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A keynote by David Kerr

Citizenship Education in the UK: Boom, Bust and Crunch – The Need for Urgent Action

Summary

In his keynote presentation, David Kerr took participants on a journey through the trajectory of citizenship education (CE) in the UK, particularly England, over the past 20 years. David Kerr has been closely involved in that journey, as researcher, policy advisor and NGO through his various roles as: expert advisor to the Citizenship Advisory Group (Crick Group), secondment to the Department for Education (DfE) to help transform policy into practice; research director at NFER of the ground-breaking Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS); and Director of Education at the Citizenship Foundation, the leading NGO in the field, and is, therefore, perfectly placed to comment.

He used the analogy of – **Boom, Bust and Crunch** – to describe the different phases of that citizenship education journey and pinpoint the key developments in each phase. David Kerr ended his keynote by drawing parallels between the current state of citizenship education in the UK with that of other European countries and calling for the development of what he termed “**A new Curriculum for Democratic Life in the 21st Century**”. He then sketched out the core components which should be at the heart of such a curriculum. Finally, he called for all those interested in citizenship education to work more closely together to promote such a curriculum in order to reclaim the political and educational space for the area that has been lost in recent years both in the UK and in Europe before it is too late.

Citizenship Education – Boom

The period from 1997 to 2010 was the **Boom** years for citizenship education in the UK, particularly England. It coincided with strong central support for citizenship education at political and educational level leading to a period of extensive gains in terms of policy, practice and research. By 2010 the UK (England) was regarded as one of the leading countries for citizenship education both in Europe and worldwide.

David Kerr reminded participants that the promotion of citizenship education in the late 1990s was born out of a response to a series of perceived crises in society at the time notably: democratic deficit and the lack of engagement in civic and political life particularly among younger age groups; concern at the declining moral and social behaviour of young people; and a feeling that communities and society were much less cohesive. The need to

take action coalesced under the new Labour government in all-Party support for the setting up of the Citizenship Advisory Group, chaired by the eminent political scientist, Professor (later Sir) Bernard Crick (and known as the Crick Group).

The Crick Group report defined citizenship education as an inclusive approach for all young people that combined three interrelated strands namely:

- **Social and moral responsibility** – as a foundation from an early age
- **Community involvement** – with the range of communities expanding over time
- **Political literacy** – developing knowledge, understanding and skills to be effective in “public life” through practical opportunities to participate and engage in and beyond school

Political literacy was the new and crucial strand in an education for citizenship. Following political and educational acceptance of the recommendations of the Crick Group Citizenship was introduced, for the first time in 2002, as a compulsory National Curriculum subject for all 11 to 16 year olds in England. The new Citizenship curriculum was revised again in 2005 in response to the London bombings and unrest in Northern cities with an increased emphasis on “Identities and Diversity”.

David Kerr went on to describe the main findings from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS), which ran from 2001 to 2010 and followed the progress of the first cohort of students in schools to have compulsory citizenship education. He confirmed that though it had taken time head teachers and teachers in schools had come to recognise the benefits of citizenship education on student behaviour, participation and confidence as well as its impact on student awareness of current affairs, improved tolerance and respect and increased participation now and in the future. The CELS study had concluded through statistical modelling that citizenship education (CE) had the greatest impact of students’ civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours where:

- Young people are **taught CE regularly and consistently** in the curriculum, at least one period a week, from a young age through to 18
- CE is planned by **coordinators** trained in Citizenship, not PSHE
- CE is taught by **specialist teachers**
- There is **planned assessment** of CE, through GCSE examinations and the like

Citizenship Education – Bust

The period from 2010 to present has been the **Bust** years for citizenship education in the UK, coinciding with declining political and educational support at central and local level. The election of a new centre-right Coalition government in 2010 saw a change in emphasis in political and educational policy to the detriment of the gains made by citizenship education in the preceding years. Though the National Curriculum remained in place the emphasis was now more on key skills and the promotion of core subjects such as English, maths and science, the acquisition of a “canon of knowledge” over skills development and rigorous national testing. At the same time, the government encouraged parental choice in education with the creation of new types of school – free and academy - that did not have to follow the National Curriculum and reported directly to the Secretary of State for Education and not local communities. As a consequence, citizenship education quickly plummeted from the political and educational agenda at national, local and school level.

The National Curriculum was revised again in 2012 with an emphasis on knowledge acquisition. The new Citizenship curriculum saw a focus on knowledge of political and legal institutions, on volunteering and a new strand of financial literacy with the downplaying of active citizenship and skills elements. It meant the replacement of the “reformist / transformative” model of citizenship education, as espoused by the Crick Group, with a more “conformist” model, in keeping with the political views of the new Conservative government. Meanwhile, the response to on-going crises in society brought by the: threat of extremism/radicalisation; impact of austerity policies on the economy and society in terms of increased unemployment; and the pace of change in the modern world, was the initiation of a series of unconnected policy responses in education. As David Kerr reminded participants **“when society gets an itch it is education that often gets scratched”**. These included initiatives such as: Prevent targeting radicalisation; the promotion of fundamental British values (FBV); support for character education; and the championing of financial education. Though citizenship education provided an ideal vehicle to ground these initiatives in the education system the opportunity was missed by government.

Citizenship Education – Crunch

The culmination of the Bust years has led to the current position of **Crunch** for citizenship education in the UK, particularly England. Despite the fact that the crises in society that led to the introduction of citizenship education in the 1990s remain undiminished, and have been joined by new ones linked to extremism, radicalisation and the rise of populism, citizenship education has largely fallen from the current political and educational agenda. Citizenship education in the UK has now reached a critical or crunch point where without some form of concerted action and support it may disappear completely from the curriculum and schools, wiping out all the gains made in the Boom years following the Crick Report. David Kerr argued that the situation of Crunch for citizenship education in the UK is mirrored by a similar position for citizenship education in many European countries.

The Need for Urgent Action – a New Curriculum for Democratic Life in the 21st Century

David Kerr concluded his keynote with a call for a re-think and relaunch of citizenship education – using the intelligence from the Boom years – to develop a citizenship education curriculum that better fitted the realities of the present. Citizenship education was in danger of being labelled by politicians and educationalists as something that was useful in the late 1990s and early 2000s but not currently. There was an urgent need to overturn this misconception in the UK and across Europe.

David Kerr set out a framework for what should be included in this **New Curriculum for Democratic Life in the 21st Century** Including:

- Personal, social and moral
- Communities, identities and diversity
- “Political literacy” that is transformative
- Human rights frameworks – conventions, charters, rulings
- History of last 60 years – UK, Europe and international
- Geopolitics
- Economy, finance and big business

- Forms of protest – traditional/on-line
- Futures challenges and scenarios
- Partnerships – local, national, European and international
- Opportunities for “vertical” participation and voice
- Handling controversial issues
- Reflection and review

He also asserted that at its heart it should be a curriculum that is inclusive of all young people and effective in helping to replace the current societal language of uncertainty, division, distrust, exclusion, despair and apathy with the more positive language of inclusion, confidence, hope, scepticism and efficacy. Above all, it should be a curriculum that seeks to:

- Build effectiveness in “public life”
- Foster efficacy – I can make a difference alongside others
- Encourage scepticism – the “so what” question
- Build confidence and hope – now and for the future

David Kerr argued that we owe it to the pioneers, like Bernard Crick, and others who picked up the citizenship education mantle in the 1990s and took it forward forcefully, as well as to current and future generations of young people in Europe, to keep on raising our collective voices and fighting for the entitlement to an effective education for citizenship for all young people regardless of where they live and study. He called on the NECE Conference 2016 and the growing NECE network to spearhead the fightback for citizenship education that would see it reclaim its political and educational legitimacy and space before it was too late. It would be a tragedy if citizenship education was but a political and educational footnote from the late 1990s and early 2000s given how it can help to tackle many of the issues and challenges facing society across Europe.

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