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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.



damned if they do and damned if they don't, young people in Britain are often characterised as apathetic and politically lazy, 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 they were prominent in a series of significant – and indeed

dramatic – mass social actions. Whether these were the spontaneous and often violent episodes of civil unrest that beset many major cities across Britain last summer, the more organised student-led protests against university tuition fees, or the campaign of occupations at St Paul's Square and at other major metropolitan sites, young people's interventions have been observed with increasing alarm by commentators.

Indeed, there has been growing anxiety within government circles over the course of the last decade that young people in Britain are disengaging from the 'formal' political process and from democratic institutions (Ministry of Justice 2007). This is evident in the persistently low election turnout of young voters, but there is also considerable research evidence that this generation has been characterised as dissatisfied 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 Sloam 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

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focus groups during November 2011, with 84 attainers who did not vote at the 2010 General Election. The focus groups afforded us the opportunity to consider how young people had experienced Citizenship classes at school.

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

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 well 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.
- Young people hold a deep antipathy to politicians and the political parties; they consider them to be remote and self-serving, with no commitment towards championing the interests of young people. One tenth of this particular cohort of young people are positively disposed to these political players, whereas four fifths hold a negative view of them.
- Finally, the results reveal that young people are deeply distrustful of the political classes; less than a sixth admit to any trust in the political parties or professional politicians, while four fifths claim little or no trust at all.

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

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 wouldnt 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 – “mmore effort should be made in school to educate, it should not be a choice as to wether we want to follow politics”.

Participants from the group who had not remained in full-time education were particularly vocal about how teachers need to make the subject more interesting and engaging, stating that it “depends what approach they have on it and how they teach it”, and “if done in the right way that would help boost interest in it”. In another group, one participant’s school had made use of student representatives standing for each party, their role to help explain policies to other students, thereby enabling them to become better informed. This idea received interest from other participants: “i wish all schools had something like [that] ... id know loads more if they had it in my college”. Methods of delivery were often considered

alongside the young people’s perceptions of teachers responsible for delivery, with one participant capturing this shared view in her statement that “the right teacher could make the difference”.

The point at which citizenship education should be introduced was widely discussed, and there was a reasonably strong belief that if left too late, there is a danger that young people will have lost interest – “i think it should be taught from a much younger age”. Capturing the imagination at the right stage was seen to be important by a number of participants and across several of the focus 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,² there is a clear indication that these have arisen from poor personal experiences. By and large, however, these same young people are not writing-off the idea of citizenship education; like their contemporaries from more affluent backgrounds and those who had opted to remain in full-time education, they can see the potential of a brand of citizenship education that offers more than they have themselves previously experienced at school. It would appear that innovation in the structure and delivery of the subject would be welcomed by young people who

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clearly see the benefit of engaging with concepts of citizenship. If a review of the subject is to take place, then it should be carried out with the willingness to explore these options further.

Conclusion

The evidence from our research study suggests that contrary to popular (mis) conceptions, young people are interested in politics and in broader citizenship issues. However, they do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process—our research data reveal that today’s generation of young people consider themselves to be relatively powerless, politically. Interestingly, and despite feeling that there are few opportunities open for them to intervene effectively within, or influence, the world of formal politics, they do have some faith in the value of elections and voting. However, their first experience of a general election at last year’s contest has left them feeling frustrated, and they are deeply critical of professional politicians and the main political parties.

Just at the time when the Coalition Government has initiated a process for review of the National Curriculum which raises questions about the future of statutory citizenship education in schools, young people themselves consider there to be significant potential value in such classes. The shared view seems to be that 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—perhaps most importantly—a confident way. ■

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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.