

Exploring youth civic engagement: a view from England

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Exploring Youth Civic Engagement – a view from England

A brief outline of citizenship education in England

Citizenship, as a school subject, in England has had a chequered and difficult history; it has never traditionally been taught as an explicit subject prior to 2000 (Kerr, 2005) and the attitude of the UK government has historically been very laissez-faire in terms of outlining any form of curriculum requirement. It was not until the 1988 Education Reform Act, that a national curriculum in England was developed. This identified subjects that were to be ‘core’ and those that were to be ‘foundation’ ones. At this stage citizenship was merely part of the ‘basic curriculum’, included as one of a number of cross-curricular themes that were also to be covered.

It was not until the late 1990s that the New Labour government of Tony Blair took steps to change the status of citizenship. Following the Crick Report of 1998 (QCA, 1998) citizenship became a ‘foundation’ subject, which meant teaching it became statutory, with a compulsory programme of study (DfEE/QCA, 1999). The development was prompted by growing concerns over the social, moral and political fabric of society (Harris, 2006). The aim of the new curriculum was ambitious, striving for:

no less than a change in the political culture of this country ...; for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and acting among themselves. (QCA, 1998)

Schools however faced numerous challenges implementing the new curriculum; for example there were few subject specialists to teach it, it was supposed to occupy five percent of an already crowded school timetable and there was confusion over the precise nature of the subject (Kerr, Cleaver, Ireland & Blenkinsop, 2003; Ofsted, 2004, 2005).

The model of citizenship as outlined in the curriculum was heavily influenced by the thinking of T. H. Marshall; thus the curriculum was underpinned by the ideas of developing young people's political literacy, social and moral responsibility and community involvement. It was however criticised on a number of fronts. Some have questioned whether it is a subject to be studied (Pring, 2006) whilst others attacked its commitment to the (essentially elitist) political status quo, (Faulks, 2006) and its narrow, nationalistic conception of citizenship (Faulks, 2006; Kiwan, 2008).

Subsequent reviews of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013; QCA, 2007) have seen the statutory content of the citizenship curriculum altered. Following the review in 2007 the curriculum document focused on the concepts of democracy and justice, rights and responsibilities, identities and diversity, and the processes of critical thinking, advocacy, and taking informed and responsible action. The biggest change here was the introduction of the idea of identity, with a focus on the idea of multiple identities. However the curriculum review instigated by the Coalition government in 2010 seriously questioned the place of citizenship in the curriculum. The expert panel, which advised the government, recommended that citizenship revert back to being part of the basic curriculum (DfE, 2011).

However the subject has retained its foundation status, but there has been a shift towards a knowledge-based curriculum, with a particular focus on knowledge of political systems, especially the UK's system of government and the 'precious liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom' (DfE, 2013). The consequences of this are yet to be fully seen but Ofsted (2013) noted some schools have already starting to pay less attention to the subject.

The impact of citizenship education in England

Given the importance attached to the introduction of citizenship education, a large-scale longitudinal study was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) from 2002-2010. Over 24,000 students from 169 schools were invited to complete questionnaires in 2002/3, 2005, 2007 and 2009 as they progressed through school. An additional 2,500 students were sent questionnaires biennially to capture views from other schools not involved in the longitudinal study, and interviews with staff and teachers were conducted in 12 schools every two years. In part the study focused on how schools were implementing the new curriculum but the reports from 2003 (Kerr et al.), 2006 (Ireland, Kerr, Lopes, Nelson & Cleaver), 2008 (Benton et al.) and 2010 (Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy & Lopes) focused heavily on the students' attitudes towards citizenship, community and participation, and provide rich insights into the thinking and experiences of this first generation of students to receive statutory education in citizenship.

Generally speaking the study found that attitudes towards many issues were relatively stable, and that changes in attitudes were likely to be related to the age of the students rather than the impact of citizenship education per se (Keating et al., 2010, p. 61).

This is similar to a wider international study reported by Isac, Maslowski, Creemers and van der Werf (2014), who found schooling had a negligible impact on students' civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Few students showed any interest in political activity (beyond voting), being more inclined, if at all, to engage in civic activities such as fund raising and volunteering. This promoted Benton et al. (2008) to worry about a 'democratic deficit' amongst young people. The only area where there were signs of increased political engagement through the NFER project was within the school community, where students showed a strong commitment to their community and had more opportunities to participate in

things like elections for school councils. Generally students reported low levels of efficacy, persistently feeling an inability to bring about change, either within school, the local community or at a national level (Benton et al., 2008; Ireland et al., 2006; Kerr et al., 2003). It was also evident that students had a limited sense of what citizenship entailed. Invariably ‘good’ citizenship revolved around voting, being law-abiding and making a positive contribution to the local community.

These findings seem to reflect attitudes more widely; a large government survey (Home Office, 2004) revealed that only 38% of adults felt they could influence decisions in their local area, which fell to 19% when applied to the national scene, and although around 38% of adults had engaged in some form of civic participation or informal volunteering in the previous 12 months, only 3% did so on a monthly basis.

The current political climate

Prior to the election of 2010, politics in the UK were dominated by New Labour under the premiership of Tony Blair, then Gordon Brown. The economic crisis saw a shift in the political landscape; in 2010 a coalition government of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties was formed, a highly unusual situation in the UK.

These recent elections have been characterised by low turnouts –less than two thirds of the electorate voted (significantly lower than other elections since the end of World War Two), with only around 44% of those aged 18-24 exercising their right to vote (UK Political Info, n.d.).

Explaining this decline in turnout is difficult. It could simply be apathy amongst the younger generation, but equally it could be disengagement as a response to the current political and economic climate. The period around 2009-10 saw considerable public anger surrounding an expenses scandal involving MPs. Trust in the political system has been

further shaken by the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic downturn. Austerity measures introduced by the Coalition government have seen massive cuts in public spending. Youth unemployment has been stubbornly high. Those on low incomes have been badly hit by government policies, whilst tax cuts for those on higher incomes has helped to fuel a growing wage gap. Claims of tax avoidance, especially by large global corporations, such as Amazon, Google and Starbucks, also sparked widespread public anger. Taken together, these events have served to make different sections of the community feel disempowered and disconnected from the political system.

Major educational reforms have also affected those under 18 and have included an overhaul of the curriculum and examination system. Arguably, the most controversial change has been to university tuition fees; the Liberal Democrats had in particular pledged prior to the election to resist any increase in fees, but then supported a huge increase in annual fees, which rose from £3000 to £9000 for students.

The one issue that did positively capture the public imagination was the referendum on Scottish independence. This saw a massive turnout, with 85% of the Scottish electorate voting (including those aged 16 and 17 who were allowed to vote on this issue).

The political landscape following the 2015 election changed in unexpected ways. The Conservative Party won an unexpected small majority (with the UK's 'first past the post' electoral system they were able to do this with 37% of the vote). The Scottish Nationalist Party, given a major boost by the referendum campaign, won 56 out of the 59 seats in Scotland (having previously only had six seats). The Labour Party did badly, especially in Scotland, whilst the Liberal Democrat Party was virtually wiped out (having attracted a lot of criticism, especially over their position in tuition fees).

It was against this background of civic engagement that this study was conducted, with the intention of drawing upon international comparisons to see whether the issues

identified in earlier studies continued to be seen in England and how this compared to young people in other nations.

Exploring youth civic engagement and disengagement in England

Students at a sixth form college in the south of England were invited to participate in an online survey. The area, according to the government's Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) data which is used to identify the socio-economic nature of an area, is ranked 17310 out of 32482 (with 1 being the most deprived area and 32482 being the most affluent) therefore indicating this area is firmly in the middle ground regarding socio-economic status. Young people aged 16-19 attend the college, where the majority study for their A level examinations. Not all students in England attend a sixth form college, as most tend to study for their A levels in a school for students aged 11-18, but in this particular region, schools tend to take students aged 11-16, and students then choose from a number of sixth form colleges. This means that the students at this college come from a number of different schools within the area and so have different experiences of citizenship education from those schools.

The online survey site only allowed for a maximum of 150 responses, and this number was reached very shortly after the survey was opened. Details about the demographic profile are presented in Table 1. In terms of cultural affiliation, the majority chose British, but the remainder came from a range of African, Asian, European and Pacific nations. However 87% (131) said their nationality was British. The majority of the sample identified their first language as English; other languages included Nepalese, Polish, Marathi, Italian, Hungarian, Mandarin, Spanish, Gujarati, Dutch, Tamil, and Tagalog. Table 1 provides details of responses to many of the questions asked, which will be referred to as appropriate during the following discussion of the findings.

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Citizenship education

Although citizenship education has been compulsory in schools in England since 2002, so all the students should have been taught the subject, fewer than half said they had learned about government structures and processes at school, whereas the majority had either not studied it or could not remember (see Table 1). In one way this is surprising as political literacy was part of the first curriculum and democracy was part of the revised 2007 curriculum, however the Ofsted (2010) report, *Citizenship Established?*, showed that where school provision was weak it tended to be in the area of government and politics. In addition one of the issues facing schools was how to find space in the curriculum for this new subject. Some schools taught it as a discrete subject, but the majority combined it with Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) and used non-specialist teachers, a model which has generally been associated with weaker outcomes for citizenship education (Keating et al., 2009; Kerr et al., 2007; Ofsted, 2010) because students (and some teachers) are sometimes unclear as to the difference between PSHE and citizenship (essentially PSHE covers issues that fall within the personal sphere, whereas citizenship relates to the public sphere). So it is entirely possible that the way in which the curriculum has been presented to students has inhibited their knowledge and understanding of citizenship issues.

When asked whether they had found the material on government useful, only 51 students agreed it had been. Many students clearly had had a positive experience at school; in response to an open question about their experience of studying citizenship at school, 40 students spoke about how relevant they had found learning about citizenship or could identify why it was relevant. However others had had a poorer experience; 10 students felt the lessons had been poorly taught, so they had failed to engage with the topics, whilst 21 responses

explained that the lessons in school had lacked detail, leaving students with little insights into the political system. This lack of knowledge was evident in response to a direct question asking student to indicate how knowledgeable they felt about government and politics; only around a quarter said they were knowledgeable, with nearly two thirds claimed to have some knowledge, whilst the remainder felt they lacked any knowledge (see Table 1). This does beg the question where do students learn about political issues, and it seems from the survey that students gain their knowledge largely through the media.

Most students said they followed the news regularly, with many others doing so occasionally (see Table 1). The vast majority of respondents, nearly two thirds, were interested in global news issues, about one sixth were interested mainly in national issues and a couple focused more on local matters. Just over half obtained their news online, with TV being the next most favoured means, used by just over a third of the respondents. Print and radio was cited by hardly any students as a source of news.

Personal experience of political matters

Relatively few students had personal experience of political matters, either directly or indirectly (see Table 1). Respondents were also invited to explain their answers further and detail their experience of political matters. Twenty eight students did respond. The issue most readily identified was education. Eleven students were angry about changes to the education system introduced by the former Coalition government (formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties), and in particular the large increase in university tuition fees, which would affect these students as they were studying courses that would allow them access to university. The following comments illustrate the concerns raised:

If I had to pick one area the government has control of which has affected me, it would be education. They need to consult students before making any major changes

because at the end of the day we are the ones who are benefiting from it, not the government (student 14)

Nick Clegg [leader of the Liberal Democrats] promised to cut tuition fees in the 2010 election and he didn't (student 150)

There were five comments about equality issues, mainly related to racism and LGBT issues, and five comments about the political system, particularly distrust of politicians (especially in the wake of the 'expenses scandal'). Three students expressed concern over environmental issues and the remainder covered individual points. In all cases the students focused on the way that political matters had impinged on their lives or attitudes, rather than ways in which they had engaged with the political system.

Students were also asked to provide open-ended responses to explain their views relating to family engagement in political matters and 27 chose to do so. Of these 11 indicated that their family's level of political activity was restricted to voting. Only three responses showed any further degree of political participation; one said their parents had signed petitions, one had been involved with a protest over marriage equality (presumably gay marriage rights given the timing of the survey, although this was not made clear) and one had actively campaigned for a political party in the locality.

Civic engagement

The students were asked to indicate how important it was for someone to be actively involved in improving their communities, to which the responses were overwhelmingly positive (see Table 1). . Yet their personal levels of activity were much more limited. Only around half of those who said it was important to be actively involved described themselves as active, whilst over a quarter said they had no active engagement in civic matters (see Table

1). When asked what types of civic activity they engaged with the main responses were donating money, volunteering and being neighbourly (see Table 1). These are either relatively simple acts to engage with or are community based rather than political in nature. Although many students felt civic engagement was important, few were active themselves and this may be linked to their sense of personal efficacy and the ability to influence change. As can be seen in Table 1, only a quarter of the respondents felt they could effectively influence change, whereas nearly a third thought they had no influence at all. Looking at the more detailed reasons why students felt this way, their comments demonstrated the youth to have a strong perception that individuals were powerless; 61 comments specifically focused on either the weakness of individuals to change things or stressed that only collective action could achieve anything.

A small group of people can't make much of a difference you have to have a lot of people working together to get a proper impact (student 8)

Because the general public although have perceived control actually has very little control, government decides most of what happens whether that be regional or local - for example students didn't want exams to change but the government made a decision to change it (student 43)

A further 14 responses also showed that the students felt that they were either too young, too unimportant or simply not trusted for their views to be taken seriously:

I feel I'm too young to be taken seriously (student 39)

I'm a teenager. We are seen as vandals and hoodlums who have nothing but bad intentions (student 42)

Although as the following response suggests, some young people feel they could make a positive difference if only they were listened to:

If myself and other youth like me were to have the means and power to speak their mind in a way that would reach the whole community, I feel that a lot of social issues would finally be brought to light and addressed. In order for us to make a difference we need to be given that chance, and when given that opportunity I believe that we would make the most of it and make a positive change to society (student 40)

Only 31 more detailed responses suggested that individuals could make, or at least make some, difference to society.

Anyone can make a difference, even alone (student 71)

Because to make a real difference on a large scale it takes more than one person to speak up but locally sometimes it only takes one person (student 104)

These findings support earlier studies, which show young people have low to moderate levels of efficacy in bringing about change (Benton et al., 2008; Keating et al., 2010).

Attitudes towards government and democracy

The vast majority of students were positive about democracy per se, but less supportive of the UK system of government (see Table 1). The concerns expressed about the UK system were that it does not always fairly represent the views of the people:

Our system benefits the rich elites, ignoring the majority of the population (student 41)

It's a good idea but most people are not represented (student 50)

democracy is a good concept, but when there are only 3 main parties people can choose from, all having similar plans for the country, it seems like there isn't really a choice in our democracy (student 65)

As with levels of civic engagement, many students felt that it was important for them to be active in the political arena. Generally speaking the responses to the open-ended question

asking students to elaborate on their answer showed that they felt everyone's voice needed to be heard:

If you don't participate, you can't change things you don't like (student 16)

If you don't use your voice, you can't complain if it's unheard (student 137)

But there were signs of either cynicism or a lack of personal efficacy:

Sometimes I think it is worth speaking out but a lot of the time realistically voices don't get heard and nothing actually changes (student 113)

At the end of the survey students were invited to add any comments regarding any of the issues and some chose to write about their views on government, a number of which were heartfelt and showed an awareness of issues within society:

The current system we have is clearly not working; it's designed to benefit the "ruling class" who are centred around greed. I don't know what the new system would look like or what it should look like. However I know it should not socialise the upcoming generations into becoming blinded, obedient slaves that use up their lives to line the pockets of the rich, it should not create vast economic disparity, it should not cause massive, irreversible damage to the environment all in the name of profit and it should provide everyone with a free and fulfilling life regardless of race, gender, sexuality or beliefs. I am only a 17 year old boy, and even I can see the problems within our society, so surely highly educated politicians can see it too. So why are, these people who are meant to represent us, not doing anything about it? (student 46)

Generally the findings from this survey resonate with earlier studies. Nelson, Wade, and Kerr (2010) concluded that young people in England were broadly supportive of democracy and were willing to vote, but their level of interest in political issues and willingness to engage in political activity was much more limited. Lopes, Benton and Cleaver's (2009) study suggested that young people's levels of engagement were largely

dictated by perceived self-benefit from participation. Given the low levels of efficacy in bringing about change identified in the findings from the survey, it could be argued that these young people do not see they have much say in how things could change and therefore see little personal benefit from political engagement.

Perceptions of what makes you a citizen

The respondents were asked to identify particular attributes and actions which would be necessary conditions for being a citizen of their country. The most popular responses were:

- Paying taxes – 83% (although this was in the context of much media attention at the time about big corporations avoiding paying tax in the UK)
- Being interested in the common well-being – 68%
- Speaking the language of the country in which you live – 60%
- Being a good neighbour - 50%
- Knowing the history of the country and rules of government – 43%
- Being born in the country – 29%

These suggest that the students regard citizenship overwhelmingly in terms of what an individual can contribute to the community, and that they are expected to be caring and law abiding. This fits very strongly into the idea of civil and social values, rather than defining it in political and legal terms. Interestingly only two students chose sharing the same religion, whilst ten chose sharing the same lifestyle, which suggests that these young people are accepting of different lifestyles and belief systems, and do not see the need for others to accept a particular set of customs as a prerequisite for citizenship.

An open-ended comment box at the end of the survey allowed participants to elaborate more fully on some points. Some students were concerned that existing institutions in the UK should be respected and that loyalty to the UK should be a key aspect of citizenship:

There should be an understanding between all cultures but I'm pretty against sharia Law. The head of the UK is the monarch not religion and if they feel sharia law is the way to go then why come live in the UK? The British have their own law and regulation. Also the British citizenship should have that key question that asks "Would you fight for the UK" and if answered no they should fail the test instantly. If there is no attachment to UK then they are most likely here just for benefits and if shit hits the fan they will be the first to leave while I will gladly fight till the end (student 135)

However more responses stressed a positive view towards immigrants, but raised concerns about how people within the UK were being manipulated into more negative views towards them:

I think there should be as little requirements as possible to get citizenship somewhere. Immigration should be actively encouraged - I think it is good for our economy, society, culture and wellbeing for it to be as diverse and varied as possible. Also, people should have limits on them where they can and can't live. As long as they pay the taxes for that country, then I think it is fine for them to live there (student 9)

The recent events that have taken place in the Middle East have heightened racial tensions. In the UK I have seen many scenarios of Islamophobia for example. Organisations such as UKIP (UK Independence Party), BNP (British National Party) and the EDL (English Defence League) have all gained support because of this closed mindedness and lack of understanding and knowledge to be quite frank. Education is one of the best ways to fight this cultural change, yes, I do think this cultural change should be fought. Nationalism and patriotism are being used as excuses for closed mindedness and sometimes racism. Educate children on world affair, from all sorts of different views, ensure they are given many perspectives on current affairs. Teach

them not to be easily persuaded by bias, teach them how to formulate independent views that take into considerations the situation from many angles (student 30)

I feel that it is wrong to expect a person to 'share the same religion and lifestyle' as the country when our country is so diverse. It's unfair and prejudiced. There are also plenty of British citizens who are not 'good neighbours' or interested in the common wellbeing and not everyone knows the history of our country. Even less people know the rules of government. So I think it's unfair and elitist to expect this of people trying to get citizenship when a percentage of our own citizens can't fulfil these requirements. A basic, general understanding is of course necessary I think (student 53)

Although only a few students commented on issues relating to immigration, the general responses regarding attributes and actions for people to be granted citizenship suggest a more tolerant and accepting position from the students who responded to this survey, which runs counter to findings in other studies. For example Kerr (2005) and Nelson et al. (2010) found that pupils were broadly intolerant of immigration. Although further work would be needed to explore this issue further for a stronger claim to be made.

The relationship between 'internal' factors and civic engagement

Overall analysis of the data did not reveal strong correlations between a range of internal factors and the levels of civic engagement, although some trends were discernible.

Knowledge of politics and government and attitudes to civic engagement

Students' knowledge of politics and government did not reveal any statistically significant correlations, although there were some noticeable trends. Those who claimed to be knowledgeable about political issues were more likely to feel they could influence change.

This was most noticeable when analysing whether the respondents felt they could **not** bring about change. Amongst those who felt knowledgeable approximately 19% felt as individuals they would be ineffective in bringing about change, for those who had some knowledge the figure rose to 30%, and for those with no knowledge the figure was higher at 45%.

Regarding support for democracy and the type of government in the UK there was an inverse relationship between the level of support and degree of knowledge. Those with higher levels of knowledge were twice as likely to support the type of UK governmental system compared to those who said they lacked knowledge of the political system, and a similar pattern was discernible for democracy generally. When analysing how important it was to participate in civic activities there was a similar trend as described above between the degree of knowledge and the perception that participation was important. A mixed picture was evident when respondents were asked about how actively engaged they were a range of civic activities. The most active were those with **some** knowledge of political issues, with a quarter claiming to be active and nearly half saying they were occasionally active. Of those who claimed to be knowledgeable and of those with little knowledge, few were actively engaged in civic activities but around half were occasionally involved.

Personality type and civic behaviour

Previous studies (Dinesen, Nørgaard, & Klemmensen, 2014; Metzger & Smetana, 2010) had suggested that personality type has an influence over people's disposition towards civic participation. The findings from this study lend some support to this idea, but are not strong. Those in the 'leader' and 'friendly' categories were more likely to demonstrate civic behaviours, but the figures only account for 11% of all responses.

Generally those in the 'leader' category were more likely to be knowledgeable about politics (29% said they were knowledgeable and 53% said they had some knowledge), more

likely to support the UK system of government (56%), and feel they could influence change (31% said they could, and 40% said they would have some effect). Overall they seem to have a higher sense of engagement with aspects of political activity, although in all cases the figures are not statistically significant.

Those who identified as ‘outgoing’ were more likely to be engaged in community focused activity (63% said it was important to be involved and 31% said they were actively involved), but also recognised the importance of supporting democracy as a form of government (both generally – 77% - and in the UK – 43%).

Altogether the four personality types were generally supportive of democracy, but support for the UK system of government was weakest amongst those who were ‘introverted’ (37%) and ‘friendly’ (26%). Those who felt least able to effect change were the ‘friendly type’ (16%), and the level of engagement in the community was lowest amongst ‘introverts’ (12%).

Gender

Comparing responses by gender shows some trends, but again revealed nothing statistically significant; males generally reported higher levels of political knowledge whereas females were more likely to be involved in community issues; 43% of males said they were knowledgeable and 45% said they had some knowledge; for females the figures were 16% and 70% respectively. Both genders reported a similar sense of efficacy in bringing about change, although girls were slightly more positive; 48% of girls felt they could be somewhat effective with 30% saying they would not be able to influence change.

Females were also slightly more likely to feel it was important to be involved in improving the community and be more active; 52% said it was important to be involved,

compared to 42% of males. Females were almost twice as likely to claim they were actively involved in the community, with 24% claiming participation, compared to 14% of males.

Sense of efficacy

As noted above, students generally revealed a low sense of personal efficacy in terms of influencing events in the local community or society more broadly. Factors such as knowledge of the political system, personality type, gender, social class did not have much bearing on young people's sense of efficacy.

However analysis relating involvement in civic activity did reveal a statistically significant relationship between the level of activity in civic processes and sense of personal efficacy ($p=.001$). What is not clear is how this relationship operates, i.e. whether higher levels of self-efficacy lead individuals into civic activity or involvement in civic activity promotes higher levels of efficacy.

The relationship between 'external' factors and civic engagement

As with the internal factors no clear or strong correlations were found between young people's level of civic engagement and external factors, although there were evident trends.

School

It has been claimed that schools do influence the ways that students engage with citizenship and civic activities (Keating et al., 2010; Ofsted, 2010, 2013) and this study provides some evidence to support these. For example, those who remember being taught about politics and government were more likely to follow the news (70%) compared to those who were not taught this in school (55%) or could not remember being taught (58%). Also students who had been taught about politics and government were more likely to be

supportive of the UK system – 48% as opposed to 37% of those who were not taught and 17% of those who could not remember.

There was also a trend regarding levels of participation. Nearly 60% of those who were taught about politics and government thought it was important for people to be actively involved in their community and 65% thought it was important to participate in civic activities. The corresponding figures for those who claim not to have been taught or could not remember being taught about politics were much lower.

This would suggest that education in school does have an effect on how students perceive the importance of participation, yet the actual levels of participation were low across all three types of response, with between 20-25% saying they engaged in civic activities.

Family and prior political encounters

It would be reasonable to assume that family influence and personal experience would shape young people's attitudes towards civic engagement. Although the data show there is a positive relationship between these factors it does not appear to be a strong one.

A third of those who claimed to be knowledgeable about politics had families who were politically active (although as discussed previously this often does not extend beyond voting), which is reduced to a fifth where families were not active. However there were some surprising results. Students whose families were not active in politics felt more strongly that they could be 'somewhat effective' in bringing around change compared to families considered active (45% compared to 29%). Also respondents were more likely to be active in their communities if their families were not politically active, and to be more supportive of the UK system of government, than those who were more active.

There was a similar positive, if not strong pattern in regard to prior political experiences. For example a third with such experience felt they could influence change, whilst a quarter of those without prior experience felt they could do this.

Discussion

Despite citizenship being a compulsory part of the school curriculum in England, and despite the focus on creating politically literate and active, responsible citizens, the findings from this survey tend to illustrate a lack of knowledge on the part of many students, and a gulf between attitudes and actions. To an extent it may be that this reflects the findings of Keating et al. (2010); in their large-scale longitudinal study of citizenship education in England from its inception, they conclude that the young people in the study were more likely to have a positive attitude towards civic and political participation if they had received a lot of specific citizenship teaching, both in terms of curriculum time and specialist teaching; in addition they noted that there was a cumulative effect, with attitudes strengthening over time based on prior attitudes, i.e. positive attitudes aged 16, became more positive for students aged 18. Conversely those who reported having had little or no citizenship education were significantly more likely to have poor attitudes to participation. Given so many in this study could not remember having been taught citizenship, Keating et al.'s (2010) findings may explain the attitudes reported here and the relatively low levels of participation (although it should be acknowledged that Keating et al.'s study looked at attitudes towards participation and intention to participate rather than actual levels of activity).

On the positive side, the majority of students are generally supportive of democratic structures (if slightly less enthusiastic about the system of government in the UK), are aware of the importance of engaging with civic activities and with the community, and are keen to be informed about the world in which they live. However it is not clear from where students

develop their views. The number of students who claim not to have been taught (a statutory subject) or cannot remember it is relatively high, plus few come from families which are politically active and few have direct personal experience of politics. Most are keen to keep up to date with news, are interested in a range of issues, and so it would seem that many teach themselves what they wish to know, or try to make sense of things as best they can. It would appear from this sample that young people want to know more about civic matters but have not received sufficient education or experience from external support systems. Although it is a positive thing that young people wish to be informed and it would appear have to do this independently, it is not clear to what extent they are able to examine a range of views, critically engage with issues and so develop well-informed opinions.

Without sufficient knowledge many feel unable to influence matters. Other studies, such as Nelson et al. (2010), have found a connection between high levels of civic knowledge and support for democratic values, and the findings from this survey suggest an association between higher levels of knowledge and positive attitudes and levels of participation. Although students feel participation is important, the majority do not believe they have the ability to influence matters, and consequently it can be argued they find reasons not to engage in activities. Given a healthy democracy needs active participation by its citizenry this should be a concern, and reflects findings in other studies (e.g. Keating et al., 2010). Overall there is a strong sense of disengagement from participants from the civic and political community. The qualitative comments suggest that young people do not feel trusted or respected, whilst in turn their perception of politicians means they do not trust them. Although there is a sense that democracy is a 'good' thing, the levels of support for the UK system of government is perceptibly lower.

The lack of political engagement is also seen in the conception of a citizen; most students defined citizenship in terms of community engagement and contributing positively

to society and a good citizen was defined in relation to personal qualities, such as being kind and caring. This stresses what Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal and ten Dam (2013) see as a model of ‘civil society’ where there is an emphasis on social cohesion, coexistence and personal development; this model of citizenship has been criticised by Mead (2010) as a form of communitarianism, which could easily be found in various dictatorships and does little to promote the values of democracy and participation in the political sphere. Although civic engagement is clearly an important element of citizenship, it is a very different conception to models that emphasise a more classical, political model. Part of the problem, as Geboers et al. (2013) imply, is that young people do not yet see themselves as citizens because of the way in which their engagement in the political world is restricted (in the UK young people are not allowed to vote until the age of 18).

It would seem that citizenship education in England needs a careful reappraisal. It seems clear that young people generally see the importance of political and civic engagement, yet feel unwilling and/or unable to participate. The resolution to this situation is complex. At one level it seems there is an argument to develop students’ knowledge and understanding of the political, social and community elements of citizenship as envisioned in the original National Curriculum documentation. The range of responses from the students in this survey may reflect the range of approaches different secondary schools are likely to have adopted towards citizenship in the curriculum – schools may teach it as a discrete subject but others may well have combined it with PSHE, taught it through cross-curricular approaches or specific theme days. It is also highly likely that there are few specialist teachers in these schools. The obvious solution would be to advocate more clearly defined citizenship teaching in the curriculum, taught by specialists. Yet on its own these are simply ‘tinkering’ around the edges.

It seems there needs to be a deeper philosophical debate if young people are to value, protect and promote democratic participation in society. The Council of Europe's (2015) educational manifesto questions whether we are doing the right things, in the right way when it comes to education; if, in future, we wish to live in a democratic society, then this must be a fundamental aim of education. As such, citizenship should not simply be a curriculum subject that is 'squeezed' into an overcrowded school timetable; it needs to be one of the driving forces behind curriculum design. It also means that young people should experience democracy in action in schools and the local community; the idea of 'student voice' is not new, but the extent to which young people have a genuine say in their lives, or are given the means and support to allow their voices to be heard is questionable. At present the findings from this small survey raise questions about the health of democratic society in England, but the findings resonate with other studies, which in turn suggests the issues raised here need careful and serious attention from all levels of the educational system.

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