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Citizenship Education in England

1. The origins of citizenship education in England

Given the common perception of England as the ‘mother of parliaments’,¹ it can come as a surprise to realize just how recently citizenship education became a statutory subject in the curriculum in English schools.

For the greater part of the twentieth century, official reports on education were almost silent about citizenship education – at least in the sense of citizenship education as an explicit programme of teaching and learning. Partly this reflected the identification of education for citizenship with a certain kind of moral training, in which the virtues of the ‘good’ citizen were believed to be transmitted indirectly through general school subjects – a kind of cross-curricular osmosis. Partly it reflected the assumption that subjects such as politics and economics were beyond the capacity of the average pupil (Lawton 2000).

Any forms of citizenship education that did exist in schools were, by and large, either aimed at elite students and based around the acquisition of information useful in preparation for high-status professions, or seen as a means of inculcating in the children of the working classes the virtues of patriotism, humility, service, and political debate. Even in the 1970s it was not uncommon to find lessons in current affairs and the British Constitution for older students in grammar schools and the academic streams of comprehensive schools, with lessons in ‘social’ studies for the less able (Batho 1990).

The introduction of community service programmes in schools in the 1960s followed a similar pattern. Developed initially in the grammar and ‘public’ (private) schools as an option for senior students, these programmes were increasingly targeted at low-achieving students in their last years of compulsory schooling – a movement which gained impetus with the raising of the school leaving age to sixteen in 1973. Though quite widespread at the time, community service programmes were only loosely linked to, and rarely, if ever, conceived as a vehicle for delivering elements of the curriculum (Edwards and Fogelman 1991).

This class-based, ‘passive citizen’ model of education for citizenship very much reflected the state of English society at the time: divided by class sen-

sibilities and lacking a consciously 'citizen' culture. The terms 'citizen' and 'citizenship' have been slow to enter everyday language in England and it was not until the very end of the twentieth century that they began to appear in educational documents with any regularity. Research at the time showed that even in the 1990s many English people still did not consciously think of themselves as 'citizens', but preferred to be called 'subjects' (Crewe et al. 1997).

2. Political literacy and the influence of single-issue politics

The 1970s and 1980s saw a series of quite radical attempts by educational innovators to develop politically-related curriculum programmes that questioned traditional assumptions about schooling and encouraged all young people, regardless of class or academic performance, to take an active part in society.

The first of these focused on 'political literacy': an idea promoted in a curriculum project called the Programme for Political Literacy, financed by the Hansard Society and championed by members of the recently-formed Politics Association, especially Bernard Crick. The idea of 'political literacy' was based on an essentially 'active citizen' model of citizenship education, i.e., on educating the future citizen for active participation in a democratic society rather than simply training for conformity or obedience. Its supporters advocated a 'conceptual approach' to teaching and learning, and were as much concerned with skills development, especially 'critical' skills, as with knowledge and attitude learning (Crick and Porter 1978).

However, the change of government in 1979 put paid to any hopes of this programme influencing official policy, at least in the short term. The Conservative government was deeply suspicious of any form of political education in schools and exponents of such programmes left themselves open to accusations of political indoctrination.

During the 1980s, the idea of political literacy was sidelined in favour of a number of single-issue-based forms of education, such as 'peace education', 'multicultural (later 'anti-racist') education', 'futures education', and 'development education' – sometimes combined in a curriculum programme called 'World Studies'. Although not as explicitly political as the Programme for Political Literacy, these 'new educations' clearly had an implicitly political dimension. Their controversial subject matter and open-ended methods were seen by the Conservative establishment as an attempt to radicalize the young. This and their association with certain single-issue pressure groups²

that had risen to prominence at the time made it difficult for them to gain any level of official acceptance (Davies et al. 1999).

A related development was the growing interest in student participation, i.e., the idea that pupils should be involved in decision-making in their schools. Although its origins lay in progressive forms of private education, the idea began to take root in the 1980s in certain more progressive comprehensive schools and local education authorities such as ILEA (Inner London Education Authority), and an increasing number of such schools began to set up their own student school and year councils (Edwards and Fogelman 1991). Supporters of student participation tended to conceive of it as an activity distinct from rather than integral to the curriculum, that is, as a basic right to which young people were entitled rather than a learning opportunity *per se*. In the invoking of children's rights, critics in government saw it also as yet another attempt to subvert traditional authority and radicalize young people.

3. A change of political atmosphere

By the 1990s, the political atmosphere in England was changing. The terms 'citizen' and 'citizenship' had begun to enter into everyday speech and develop more positive connotations. John Major, the Conservative Prime Minister, unveiled his Citizen's Charter: a programme promising a better deal for the users of public services. A Commission on Citizenship, set up by the Speaker of the House of Commons, issued a report recommending that every young person should study and experience 'Active Citizenship' from their earliest years through to higher education, though it did not go so far as to spell out what this might mean in practise.

The problem was that the National Curriculum, introduced in English schools in 1988, was constructed almost entirely in terms of traditional school subjects. This, the detailed programmes of study, and the demands of assessment entailed by the National Curriculum, meant there was little time or space in schools for the teaching of new or alternative subject matter. So when in 1990, acting on the recommendations of the Speaker's Commission, the National Curriculum Council suggested a programme of 'education for citizenship' for schools, what emerged was not a new National Curriculum subject but a non-statutory 'cross-curricular theme' – one of five such themes that was meant to permeate the whole curriculum. However, mainly due to the demands of the existing National Curriculum subjects, the cross-curricular themes were largely ignored by schools, with education for citizenship being ignored more than most (Whitty et al. 1994).

4. The Crick Report

Despite, or perhaps because of the failure of the cross-curricular themes, the constituency for some form of education for democratic citizenship in schools continued to grow throughout the 1990s. There was increased concern in official circles about both the apparent apathy towards and lack of involvement of young people in public life (the so-called ‘democratic deficit’), as well as the consequences of the decline in traditional forms of civic cohesion. This coincided with the arrival of a new era of consensus politics. The value of education for active citizenship, whether in the sense of civic obligation (Conservative) or civic morality (Labour), had, for the first time, strong cross-party support in Parliament.

Citizenship education was particularly close to the heart of David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the time. In the 1997 White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, Blunkett pledged to strengthen education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools. He also set up the Advisory Group on Citizenship, chaired by (then Professor) Bernard Crick, to provide advice on ‘effective education for citizenship’ in schools (QCA, 1998).

Reporting in 1998, the Advisory Group recommended that ‘citizenship education’ be a statutory entitlement and that all schools be required to show that they were fulfilling this obligation. It made a conscious effort to avoid the problems that had dogged previous attempts at curriculum reform in this area, seeking to develop a curriculum model acceptable politically and practicable to implement in an inflexible, traditional, subject-dominated curriculum. The solution proposed involved a combination of a broad definition of aims and purposes, flexibility of delivery, a framework of tightly defined learning outcomes, and public accountability for schools.

Talking about ‘active citizenship’, while in reality steering a careful path between ‘passive citizen’ and ‘active citizen’ curriculum models, the Crick report fused a range of earlier initiatives and traditions – such as community service, student participation and political literacy – with contemporary concerns about levels of apathy, ignorance, and cynicism about public life. It defined education for citizenship in terms of three interrelated ‘strands’:

- ‘social and moral responsibility’,
- ‘community-based learning’, and
- ‘political literacy’.³

Focusing on curriculum outcomes rather than inputs, the report was able to establish a framework for translating policy into practice without having to prescribe an actual curriculum programme that might have been controversial.

5. Citizenship as statutory school subject

The Advisory Group's report was well received politically and 'citizenship' became a statutory subject in the National Curriculum in England for 11- to 16-year-olds in September 2002. The statutory Order for the new subject closely matched the spirit, if not every detail, of the report's recommendations.

First, the Order prescribed what pupils were to learn in little more than two pages of text, set out in the form of short bullet points and divided up into three categories:

- 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens'
- 'skills of enquiry and communication' and
- 'skills of participation and responsible action'.⁴

Second, it placed a strong emphasis on flexibility of delivery and local autonomy. There were no instructions about level of detail to be taught, time to be spent, or how it should fit into a school's existing programme of activities.

Third, it required that this new subject undergo the same assessment and evaluation procedures legally required of all other National Curriculum subjects, including: formal assessment at the end of Year 9 (students aged 13 to 14); annual reports to parents; and inspection by the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED).

6. Implementation of the new subject

How have schools responded to this? The evidence suggests that curriculum practice varies considerably from school to school: some, a minority, have embraced the new subject with enthusiasm; others, perhaps the majority, have responded with indifference.

Some schools have adopted a 'cross-curricular' approach, claiming they are able to satisfy the requirements of the citizenship Order through existing school subjects. Others say they teach citizenship largely through the ethos of their school and extracurricular activities, such as volunteering, community involvement, pupil participation, or special 'suspended timetable days'.⁵ Perhaps the most common approach has been to incorporate citizenship into the pastoral, or 'tutor', programme normally delivered by class teachers alongside their specialist subject teaching, either in tandem with or subsumed within Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE).

To date, very few secondary schools have introduced citizenship as a separate subject in its own right, and fewer still are able to offer an integrated

programme combining discrete subject teaching with other forms of delivery, curricular and extracurricular. Where it has been embraced with enthusiasm, it is often one area of the subject that has been developed rather than the subject as a whole: a school might be committed to innovatory practice in community involvement or learner voice, for example, but provide little teaching, say, about government or the criminal justice system.⁶

7. A subject still in search of a definition?

How is this response to be understood? Of the different factors at work here, two stand out. The first is that, although the statutory nature of citizenship compels schools to be seen to be doing something to mark the existence of citizenship education as a subject, the demands of the National Curriculum actually give them, however enthusiastic, little room to manoeuvre.

The second, arguably more deep-seated, factor is the almost complete lack of any explicit or unified tradition of citizenship teaching in English schools, the lack also of any clearly-defined tradition of teaching through community involvement or student participation, or of integrating different kinds of citizenship learning activities. This much was admitted when the Crick report said, 'a national approach to citizenship education is novel to this country'.⁷

We have, therefore, a teaching profession not only ill-equipped for the introduction of citizenship technically, but also *intellectually*. It is not just a case of unfamiliarity with the detail of official requirements, it is that even when they are in possession of this information many teachers still fail to *understand* the *implications* of the subject – a situation borne out by a number of school inspections.⁸

One of the problems is that the broad principles set out in the Crick report, and the 'light-touch' curriculum based on its recommendations, can be interpreted in a variety of ways and do not translate directly into any one curriculum model. The lack of direction in these and official guidance documents, however justifiable at the time, has led to confusion about the underlying nature of the subject and given rise to some quite different emphases in curriculum practice. A recent official report concluded that in spite of 'considerable progress', it is clear that there is 'still not yet a strong consensus about the aims of citizenship education or about how to incorporate it in the curriculum'.⁹

The years since the formal appearance of citizenship as a statutory subject in 2002 have seen the development of a wide range of structures and mech-

anisms to support the implementation of the citizenship Order in schools – from model schemes of work¹⁰ to a school self-evaluation tool and, most recently, a teachers' professional development certificate.¹¹

The issue facing policy-makers in England now is how to obtain more agreement about, and, therefore, homogeneity in curriculum practice in citizenship education as a means of raising standards across schools and guaranteeing all students their educational entitlement. This task, in part at least, is one of clarification, for in many respects citizenship education in England is a subject still in search of a definition.

Notes

- 1 John Bright (1811–1889), English Radical and Liberal statesman.
- 2 For example, the association of peace education with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.
- 3 QCA, 1998, 2.10.
- 4 QCA, 1999, 14–16.
- 5 These are days which take place in certain English schools where the normal timetable or curriculum is suspended or cancelled so that the whole school (or specific year groups) can take part in one collective activity. This is quite common with regard to citizenship education.
- 6 For examples of innovative practice, see Rowe, 2005.
- 7 QCA, 1998, 1.4.
- 8 For example, OFSTED, 2003 & 2006. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) is the non-ministerial government department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England ('HMCI').
- 9 OFSTED, 2006, title page.
- 10 Schemes of work are 'guidelines to support medium- and long-term planning ... help[ing] schools implement the national curriculum programmes of study'. (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes3/faq/?view=get#539416>, accessed on 31 August 2007).
- 11 For a more exhaustive list, see Huddleston (2005).

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Further Reading

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