HEROES AND VILLAINS IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Background and focus

This paper explores the nature and significance of pupils’ identifications of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’. As part of our longitudinal study of education in Wales, we asked 1200 children and young people to identify three people they most admired and three whom they most disliked.

Their identifications are socially and educationally significant in a number of ways and throw light on issues connected with the extent to which children and young people have been ‘captured’ by the ‘cult of the celebrity’ and concerns about the lack of appropriate ‘role models’. The responses also reveal the disjuncture between children’s perceptions of who is worthy of admiration or contempt and the kinds of heroes and villains presented to them in the official curriculum.

Research methods

The data derive from the WISERDEducation longitudinal research project which is following children through key stages of their education. The cohorts comprise 1200 pupils, currently in Years 7, 9 and 11, attending 29 different schools across Wales. The questions which we are exploring in this paper come from a survey that they undertook in 2013.

In addition to qualitative exploration, their responses will be analysed using descriptive statistical analysis to identify key themes and patterns. As well as examining the range and nature of their ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’, we will explore variations in relation to gender, age and language of instruction.

Contribution to knowledge

The paper will contribute to growing understandings in the sociology and social psychology of childhood of the significance of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ for children’s identities (eg Lines 2001; Fraser & Brown 2002). As Anderson and Cavallaro (2002: 161) argue ‘what kind of heroes a culture promotes reveals a great deal about that culture’s values and desires’. Children’s attributions of worthiness are also likely to have some influence on the development of their own values and aspirations. The paper will conclude by discussing some of the implications of the findings for curriculum development.

References

