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SUMMARY

We conducted a review of the literature that aimed to explore understandings of young children's citizenship and provide insights into how practices in early learning and childcare (ELC) settings can support young children to develop the skills, dispositions, practices and understandings associated with citizenship. The focus of the review was children in the Early Level of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (3-6 years old). Interest in this topic emerged from previous work carried out by the GCPH on assets-based practice and resilient communities.

The review was commissioned by the GCPH and carried out by a team from the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection at the University of Stirling, between May and July 2017.

KEY POINTS

Citizenship is a complex and ambiguous concept, particularly when applied to young children due to tensions between rights and responsibilities; and between agency and vulnerability.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by all but one Nation State indicating that, at least in policy, children are recognised as right holders. In practice, however, children are most often understood as citizens in the making, due to a deficit approach that sees them as less capable than, and dependent on, adults.

Educational policies in the UK aim to promote educational experiences that will ensure children become responsible citizens. There is little guidance, however, as to how this is to be pursued. The educational and policy communities in Scotland should engage in further debate about how the curriculum goal of becoming a responsible citizen in the early years is to be understood and pursued.

Early years educators and primary school teachers need opportunities in their initial and continuing professional education to consider how they can foster positive citizenship. They also need to be able to reflect on their own, as well as others', perspectives on citizenship and children's position in society and how this limits children's agency and ability to act as citizens. Such thinking will support practitioners in developing democratic practices in ELC settings that recognise children's capacity and foster citizenship.

There is a striking absence of evidence about the ways in which pedagogic practices can support children's development of the skills, dispositions, practices or understandings associated with citizenship. There is also uncertainty about the impact of any specific learning in the short and long term.

Further research is required to consider how citizenship education is fostered in the early years and its impact on children. Further consideration should also be given to children's everyday practices and how they negotiate and contribute to social relationships.

INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper summarises and discusses the findings from a review of the literature exploring the meaning of citizenship in early childhood and which sought out evidence about the ways in which early learning and childcare settings can support young children to develop the skills, dispositions, practices and understandings associated with citizenship¹. Finding ways in which to foster citizenship and build resilient communities is a key policy concern in Scotland². Evidence indicates that positive citizenship is important to the wellbeing of individuals, their families and communities. Previous work carried out by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) on assets-based practice and resilient communities highlighted the importance of promoting individual and community strengths to support people to respond and adapt to challenges in their environment³⁻⁵.

The education system has traditionally been seen as having a significant role to play in the socialisation of children into responsible and active citizens⁶⁻⁹. Recent policy developments in Scotland have put into focus the scope of education for citizenship in early education and childcare settings. Firstly, concerns about school discipline and children and young people's disengagement from schools and communities, have led to a renewed interest in children's citizenship and citizenship education in schools¹⁰⁻¹². In Scotland becoming a responsible citizen is one of the four goals of the Curriculum for Excellence which guides the educational provision made for children from 3-18 years of age¹³.

Secondly, evidence highlighting the importance of a child's early years has led the Scottish Government to commit to the implementation of services and interventions to ensure all children have "the best start in life"¹⁴. Relating to that is evidence of the impact of early learning and childcare (ELC) settings that suggests that good quality ELC can improve language development¹⁵. This has led to a substantial increase in the provision of ELC in Scotland as there is a growing consensus among policy-makers that investment in the early years will reduce inequalities and close the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged and more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The aim is to ensure that children will grow into adults who can make a positive contribution to society.

These developments then raise questions about the ways in which children's citizenship is being conceptualised in policy and practice, and how education for citizenship is, or should be, pursued in ELC settings.

AIMS

The review aimed to explore how citizenship is understood and might be fostered in early learning and childcare settings and the first years of primary school.

The following questions informed the review:

- What is understood in the educational literature by the concepts of ‘citizen’ and ‘citizenship’ as they relate to the learning and experiences of children aged 3-6 years old?
- What behavioural characteristics, dispositions or actions of 3-6 year olds are associated with positive citizenship?
- What evidence is there of the efficacy of particular educational practices, activities or programmes as a way of developing understandings of, skills for or positive dispositions towards positive citizenship in the early years?
- What implications arise from this review for the development of policy and practice to foster positive citizenship in young children attending early learning and childcare settings?

METHODS

A rapid review of the literature was carried out between May and July 2017 by members of the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, University of Stirling. The focus of the review was on literature relevant to children in the Early Level of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (3-6 years olds). It adopted a two-pronged approach. The first approach focused on key academic, peer-reviewed journals within the early years field. Table 1 lists the journals included in the search and the search terms employed.

Table 1. Journals and search terms.

Journals	Search terms
<i>Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood</i> <i>International Journal of Early Years Education</i> <i>Early Years</i> <i>Childhood</i> <i>Early Childhood Research Quarterly</i> <i>European Early Childhood Education Research</i>	citizenship, participation, children leadership, resilience, civic attitudes, assets-based
<i>Children & Schools</i> <i>Children & Society</i>	citizenship OR civic OR participation AND early years

The second approach was a wider search of grey and academic literature that used: StirGate, the University of Stirling's search engine; Open Grey, a European search engine that focuses exclusively on grey literature; Google Scholar; and Bingo. Due to time restrictions, fewer search terms were used in the second approach than in the more focused approach. All searches were restricted to publications in English published between 2000 and 2017, although earlier publications were included where relevant.

POLICY CONTEXT

Educational and early years policy in Scotland is driven by the Scottish Government's desire to make Scotland "the best place in the world in which to grow up"¹⁴ and ensure every child has "the best start in life"². These developments are underpinned by the principles of social justice and equity to meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable families and foster resilient communities.

One proposed way in which to achieve these aims has been through increased investment in the early years. The Scottish Government, for example, is substantially increasing the provision of early learning and childcare services for *all* children aged 3-5 years old and for some two year olds, such as children who are or have been looked after by a local authority any time since their second birthday or whose parent(s) are in receipt of certain benefits¹⁶.

Running in parallel with a range of intervention policies to support families with children in their early years is the Scottish curriculum for children aged from 3 to 18 years old¹³. Known as the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), this policy document sets out national educational aims and expectations. The Curriculum's aspiration is that all children, in every educational setting, will be successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

This focus on citizenship education can also be found in the educational policies of other countries. In England, for example, citizenship education was made statutory for secondary school students and part of the non-statutory framework for primary schools following the publication of the Crick report in 2000^{17,18}.

ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Despite the broad search adopted there was little in the literature that explicitly considered understandings of young children's citizenship and how this is or may be fostered in ELC settings. Furthermore, studies often focused on specific contexts or settings, had small samples and did not consider changes over time. Despite these shortcomings, some common themes were identified that are relevant to the research questions above. These are summarised below.

Young children's citizenship

The concept of citizenship has a long and contested history¹⁹⁻²². Citizenship is often defined as a socio-legal status that grants both rights and responsibilities to members of a community^{11,19,23}. In this understanding, children's citizenship occupies an uneasy space. Children are both members of a community but excluded from fully participating in it²⁰⁻²³. While children may be afforded some rights, such as those promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)²⁴, they lack many of the civic (e.g. the right to freedom of assembly and movement), political (e.g. the right to vote) and economic (e.g. the right to own property) rights commonly granted to individuals once they reach adulthood.

Children have been consistently denied status as citizens due to their perceived lack of competence^{20-23,25}. Such deficit thinking is likely to favour policies and curriculum approaches which limit children's agency and ignore their ability to act as citizens⁸. As a consequence, young children are often treated as objects (rather than subjects) who require socialisation and education into becoming good and active citizens^{20-23,25}. Young children's participation has, therefore, often been pursued and defended on the basis that it will support children to become citizens; rather than recognising children as citizens in the present^{19,25}.

In contrast, children's agency and ability to act as citizens in the present has been extensively documented in research²². For example, drawing on their research in ELC settings in Sweden and England, Bath & Karlson considered how young children's everyday practices can be understood as acts of citizenship²². Departing from an understanding of children as competent and rational beings and a recognition of children's play as fulfilling a variety of functions, they show how children's everyday practices are informed by an ethics of solidarity, an interest in social justice and an understanding of differences. An example of children acting in such a way is when they intervene to defend the rights of others.

In her research with six groups of marginalised children aged 5-13 years old in Wales and France, Larkins identified four ways in which children can act as citizens²¹:

- 1) Negotiation of rules and creating selves.
- 2) Contributing to social good.
- 3) Contributing to the achievement of individuals' rights.
- 4) Transgressing existing boundaries of citizenship to dispute balances of rights, responsibilities and status.

Using this framework Larkins shows how children contribute to social as well as personal wellbeing, independently of adults. Larkins argues that when engaging in the first three of these actions, children are acting in ways that are consistent with what is usually expected of good, active citizens; while in the fourth children are challenging accepted ways of acting as citizens. Both Larkins and Bath & Karlson observe, however, that children's capacity to act as citizens remains unappreciated because to recognise children as capable represents a challenge to dominant understandings of childhood and citizenship. They argue that a new understanding of citizenship is required – one that is not based on status but is instead understood as relational and contextual, and thus learned through practice rather than acquired at pre-determined life stages^{21,22}.

Similarly, Millei & Kallio suggest greater attention must be paid to young children's agency and everyday practices if an understanding of young children's citizenship is to emerge²⁶. They argue that not doing so risks children's everyday political agency being overlooked and the actions of some being misunderstood or hindered.

Einarsdottir and colleagues' analysis of early childhood educational policies in Nordic countries suggests that the task of developing children as future citizens and attending to children as current citizens in their learning do not need to be in opposition to each other²⁷. Considering how Nordic countries articulate the value of democracy in policy, for example, the authors found that there is a preoccupation with teaching democratic values to children so that they can *become* competent and active citizens. They also found that ELC settings and educators are committed to promoting democratic practices in the here and now.

This point is further developed by Dunne²⁸ who argues that it is possible to think of childhood and citizenship as linked, rather than in opposition, if citizenship is conceptualised according to three principles:

- Freedom, including freedom to participate with others in decision-making and self-governance.
- Equity, particularly in the worth of the individual and their views.
- Solidarity or civic friendship which sees others not as opponents or strangers but as individuals to be cared for.

Furthermore, these principles must be enacted through three qualities of humanity: speech and expression; deliberation or reflection; and action.

Dunne illustrates his argument that citizenship and childhood can be reconstructed to overcome the tensions discussed above by referring to the ways in which children and adults engage in the educational settings of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. As observed in the main report¹:

“Arising from the specific social and political context of the area, early years provision in Reggio Emilia is based on an understanding that children’s development should be fostered through following their interests and curiosity. Children work on topics or question in groups supported by adult educators and artists. The focus is on joint construction of learning and careful attention to and reflection on what are often referred to as the hundred languages of children²⁹. The Reggio Emilia approach also depends on an open and ongoing dialogue between children and adults; sensitive responses by adults to support children’s agency; and active engagement between parents, the community and the educational settings. For Dunne, this approach to early years education offers a way to overcome the paradoxical relationship between citizenship and childhood.”

Participation rights and citizenship

In the literature reviewed, children’s citizenship is often conflated with children’s rights to participate in decisions that affect them, as per Article 12 of the UNCRC^{8,10,11,30-32}.

While participation in decision-making is a significant characteristic of active citizenship, such a narrow understanding of citizenship is problematic for various reasons. Firstly, if participation is viewed as the essential prerequisite of being an active citizen, children who may be unable or unwilling to participate could be perceived as second-class citizens^{10,23}. Secondly, a focus on participation may

overlook other aspects of children's agency that constitute acts of citizenship, such as negotiating the rules of social interactions in their play^{21,22}. Thirdly, concerns have been raised about the relationship between increased calls for children's participation and the increased influence of neo-liberal thinking. These concerns centre on the notion that in the context of neo-liberal ideology participation is synonymous with 'consumer choice'¹¹. Consequently, the push for increased children's participation in this context would be unlikely to result in children gaining greater influence over the social and political processes that impact on their lives, and that of their communities.

Teaching citizenship

No overt strategy for the teaching of citizenship at any level can be found in the CfE. Instead it is expected that teachers and early years practitioners will, based on their knowledge and experience, provide a variety of experiences to children and young people that will ensure they develop into successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. Furthermore, those supporting the learning and development of children in the Early Level (3-6 years old) are expected to adopt an active learning approach that engages and challenges children's thinking through play, exploration and reflection³³. The practice guidance suggests that this approach to teaching can foster responsible citizenship as it encourages children to try new things, take part in decision-making and learn to respect themselves and others³³.

There is little evidence of how citizenship education is being conceived and delivered in ELC settings and primary schools in Scotland. Some have considered how teachers' experiences, beliefs and attitudes impact on their willingness and ability to teach citizenship^{7,9-11}. For example, educators who view young children as vulnerable and lacking in capacity may feel that young children are unable to understand abstract concepts relating to citizenship⁸ and that they should be protected from the outside world³⁴.

Furthermore, little evidence was found of specific programmes or approaches to teaching of citizenship in ELC settings and primary schools. The Association for Citizenship Education³⁵ has developed CPD modules to support the delivery of citizenship education in primary schools while both Oxfam³⁶ and IDEAS³⁷ have developed resources for the teaching of global citizenship. It is unclear, however, whether these resources are being utilised and, if so, by whom and how often.

While CfE expects teachers to use their knowledge and experience to provide children with a variety of experiences to ensure they develop into responsible citizens, initial professional development for those supporting the learning and

development of children in the Early Level (3-6 years old) in Scotland does not explicitly address how citizenship may be fostered in the early years. Commenting on the situation in England, Baker notes that while early years educators appear to be comfortable with the teaching of ‘character development’, they remain unsure about their role in fostering active citizenship among young children³⁸. Similar observations were made about primary school teachers in Scotland¹².

Millei & Imre argue that the focus on citizenship in education can become tokenistic and normalise particular structures and practices²⁰. School councils can become a way of apparently giving children a space to act as citizens in the school community and have their voices heard²⁰. Often, however, these are adult-led initiatives and their effectiveness will depend on the approach taken by adults to ensure that the process is inclusive and has a real impact on the school community. Such initiatives also run the risk of normalising particular structures and practices (i.e. voting in class), while ignoring, or even suppressing, practices that are initiated and/or led by children^{34,39}. Moss¹¹ and Tesar⁴⁰ argue that the normalising tendencies of institutions and the power relationships in early years settings not only constrain young children’s ability to act as citizens, but also make it difficult for the teaching of citizenship to take place.

Learning citizenship

CfE does not define what a ‘responsible citizen’ is, nor which educational approaches and practices will foster the skills, dispositions, values and knowledge that children should develop in order to become responsible citizens. An inspection of various curriculum areas and proposals indicates that the teaching of citizenship draws on notions of personal development and social justice. CfE expects educational settings to support children to develop social skills, confidence and resilience and help children make informed choices. Children are also expected to gain an understanding of the impact of their decisions and behaviours and to recognise diversity and inequality.

A similar set of desirable outcomes for young children are found in the curriculum guidance of the other three education systems in the UK. Guidance for teaching citizenship at Key Stage 1 (5-7 years old) in England identifies five broad themes that should be taught to pupils⁴¹:

“Developing confidence and responsibility and making the most of personal abilities.

Preparing to play an active role as citizens.

Developing a healthy, safer lifestyle.

Developing good relationships and respecting the differences between people.

Breadth of opportunities.”

Under each of these themes further details are given about the skills, dispositions, practices and understandings children should develop. For example, under the theme ‘preparing to play an active role as citizens’ children should learn to, among other things, take part in discussions and simple debate about topical issues; recognise the difference between right and wrong; agree and follow rules and understand how rules help them; and contribute to the life of the class and school.

The literature reviewed identified a similar range of skills associated with positive citizenship such as the capacity for listening, critical thinking, problem-solving and conflict resolution^{10,21,34,39,42}. Children’s active participation is often mentioned as critical for the development of political literacy^{31,43,44}.

The development of social and personal factors such as being self-aware, compassionate and responsible also receive attention in the literature^{22,27,38}. Further, there is mention of the need for children to feel a sense of belonging and connection with the global community⁷.

More broadly, positive citizenship is associated with values of inclusion, social justice and equality^{7,21,22}.

Fostering citizenship

Much of the literature reviewed was concerned with how the interventions of adults can support children to become responsible citizens. For example, some argue that educators can foster citizenship by challenging current ways of knowing, being and doing and creating the space for children to do the same²². The use of participatory methods is encouraged as a way in which to empower children to voice their views and resolve issues^{32,34,44}. It is also claimed that participatory methods are more democratic and encourage self-reflection. For example, Serriere argues for a pedagogic approach that makes use of participatory methods to enable children and educators to reflect on and re-imagine social dilemmas and inequalities⁴⁴. Edwards and colleagues suggest that children’s popular culture can be used by teachers to explore with children their choices and practices around contested issues such as healthy eating and wellbeing⁴⁵. Actively listening is also advocated as a way in which educators can foster citizenship in the early years. It is unclear how successful these adult initiated and led approaches are in fostering citizenship in young children.

Others suggest that young children may learn about citizenship through their interactions with the world and relationships with their peers, rather than the explicit teaching practices of adults. For example, Hägglund & Samuel argue that young children learn about social justice and equity through their interactions with each other and that this learning is independent of adult guidance and control⁷. Devine considers how children's interactions with their peers provide them with opportunities to negotiate their own rules¹⁰. Similarly, Bath & Karlsson emphasise the importance of understanding children's play as performing various roles, including offering children an opportunity to act as citizens independently of adults²². Others consider how the experience of conflict with peers can support children to develop several of the skills commonly associated with positive citizenship, such as the ability to make their views known and respect for diversity^{42,46,47}.

Acknowledging children's existing or developing capacities for acts of citizenship can be seen as empowering and respectful. However, it also risks inappropriately shifting the responsibility to learn about the principles and values of citizenship and to develop skills in self-regulation onto children themselves.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this review was to explore how citizenship is understood and might be fostered in early learning and childcare settings and the first years of primary school. Despite adopting a broad search process, very little was found to explicitly address young children's citizenship, or the practices and approaches adopted by ELC settings that may contribute to children developing the skills, dispositions, practices and understandings associated with citizenship. This is somewhat surprising given the policy focus in Scotland on ensuring that children become responsible citizens through their education experiences.

The review suggests that citizenship is often understood as a socio-political status that grants both rights and responsibilities to members of a community. This focus on rights and responsibilities effectively excludes children from citizenship as they are, due to their perceived lack of capacity and vulnerability, denied the same rights as adults. While children are increasingly recognised as capable of autonomous action in research, in practice and policy, doubts about their agency and capacity for citizenship have not been overcome.

There is little in the literature reviewed that tells us what specific skills, behaviours and actions of 3-6 year olds are associated with positive citizenship. In many instances children's citizenship is understood or equated with their capacity for participation with little or no consideration of the limitations of participation. Some examine children's ability to negotiate (and in some cases challenge and transgress) rules and roles in their everyday interactions with their social world as examples of children's acts of citizenship in the here and now.

It is unclear how citizenship is being conceived and delivered in ELC settings and primary schools; or how effective any approach to citizenship education is. What the literature points to is that whether and how citizenship education is pursued in ELC settings and primary school greatly depends upon teachers' and educators' own values and understandings of childhood and citizenship. This review suggests that if the citizenship expectations of the Curriculum for Excellence are to be realised, a new conceptualisation of children as citizens will be required that acknowledges their capacity and autonomy. Furthermore, early years educators will need to be given the opportunity to review and develop approaches that can support children to develop the skills and characteristics of active citizens. This needs to be supported by ELC settings and primary schools creating learning environments that encourage and empower young children to acts of citizenship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommended actions have arisen from this review:

- The educational and policy communities in Scotland should engage in further debate about how the curriculum goal of becoming a responsible citizen in the early years is to be understood and pursued. Re-framing citizenship as relational, for example, would create opportunities for new understandings to emerge about how children learn about, experience and practice citizenship in their everyday practices and relationships.
- Early years educators and primary school teachers need opportunities in their initial and continuing professional education to consider how they can foster positive citizenship. Creating opportunities for children to develop skills associated with citizenship and fostering independent acts of citizenship will require teachers to provide an educational environment that nurtures peer interactions, and an ethos of justice and equity.
- Early years educators and primary school teachers also need to be able to reflect on their own, as well as others' perspectives on citizenship and children's position in society, and how this limits children's agency and ability to act as citizens. This thinking will support practitioners in developing democratic practices in ELC settings that recognise children's capacity for citizenship in the here and now.
- Lastly, further research is required to explore how citizenship education is fostered in the early years and its impact on children, giving consideration to children's everyday practices and how they negotiate and contribute to community life.

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FULL REPORT

The full literature review report can be accessed via the GCPH website at:
www.gcph.co.uk.

The literature review should be cited as follows: Stephens C, Gadda AM. *Nurturing citizenship in the early years: a review of the literature*. Glasgow: GCPH; 2017.

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