Citizenship Education in England

Attempting ‘A change in the political culture’

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Background Context

Despite its global reputation for promoting parliamentary democracy it is surprising that England does not have a long track record in citizenship education. Citizenship only became a formal curriculum subject for 11 to 16 year olds, for the first time in 2002. Prior to this, there was no official national policy to guide teaching and learning in this area (Kerr, 1999).

Citizenship was introduced following a review by the Citizenship Advisory Group (CAG) chaired by Professor (Sir) Bernard Crick which declared that:

‘We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting.’ (QCA/ Crick Report, 1998)¹

For the CAG, the goal of this policy reform was to increase political literacy and active, responsible participation, both in the political and in the civic spheres, and at community, national, European and global levels (Kerr, 2003). The CAG report and its recommendations initially received support from across the political spectrum and policy field (McLaughlin, 2000).

However, the content of and context for citizenship education has evolved considerably since 2002 to today. One of the key drivers has been changing emphases in education policy brought by successive governments. This has seen the introduction, over the past decade, of community cohesion, integration and combating extremism as core goals of the Citizenship curriculum. This new emphasis emerged in part as a response to the eruption of racial tensions (and riots) in Northern England in 2001 and the terrorist attack in London by so-called “home-grown” bombers in 2005. These events prompted a review of the place of diversity in the curriculum (namely the Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review; Ajegbo et al, 2007)². Following the Review’s recommendations, the new National Curriculum in 2008 revised and updated the Citizenship curriculum to add a fourth aim in the guise of a new thematic strand

entitled *Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK* (QCA, 2007). In addition, a series of additional school policies were also introduced, such as the *Duty to Promote Community Cohesion* which placed a legal study on schools to promote cohesion (DCSF, 2007).

The current Conservative government has continued this policy shift with an added emphasis on Citizenship's role in countering extremism. To this end, the then secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, announced that all schools would be required to promote fundamental British values from September 2014 (DfE, 2014). The move followed concerns about the values being promoted by some schools, particularly perceived concerns about strict Islamist values in some schools in Birmingham and London. Indeed, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools Lord Nash, in a letter in March 2015, explained the changes were designed to:

> ‘Tighten up the standards on pupil welfare to improve safeguarding, and the standards on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils to strengthen the barriers to extremism’. (Nash, 2015)

This has been allied with the introduction of a new National Curriculum in 2014 with an emphasis on promoting a core ‘canon of knowledge’ for pupils through core subjects. For a period Citizenship was under threat of removal as a statutory subject but survived. However, the new Citizenship National Curriculum has a strong emphasis on political, legal and economic knowledge at the expense of the development of skills and active citizenship elements (DfE, 2014).

**Citizenship Definition**

The nearest thing to a definition of citizenship education is the Purpose of Study statement for the 2014 Citizenship National Curriculum which states that:

> ‘A high-quality citizenship education helps to provide pupils with knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society. In particular, citizenship education should foster pupils’ keen awareness and understanding of democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld. Teaching should equip pupils with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments. It should also prepare pupils to take their place in society as responsible citizens, manage their money well and make sound financial decisions.’ (DfE, 2013)

**Non-formal Citizenship Education**

There is not a great emphasis on non-formal citizenship education. The closest is, between 2002 and 2015, the host of additional initiatives and policies introduced to encourage student participation and ‘pupil voice’ in decision-making in schools and in local government (see HM Government, 2010). For example, schools were strongly encouraged to establish student councils (see Wisby and Whitty, 2006). At the same time, there has also been an increased emphasis on encouraging young people to get involved in their local community and to

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3 The duty to promote fundamental British values has generated considerable discussion and debate and led to a range of advice to schools as to how to move forward. For example see: http://www.doingsmsc.org.uk/british-values/

4 Democratic Life, an umbrella group of organisations with an interest in strengthening democracy in the UK and promoting effective citizenship education fought a vigorous and ultimately successful campaign to preserve Citizenship as a national curriculum subject in schools, including lobbying Michael Gove the Secretary of State for Education. See: http://www.democraticlife.org.uk/
undertake voluntary work. This trend has been maintained by the current government through their ‘Big Society’ policy programme and the National Citizen Service (NCS) for young people (Cabinet Office, 2010).²

Legal Environment
Citizenship is a statutory National Curriculum subject for all 11 to 16 year olds in state secondary schools with all students having an entitlement to Citizenship teaching and learning.⁶ It is part of a non-statutory framework alongside Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) for all 5 to 10 year olds in primary schools⁷. Schools also have a legal responsibility to show how they are developing community cohesion, since 2007, and promoting fundamental British values, since 2014. Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, can report on how well Citizenship is being promoted in schools, as a contribution to community cohesion and British values, as part of their inspection of schools. The progress of Citizenship in schools has been the subject of a government commissioned longitudinal study (CELS), which ran from 2001 to 2010, as well as three reports from Ofsted⁸.

Stakeholders
There are a range of key stakeholders who have evolved around the renewed emphasis on citizenship education since 2002. They include: NGOs such as the Citizenship Foundation (CF), Amnesty International, UNICEF, CND, Oxfam and the Red Cross; professional organisations and networks such as the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) and Citized, a network of teacher educators and researchers; lobby groups such as Democratic Life (DL); exam boards developing citizenship qualifications at GCSE and AS/A level; and bodies linked to the government and politics such as the Parliamentary Education Service and DfE Citizenship Expert Group.⁹

Challenges
The strong evidence base developed for Citizenship around the CELS study and Ofsted report highlights many challenges facing this area since 2002 (Benton et al., 2008; Keating et al., 2009 and 2010; Ofsted, 2006, 2010 and 2013). Perhaps the greatest is that around the consistency and coherence of links between policy, practice and vision. The CELS report of 2010 showed that citizenship education is most effective for young people over time: where they encounter it regularly in the curriculum (starting in primary schools); where that curriculum time for Citizenship is planned and taught by trained specialist Citizenship teachers; where there are quality teaching and learning materials; where there is clear assessment of students’ learning and, finally, where Citizenship has status in a school, and the active support of school

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² The National Citizen Service (NCS) has considerable promotional material available for those who want to know more about its aims, practices and outcomes. See more at: http://www.ncsem1.org.uk/

⁶ The Association for Citizenship Teaching has published a range of advice and resources to help schools to get to grips with delivering the new 2014 Citizenship National Curriculum. These can be accessed at: http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/about-citizenship/citizenship-national-curriculum-2014-guidance

⁷ The non-statutory framework for Citizenship and PSHE in primary schools can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/citizenship-programmes-of-study-for-key-stages-1-and-2

⁸ All the reports and outcomes from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) conducted by NFER can be accessed at: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/cels/

⁹ Useful websites include: Citizenship Foundation (CF) at http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/; Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) at http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/ and Citized at http://www.citized.info/
leaders (Keating et al, 2010).

Ensuring that these conditions are being met has proved challenging in England, largely because of constantly changing education policies and priorities by government. These have given mixed messages about the focus on and value of Citizenship in schools and prevented Citizenship for firmly taking root in schools in the curriculum, school community and through links with wider communities. The research base shows that the progress of Citizenship has been bumpy, patchy and inconsistent with excellent practice mixed with less good. As a result, Citizenship remains a work in progress in England, with the on-going key challenge being that of how to translate ambitious policies into ambitious practices and meet the vision of the CAG in effecting ‘a change in the political culture’. 
References


