Revitalising Politics: the Role of Civic Education

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Introduction

Declining participation in conventional forms of politics has become a central theme for academics and policy-makers in recent years, and has often been viewed as marking a crisis in citizenship (Power Inquiry 2006; Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). The trend is most observable amongst younger people, who have become increasingly alienated from electoral politics (and, indeed, the state). On the other hand, young people (15 to 25 year olds) are not politically apathetic (Catan, 2003); they have their own views and engage in democratic politics through various modes of participation (Pattie et al. 2004; Sloam 2007). How can we reconnect young people to the political system? Much faith has placed in education as an answer to this problem (e.g. DFEE/QCA 1998), and there is strong evidence to suggest that educational interventions have the potential to boost prospects for future political activity (Colby et al. 2007). We argue that the introduction of citizenship education has the potential to help provide young people with the knowledge, skills and values to participate effectively in the democratic life of the country. The introduction of citizenship lessons in 2002 was a step in the right direction, but it currently suffers from a number of serious problems (OFSTED, 2005).

In this paper we argue that a more effective form of citizenship education can be developed by placing more emphasis upon: interactive engagement with young people's politics; intensive deliberation and critical analysis – reflection on experiences and participatory acts; the role of the school as a mini-polity; and, outreach beyond the school environment (e.g. service learning).[i] Our underlying argument is that existing attempts to promote participation will fail if citizenship classes either over-emphasise knowledge transmission (in a top-down manner) or simply equate active citizenship with voluntary work. We argue that young people must be enabled to fully *experience* politics, *deliberate* upon those experiences, and *reconstruct citizenship in their own image*. We nevertheless underline the point that education can only be part of the answer, and can

easily be frustrated or undermined by opaque and inaccessible political decision-making as well as other negative political practices (discussed elsewhere in this conference, see Hay et al. 2008).

Youth, Politics and Citizenship

The UK has witnessed a significant decline in engagement in electoral politics in recent years. The median young person does not vote, does not belong to a political party and has very little trust in the main political institutions (Sloam 2007). Turnout for the 18-25 year old age group in the 2005 general election reached a historic low of 37% (despite a moderate increase in overall turnout to 61%) (Electoral Commission 2005). According to a recent study, only 10% of young people 'trust' politicians and just 6% trust political parties (Moore and Longhurst 2005: 24). By contrast around a third of young people *trust* certain NGOs like Amnesty International and Greenpeace (Ibid.). Political parties have traditionally acted as the glue for democracy, providing political socialisation and forums for different advocacy groups, and have galvanised public opinion on a broad range of issues. But parties (like other conventional political institutions) are increasingly irrelevant for young people, as demonstrated by the ageing and declining of their memberships (Mair and Van Biezen 2001).[ii]

Disengagement from conventional politics is most prominent amongst younger cohorts, but youth (non-)participation should not be divorced from broader developments in society given that participation depends as much on class, income, educational attainment and regional location as it does on age (Pattie et al. 2004). In terms of the population as a whole, authors have pointed to a decreasing participation in civic life (Putnam 1995) (although this is hotly contested, see Pattie et al. 2004 and Dalton 2008), low levels of trust in political institutions (Hall 1999), the 'marketisation' of political competition (Hay 2007), the withdrawal of the state and the individualisation of risks in society (Beck 1992), and growing cynicism about electoral politics driven by the media (Stoker 2006). Literature focusing more exclusively on young people has similarly laid responsibility for decreasing participation on: more complex and less structured youth transitions (Hall et al. 1999); political institutions that deny young people the opportunity

to express their opinions (Matthews et al. 1998); party strategies to maximise votes that rationally neglects marginalised groups (including young people) that are less likely to vote (Sloam 2007); and, the weakening of young people's position in relation to the labour market and the welfare state (MacDonald 1997).[iii] Together, these factors have undermined the 'sense of common purpose and ownership in the political system' (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995: 10) and impacted upon young people's sense of responsibility to the state.[iv]

Yet the current generation of young people *are not* apathetic with regard to 'politics' (more broadly defined). They are interested in and engaged with political issues, even if their modes of engagement have changed (Pattie et al. 2004) and they have quite different conceptions of politics and how it works (Marsh et al. 2007). Evidence of interest in politics (broadly conceived) can be found in the education sector where the number of students taking politics A-levels and enrolling for politics degree programmes has increased rapidly over the past decade (UCAS, 2007).

A central problem is the low level of political knowledge and here education can clearly make a contribution given the fact that: 'Students with the most civic knowledge are those most likely to be receptive to participating in civic activities' (IEA 2008). At the same time knowledge can be relative and shaped by perceptions of politics so it is important – for politicians and educators alike – to engage with young people's own conceptions of politics.[v] Henn et al. (2002: 175) argue that 'politics is not aimed at young people…and has little political meaning for them'. Despite some efforts to engage young people in recent years, we believe that this continues to be the case.[vi]

In the absence of political socialisation within and through political parties, schools in general and citizenship education in particular can play a key role in this area. First, schools can act as mini-polities (Flanagan et al., 2007), which place importance upon the democratic nature of, and opportunities for expression in, schools. Second, citizenship education can be more effective if it is an interactive (flexible) experience that relates to students own experiences, and allows them to participate in and reflect upon the wide spectrum of democratic politics as part of the curriculum.

Citizenship Education in the UK

Aims and Developments

Citizenship education became a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum for secondary schools in England in August 2002. Citizenship, as a discrete, compulsory subject, is still not on a statutory footing in Wales or Scotland. In September 2007 'Local and Global Citizenship' became a statutory component of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum, meaning 'in effect' that citizenship education is now 'a statutory entitlement for all young people from the ages of 11 to 16' (McEvoy 2007: 140). Citizenship lessons were introduced in England principally because of concerns held by a range of actors, including politicians, academics and members of pressure groups, about levels of social capital in Britain (Kisby 2006, 2007). When it was first introduced, citizenship education in England had three strands: political literacy, social and moral responsibility and community engagement. Its principal aims were to teach young people to become well informed, responsible citizens engaged in mainstream political and civic activities, such as voting and engaging in voluntary work, in particular at a local community level (DFEE/QCA 1998).

Citizenship education covers a wide variety of topics, including: politics and government, the legal system, equal opportunities and human rights issues. Following Sir Keith Ajegbo's review of Diversity and Citizenship in the curriculum, published in January 2007 (DFES 2007) and welcomed by the Government (see e.g. Johnson 2007), from September 2007, governing bodies had a new duty to promote community cohesion and since September 2008, the secondary curriculum for citizenship education has included a new fourth strand 'Identity and Diversity: Living together in the UK'. School children are now also taught about national, regional, ethnic and religious cultures and their connections and are to explore the concept of community cohesion. In addition, a short course GCSE in Citizenship Studies has been developed and an AS Level in Citizenship Studies is also an option for many students. A full course GCSE is expected to be available from September 2009 and an A level in Citizenship Education is also being devised. In addition, a number of British Universities offer Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Citizenship Studies.

In 2001 the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a longitudinal study examining the short-term and long-term impact of citizenship lessons on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of pupils. The study is being conducted over an eight-year period, from 2001 – the year prior to the compulsory introduction of citizenship in the National Curriculum – to 2009 and follows a cohort of over 10,000 pupils who will be the first to be taught citizenship lessons right the way through school. The study combines a tracking survey, a cross-sectional survey, longitudinal case studies in twelve schools and an on-going literature review. The annual reports produced by the NFER so far (see, in particular, Cleaver et al. 2005; Whiteley 2005; Ireland et al. 2006; and, Kerr et al. 2007) present a mixed picture. They point to differential levels of citizenship education provision in schools and to the fact that it is taking time for citizenship education to find its place in the National Curriculum – with a limited degree of success in some schools. The reports suggest that citizenship lessons are likely to have a positive impact on pupil engagement in society in the longer term and they draw attention more recently to significant improvements in the delivery and impact of citizenship education in terms of the increasing amount of time devoted to citizenship lessons, pupil's growing knowledge of citizenship, and rising numbers of schools that formally assess citizenship. However, a positive impact on young people's participation in mainstream politics should not be seen as the principal justification for, or only measure of the 'success' of, citizenship education. Rather, citizenship lessons should be an entitlement for young people to enable them to gain the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in the democratic life of the country.

Students, Schools and Society: the importance of Experiential Learning
Citizenship education is most effectively taught through an interactive approach that focuses on forms of experiential learning. Drawing on principles based on the educational philosophy developed by John Dewey (see e.g. Dewey 1916), forms of experiential learning emphasise the vital role experience plays in learning and fundamentally, the nature of these experiences. This is contrasted with more passive, didactic forms of

learning. Experiential learning seeks both to connect learning to students' past experiences and promotes the notion of students actively and collaboratively engaging in participative activities that address issues that are relevant to their own lives – what some educationalists have described as 'deep learning' (Ramsden 2003). The development of knowledge and skills is facilitated through performance (Kolb 1984), enabling learners to link theory with practice, to develop their own questions and find their own answers. Service learning promotes students participation in work-based learning concerned with achieving public goods, and (unlike simple volunteerism) emphasises the importance of participants reflecting on and analysing the activities undertaken.

In great contrast to the 'civics' education taught in the past in British schools, which focused exclusively on students learning 'facts' about Britain's uncodified constitution and 'the rule of law', citizenship lessons, through the 'community involvement' strand, encourage students to engage in participative activities, and this is to be welcomed. Under civics, students were taught in a top-down, didactic way about the functions of central and local government, aspects of the legal system, and various procedural details relating to the role of the monarchy, the passage of a bill through Parliament and so on. The courses were very descriptive rather than being analytical and critical, providing naïve rather than sophisticated introductions to the realities of various political processes. This approach was (and sometimes still is) mirrored by overly hierarchical educational structures. Schools can act as mini-polities, formative arenas for expression and civic engagement, for practice in social relations and in dealing with authority (Flanagan et al. 2007). Conversely, without an element of student participation and input into school life, citizenship education is undermined.

However, there are also significant grounds for concern about how citizenship lessons are taught in practice. OFSTED and NFER reports, combined with anecdotal evidence from teachers, suggest that too much of what passes as citizenship education is inconsistent with the core principles of experiential and service learning, with active citizenship sometimes treated as simply synonymous with volunteering. The clear danger here is that

school children are oxymoronically required to engage in compulsory, voluntary activities. Significant research in the United States shows that 'educating for democracy' can and should employ a variety of educational practices: learning through 'discussion and deliberation', 'political research and action projects', 'speakers and mentors', 'placements, internships and service learning' and 'structured reflection' (Colby et al. 2007). Beyond teaching and learning, there is the further danger that, as in the United States, civic education may increase voluntary service, but not participation in electoral politics. Bernard Crick, the Chairman of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, whose 1998 report was one of the key immediate causes of the introduction of citizenship education, has been absolutely clear on this point: volunteering can only become active citizenship 'when the volunteers are well briefed on the whole context, given responsibility about how to organize their actions, and debriefed afterwards in the classroom or listened to in a formal meeting about whether they think it could have been done better' (Crick 2004: 83). It is not enough that children do 'good' deeds in the community, however worthy and worthwhile. Knowledge, participation and deliberation are all vitally important elements that must be linked together in citizenship lessons, if it is to be active citizenship rather than just volunteering that students are engaged in.

Conclusion

Citizenship education is not a panacea for the problem of young people's disengagement from mainstream politics, whatever its content and however well it is taught; there is no such thing as a panacea on this issue. But the fact that the evidence of disengagement is so strong does point to a genuine problem, albeit one with complex causes, almost certainly of both demand and supply. Policy-makers, members of various interest groups and think-tanks, academics, commentators and others are right to be concerned about such evidence. Nevertheless, any serious attempt to address this disengagement must involve action on both the supply and demand sides. Citizenship education is just one, albeit important, element of addressing the demand side, of trying to positively influence young people's civic attitudes. By adopting a more interactive approach (set out above) citizenship classes can be made more effective, helping to provide young people with the knowledge, skills and values to participate in the democratic life of the country (in ways

of their own choosing) and therefore ought to be seen as an entitlement for all young people. However, policy-makers must not rely on addressing only issues of demand (Hay 2007). In reality, the way politics is practiced in the UK seems – for many citizens – at best of peripheral importance and at worst rather irrelevant. In this context, it is hard even for politically motivated young people to see the efficacy of political engagement or action. On the other hand, young people and students are interested in politics, and the success of Barack Obama in the US in effectively engaging this age group, illustrates the potential for revitalising politics if young people's political concerns are actively addressed.

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[i] To achieve these goals it is essential that academics and policy-makers reflect upon best practice in the UK and abroad.

[ii] This is not to say that politicians have an easy job. They are faced by an electorate that is more diverse in terms of values and lifestyles (Giddens 1991; Inglehart 1997) in a 'risk society' (Beck 1992) where a 'job for life' has become a thing of the past. In this scenario, parties have to do more than just appeal to class interests (as was often the case in the past).

[iii] The withdrawal of the state in previous decades has had a direct impact on the lives of young people – from the reduction of benefits to the selling off of school playing fields. This has decreased young people's attachment to the state, which is especially true for those who are socially excluded at the margins of society.

[iv] Young people furthermore suffer from a (largely unfair) depiction by the media as lazy (e.g. benefit scroungers), violent (e.g. media reporting on teenage stabbings in London, huge increases in summary penalties and ASBOs) and politically apathetic.

[v] Whilst we agree with Hay et al. (2008) and others that the withdrawal of the state and the off-loading of responsibilities creates problems in terms of democratic accountability, we argue it is less about 'distancing' and more about the lack of 'awareness' of how politics works and where responsibility lies and the diffusion of political power away from Westminster (e.g. the huge ignorance of the existing powers of the EU), and the absence of a feeling of efficacy with regard to political participation.

[vi] Although traditional concerns like healthcare and education remain important, issues of individual interest (e.g. better facilities for young people), issues of special generational concern (e.g. drugs, street crime) as well as post-materialist and international issues (e.g. the environment, fair trade) have greater resonance for this cohort of young people (Citizenship Foundation 2005; Haste 2005). Marsh et al. (2007) try to provide a road-map of young people's politics, but there is a great need for further research in this area, especially – as Hay et al. (2008) argue – to see how young people's conceptions about politics are constructed.