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Setting the record straight: an introduction to citizenship education

Democratic Life is calling on politicians from all parties to support citizenship education so that it remains in the National Curriculum and schools continue to improve their delivery of the subject.

Overview

This briefing will cover how citizenship education:

- became established in schools – first as a cross-curricular theme under a Conservative government and then as a statutory subject under the last Labour government – in response to increasing levels of political apathy;
- is the only compulsory curriculum subject that encompasses politics, economics, and the law and that teaches young people about their rights and responsibilities as citizens;
- can improve pupil motivation and behaviour and schools' relationships with the communities they serve when it is supported by school leaders and taught by confident teachers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Democratic Life

Democratic Life is a coalition of organisations and committed individuals that champions the teaching of democracy in schools through citizenship education (see appendix 1). Mindful of the difficult spending choices that the government will have to make in the coming years, and conscious that the political process is suffering from a lack of public confidence, we are working together to refresh and restate the arguments for the core values of citizenship education.

We are even more convinced of the need for our coalition as we anticipate the Government's curriculum reforms and the Education and Children's Bill. While the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove MP, has been very vocal about his commitment to English, maths and sciences and his intention to revive history, we still don't know enough about this Government's commitment to citizenship education.

Our aim is to ensure that citizenship education not only retains its importance in the National Curriculum, but also that it receives more support from the Department of Education so that teaching of the subject continues to improve.

Democratic Life and its members are not aligned with any political party. Rather, our aim is to achieve a cross-party consensus on the important role citizenship education plays in ensuring our democracy's health.

1.2 What is the purpose of citizenship education?

One of the central purposes of education, besides equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need for employability and personal fulfilment, is to enable them to make an effective contribution to public life.

Citizenship is the only curriculum subject that develops the knowledge, understanding and skills that children and young people need to become effective, informed and active citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to society and participate in the democratic process.

Citizenship was introduced as a National Curriculum subject in England at key stage 3 (ages 11-14) and key stage 4 (ages 14 – 16) in 2002.

2. Why was citizenship only adopted into the curriculum in 2002?

2.1 The development of citizenship education

Education for citizenship has a long, if not steady, history in England. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, soon after the introduction of compulsory education, civics resources were produced in response to demand from school boards and teachers and, while not mandatory for all schools, these resources were taken up in large numbers¹. In the first two decades of the twentieth century a progressive movement calling for citizenship to be adopted by schools started to take shape. It grew in strength in response to the rise of fascism in Europe and in 1934 the Association for Education in Citizenship (AEC) was established. Reflecting at the time on the need for citizenship education, the then President of the Board of Education, Oliver Stanley, wrote:

The decay of democracy abroad has led many people to the conclusion that, if those democratic institutions which we in this country agree are essential for the full development of the individual are to be preserved, some systematic training in the duties of citizenship is necessary.²

Following the war, however, it was believed that religious education was sufficient to create 'good citizens' and, during the Cold War especially, there was an unfounded fear that introducing teaching about Parliament and politics into schools would allow students to be indoctrinated into teachers' own beliefs.³

The subject began to gain traction again in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, when concern about young people's political apathy led to the Conservative government making citizenship education a cross curricular theme in the National Curriculum in 1990. Crucially during this period, though citizenship education was a cross-curricular theme and on the political agenda, 'the uptake of the subject was both sporadic and piecemeal' while it remained non-statutory.⁴

2. 2 Establishing citizenship in the curriculum: the Crick Report

Following the 1997 general election, the new Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett MP, established a Citizenship Advisory Group under the

¹ Heater, D. (2001), 'The history of citizenship education in England', *The Curriculum Journal*, 12 (1), 106.

² Batho, G., (1990), 'The history of the teaching of civics and citizenship in English schools', *The Curriculum Journal*, 1 (1), 95.

³ This is unlawful: the Education Act 1996 (sections 406 and 407) requires governing bodies, headteachers and local education authorities to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to learners' attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views. And teachers are trained to teach in ways that are nonpartisan; they guide students through major social debates by developing pupils' skills of critical thinking through discussion and rational, respectful debate.

⁴ O'Hare, P. and Gay, O. (2006), *The Political Process and Citizenship Education*, London, House of Commons Library, 9.

chairmanship of Professor Sir Bernard Crick. The advisory group was distinctively cross-party and featured the Conservative former Secretary of State for Education, Lord Kenneth Baker, alongside educationalists, journalists and representatives from the charity and criminal justice sectors and the Church of England.

Based on their belief that effective civic and civil participation depends on 'developing values, skills and understanding', the Advisory Group unanimously recommended that citizenship education become a statutory subject in schools. Their aim, they claimed, was:

nothing less than a change in the political culture in 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; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.⁵

To achieve this aim, the Group put forward a vision of citizenship education based on three key principles: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy.

Following the recommendations made by Crick's committee, citizenship education became a statutory subject in key stages 3 and 4 in 2002.

⁵Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998), *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools*, London, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 7-8.

3. Citizenship education today

3.1 In the curriculum

Occasionally, we hear criticisms of citizenship education that suggest it is not thought of as a serious subject, but rather as a 'do-gooding' exercise that lacks intellectual rigour, or even as a vehicle for New Labour. None of these accusations are correct; citizenship education contains elements of politics, philosophy and economics (a highly respected combination of subjects), law, ethics and sociology. And citizenship education has been designed to address concerns about the growing gap between the citizen and the law and Parliament and the important issue of citizens withdrawing from public and community life, which all political parties are rightly concerned about. Indeed, the National Curriculum states that in both key stage 3 (11-14 years) and key stage 4 (14-16 years) young people should be taught about:

- key elements of Parliamentary democracy;
- the legal rights and responsibilities of citizens (including key human rights);
- the justice system;
- the contribution of civil society and voluntary organisations to the wider community;
- taxation and public finances;
- Britain as a diverse society and the importance of political tolerance;
- the role of Britain in the wider world and its relations with Europe, the Commonwealth and the wider international community;
- global challenges, including climate change and economic globalisation.⁶

No other subject in the curriculum covers these areas of study, which are so important in helping young people understand the modern world and the part they play in it. While subjects such as history, geography, science, English and religious education draw on and refer to this citizenship knowledge, it is not their brief to teach them; and Ofsted has consistently underlined the weakness of the 'cross-curricular approach' (which claims that other subjects can adequately cover this content).⁷ Furthermore, citizenship is an active and contemporary subject that requires teachers to use topical and controversial issues and real contexts for learning and action to develop young people's subject knowledge,

⁶ For more information regarding the curriculum see the QCDA's guidance at <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/index.aspx>.

⁷ In 2007, after conducting an inquiry into citizenship education, the Education and Skills Committee found that the 'cross curricular' approach was roundly rejected by experts and the Committee itself recognised that under this approach important aspects of the curriculum are often neglected (see Education and Skills Committee (1997) *Citizenship Education: Second Report of Session 2006-7*, London, House of Commons).

understanding and skills. Because of its relevance, students of all abilities find it challenging and interesting when taught well.

Citizenship is also a qualification subject. Since its introduction in 2002, over half a million young people have achieved a GCSE or A level in citizenship and it is the fastest growing GCSE.

3.2 In schools

Information gathered through Ofsted inspection and the longitudinal research conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) shows that many schools deliver citizenship with imagination and confidence, that some schools are not yet covering all aspects of the curriculum effectively and that most schools occupy the middle ground.⁸ Well-trained specialist teachers are delivering outstanding teaching and are able to tackle controversial issues, but teachers who lack expertise find it difficult to cover the range of topics in the curriculum. In particular, many teachers find the political literacy aspects of the curriculum intimidating. Poor provision can also result from weak leadership, a lack of coordination within schools and when citizenship education is given a low priority.

Despite these difficulties, many schools testify to the benefits that have come about as a result of encouraging students to take more responsibility for the shared life of the school through citizenship education. As the NFER noted in its last report, school leaders and teachers are 'more positive about the impact of CE [citizenship education] on student confidence and behaviour and on their future actions and activities in the community ... they can see the wider benefits of CE [citizenship education] both for their schools, their students, and their communities.'⁹ The more young people participate in community projects, school council activities, charitable fund-raising, and campaigns to improve their community, the more they take ownership of what goes on in the wider community and the more they learn about the benefits for all that follow.

⁸ Ofsted (2010), *Citizenship Established? Citizenship in schools 2006/09*, Manchester, Ofsted and National Foundation for Educational Research (2009), *Embedding Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools in England (2002-08): Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study Seventh Annual Report*, London, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

⁹ National Foundation for Educational Research, 78.

4. What next for citizenship education?

For all schools to reap the benefits of citizenship education – and for all young people to gain the skills and knowledge they need to become effective, active citizens – the subject requires strong political support. As evidenced by the Ofsted and NFER reports, citizenship flourishes when school leaders believe in its value and when teachers have received the training needed to tackle complicated, and often controversial, aspects of the citizenship curriculum. Without government commitment to citizenship education we will return to the sporadic provision that characterised schools' approaches in the period when citizenship was a cross curricular theme but not a statutory, distinct subject. And without the continuing support from the Department of Education, teachers will miss out on the specialist training they need to engage young people with politics, the law and their rights and responsibilities.

Current moves to free up the curriculum may result, we believe, in citizenship education becoming optional for schools once more. The move to give schools more room for local determination of the curriculum will bring its benefits, but we believe it to be in the interests of young people themselves, and of society, that citizenship education should remain as an essential life-skills subject. For whilst many schools will undoubtedly choose to continue to teach citizenship, there is a serious danger that at least one quarter of schools (who currently do not teach it adequately or at all) will be allowed to drop it. This would be to deny the entitlement of young people in those schools an introduction to their rights and responsibilities. It would also mean that this country would be in breach of its duty to teach all students about human rights, as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, which the current government formally accepted on 11 May 2010.¹⁰

¹⁰ Having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UK is committed (under article 29) to providing education directed at 'the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'. On 11 May 2010 the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and representatives of the 47 Council of Europe member states adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, which states 'Member states should include education for democratic citizenship and human rights education in the curricula for formal education at pre-primary, primary and secondary school level'.

5. Conclusion: what you can do

The concerns that led both Conservative and Labour governments to bring citizenship education formally into schools in the 1990s are still relevant today. It would be a wasteful folly to abandon citizenship now and, therefore, Democratic Life is calling on Parliamentarians from all parties to:

- support the contribution citizenship education makes to the democratic life of this country;
- continue to use the opportunities provided by citizenship education to build links with schools and their students in their constituencies;
- press for citizenship education to remain statutory under any future curriculum reforms.

Please register your support for citizenship education and Democratic Life by visiting www.democraticlife.org.uk or by contacting Molly Kearney on 0207 566 5034 or at molly.kearney@citizenshipfoundation.org.uk.

Appendix 1

Governing members of Democratic Life: Association for Citizenship Teachers, Amnesty International, British Youth Council, Changemakers, Citizenship Foundation, Community Service Volunteers, Hansard Society, Institute for Global Ethics, involver, Learning and Skills Network

www.democraticlife.org.uk