; Ehrenfeld & Harris, 2020), to the economic expansion of the elite class, particularly in recent years in which the richest individuals in the world have become even wealthier (Reich, 2008; James, 2014; Kelly, 2020), participants gained insight into these circumstances.

4.2 SESSION 4: VIEWS ON FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY, INTERSECTIONALITY AND WIDER GLOBAL ISSUES

This session was mainly concerned with challenging the political orthodoxies at work in the prior sessions. Therefore,

participants were asked to examine previous sessions in depth and share their thoughts and feelings, including their views on economic and political inequality. Furthermore, the researcher asked participants how they would strengthen the positive characteristics of the societies they enacted, as well as resolve the areas they disliked or regarded as unfair. This approach was adopted because the framework upon which session 4 was constructed, anarchism, is concerned with the liberation of people and questioning of power systems rather than arranging the citizenry in a specific economic and political order (Brown, 1996; Bookchin, 2005; Chomsky, 2005; Pinta, 2012). Interestingly, in the previous sessions, children thought it was unfair for those who did not complete all four tasks to also receive all the basic necessities, whereas in session 4, after exploring various forms of government and social structures, they praised the very same thing they had assumed to be improper in the beginning. In their reflective journals, they wrote comments like 'I liked that everyone was equal', 'I liked that no-one was bossing me around' or 'I liked being the boss but today was fairer'.

It is irresponsible, if not immoral, to engage in authority and power discourse without adopting an intersectional stance. Whilst Marx's conception of society dismisses any other oppressive interactions – such as racism or misogyny – as being epiphenomenal to the core issue of class struggle (Bohrer, 2018; Khazoeva *et al.*, 2019; Chambre & McLellan, 2020), more critical analysis acknowledges the privileged attitude of this approach (Malott, 2012; Winegar, 2012; Bohrer, 2018) and identifies a broader multidimensional perspective on societal structures (McIntosh, 1989; Goodman, 2011; Zembylas, 2018; Bohrer, 2020). Even though participants did not portray explicit characterisations of intersectional sociocultural concerns, children's thinking about the importance of intersectionality was, in fact, evident through a number of their comments in response to the

various activities. In discussing the Bill of Rights (Parliament of England, 2020), for example, issues of social inequality surfaced and were briefly explored; these included themes of discrimination against and enslavement of people of colour, the enforcement of one religion over the others, intolerance towards LGBTQ2S+ people, and misogyny and women's rights. The children enquired about the existence, and discussed the necessity, of some rights that seemed evident to them, such as the right to vote. Children were taught that voting was not always a right for everyone, and that various groups of people have had to fight for this right throughout history. Participants asked, 'why should not everyone be allowed to vote?' and 'who has enough power to tell people what they can and cannot do?' as well as making comments such as, 'some people are really mean just because they can, and that is really bad', and 'we should all have the same rights and be nice to each other because we are all people'.

To extend the session, participants were given the opportunity to propose change. This was done by writing down what they would improve about the world and addressing what they liked or disliked about both the sociopolitical systems and RL. In their responses, children discussed the following themes:

- climate change and the necessity of environmental preservation

- animal cruelty and abuse

- peace and freedom, as well as anti-war views

- the right to housing for everyone, and how the home environment should be safe

- and lastly, education and how they would improve it.

Some of these subjects, like climate change or animal abuse, were never discussed during the RL. This might illustrate how, despite the fact that children's knowledge is restricted by their experience and awareness (Loughland *et al.*, 2002; Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow,

2004; Inguglia *et al.*, 2005; Furnham, 2016), they are capable of identifying and interpreting some of the issues unfolding around them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The methodology designed, RL, had two aims: first, the fundamental aim of the research, which was to support children's understanding of sociopolitical systems; and secondly, the game objective, to achieve all the basic necessities by engaging in four activities representing the means of production through the variables of the different sociopolitical systems, with different social roles assigned accordingly. This second aim enabled children to achieve the first primary objective. Establishing a game-based educational process, RL, (Norman, 2002; Plass *et al.*, 2015) premised on a constructivist–interpretivist framework, enabled the development of dramatised sociopolitical systems, allowing participants to experience and explore society in all its complexity.

Despite the RL being primarily concerned with sociopolitical arrangements, broader intersectional themes emerged throughout the sessions as a result of both the activities and the children's interpretations and concerns about the social world. Following this experience, and considering children's ability to recognise broad sociocultural issues, it is possible to hypothesise that RL could be used to understand other complex socio-historical concepts. While complete comprehension of all the nuances of our sociopolitical system may be out of reach for the young child, adopting this methodology could support these future citizens in establishing a foundation of sociopolitical and historical awareness. As a result, children's perceptions of themselves and their political environment would deepen, and citizens would be more willing to advocate for greater rights and freedoms (Diamond, 2008; Fukuyama, 2012; Pinta, 2012). ∎

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