Back on the agenda and off the curriculum?
Citizenship education and young people’s political engagement

Matt Henn and Nick Foard share some important research which demonstrates that many young people feel powerless and alienated from politics, but nevertheless look to Citizenship teachers as potentially offering them a greater understanding and empowerment.

Amidst the so-called ‘apolitical’ generation, a significant number of young people feel disaffected from politics. Young people in Britain are often characterised as dissatisfied with, and seemingly disengaged from, democratic institutions. Indeed, there has been growing anxiety in recent years that young people in Britain are often characterised as apathetic and politically inactive, with neither aptitude nor inclination for participating in any form of collective social endeavour, and with no sense of civic responsibility. And yet 2011 will be remembered as a year in which young people were prominent in a series of significant, and indeed dramatic, mass social actions.

In this article, we report the findings from a national online survey that was conducted by the government over the last decade that young people in Britain have been characterised as disaffected with, and alienated from, the political process (see Henn and Foard 2011). The government response has included the introduction of statutory citizenship classes at schools in England and, despite some problems getting the subject established (Ofsted 2006), there is evidence that such lessons are now having a beneficial impact for many young people (Benton et al. 2008). When given a choice, many more students opt to study citizenship subjects: Citizenship is the fastest-growing GCSE subject, with 94,000 students undertaking this subject in 2010; the numbers of students sitting politics-related A Level exams increased by 24% between 2003 and 2008; and enrolment on politics programmes at UK universities has seen a rapid rise of 69% between 1997 and 2007 (Kisby and Sloan 2009). Despite this, the government review of the national curriculum seems to put the future of Citizenship in jeopardy.

Research
In this article, we report the findings from a national study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council that considers young people’s political participation and levels of engagement. Our research specifically addresses the following issues: Young people’s levels of interest in, and understanding of, politics and elections; Youth attitudes towards democracy in Britain; The degree of faith that young people have in political parties and politicians; The likelihood that young people will take part in differing political activities in the future, including voting at elections; What the political parties need to do if they are to engage young people in the future.

We conducted a national online survey of 1,025 ‘attainers’ (18 year-olds eligible to vote for the first-time at the 2010 General Election) during April and May 2011. In addition to the survey of this representative sample, we also conducted fourteen online focus groups during November 2011, with about three quarters of young people (approximately six times as many) claimed to lack such influence. Nearly half of young people have a general confidence in the electoral process, against a third who hold more sceptical views. There is a similar faith in the value of voting, with over half professing a commitment to the principle of voting, and just a quarter not perceiving it to be worthwhile. When asked how likely it was that they might take part in various types of political activity over the next few years, half indicated that they considered that they might be prepared to do so, but a significant minority of over two fifths could not see themselves as being politically active.

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Findings
A quarter of the respondents to our online survey reported that they had taken a GCSE in Citizenship Studies. As Table 1 reveals, there is no statistically significant difference in the political orientations or levels of political engagement between this particular group and the group of respondents that did not sit this particular exam.

Our survey results seem to run counter to popular thinking that young people are dismissive of political matters. Nearly two thirds of respondents claimed to have some or more interest in politics.

Despite their interest in politics, more than half of young people lack confidence in their knowledge and understanding of British politics, with only a third claiming confidence in such matters.

Young people do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process. Only a very small minority considered there existed meaningful opportunities open to them to influence the political scene, while nearly half of young people have a general faith in the value of voting, and two thirds claim little or no trust at all.

Table 1: Political engagement (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GCSE Positive</th>
<th>Non-GCSE Positive</th>
<th>GCSE Negative</th>
<th>Non-GCSE Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in politics?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in personal knowledge and understanding of British politics?</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful opportunities open to them to influence the political scene?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to elections</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to voting</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future political activism?</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of political parties and professional politicians</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in political parties and professional politicians</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Matt Henn is a Professor of Social Research, interested in researching young people and political engagement. Nick Foard is Senior Lecturer in Social Research, his main areas of research interest are socio-cultural and political identities of youth. They are both based in the School of Social Sciences at Nottingham Trent University.
These online survey results indicate that there are no appreciable differences in orientation to formal politics between those young people who have taken a GCSE in Citizenship and those who have not. However, our online focus groups reveal some interesting findings about the potential value of citizenship classes for increasing understanding of politics and citizenship issues, and for re-engaging young people with the political process.

Many of the young people would like to see citizenship being delivered as formal classes explicitly devoted to the subject, rather than it being embedded within other subjects where it might become lost. One participant received support from others when she suggested that, “I feel I would have benefited from these classes because we wouldn’t really have a choice of whether we wanted to listen to it or not and maybe I would have voted this year”. Although not a unanimous view, similar sentiments were shared in other groups. For instance, one person felt that, “there should be classes at a younger age so that we are exposed to politics early on … if done in the right way that would help boost interest in it”, while someone else from the same group offered that, “it would give children much more of an insight and understanding”. Although not unanimous, this popular view supports the Goldsmith Commission’s suggestion that citizenship education should be made compulsory from an earlier age.

Overall, the attitudes expressed by participants towards citizenship education were mixed. Although the views of some of the young people in our focus groups were undoubtedly negative, there is a clear indication that these have arisen from poor personal experiences. By and large… these young people are not writing-off the idea of citizenship education, they can see the potential of a brand of citizenship education that offers more than they have themselves previously experienced at school.”

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“Lack of knowledge and understanding about politics and citizenship issues serves as a major impediment to young people’s engagement with the democratic process; extending citizenship education in schools might just serve to help provide the political literacy skills necessary for young people to intervene in and connect with British democracy in an effective and a confident way.”

References

Acknowledgements
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Notes
1. Quotes used in this article are from the original text responses typed by participants during the online focus groups, and have not been altered to improve spelling or grammar.
2. Notably those no longer in full-time education, those from poorer social backgrounds and those from black and minority ethnic groups.

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