Research

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Learning by doing? The role of political learning activities in promoting youth political engagement

When citizenship education was introduced into the national curriculum in 2002, the government funded a longitudinal research project to track how effective it was in reality. This research concluded that, among other things, when citizenship education was taught regularly by specialists, and assessed rigorously it did indeed have a positive effect on students' knowledge and attitudes in relation to citizenship. So far so good, but the ultimate aim was for citizenship education to have longer lasting impacts that carried on into adult life. If it could be shown that experiencing citizenship education in school had an impact on adult citizenship, then the case for the subject would be much stronger. **Avril Keating** has been collecting exactly the data required to explore this issue and in this article reports that there is evidence of the long term impact of citizenship education into adulthood. This is clearly hugely significant to all of us working in Citizenship, and to policy-makers looking for ways to strengthen our democracy. It sets the scene perfectly for our special edition on the election, and shows that the more we make of these opportunities for active learning, the better our chances of success.

"Since we learn by doing, the practical experience of citizenship important is at least as important as formal education"
(Lord Chancellor quoted in QCA, 1998: 61).

In the run up to the general election, the issue of youth voting has once again been the subject of much media and policy attention (e.g. Birdwell et al, 2014). This concern is not new; in fact, the decline in youth turnout was one of the reasons that the Citizenship curriculum was introduced as a statutory subject in secondary schools in England in 2002. The students who first received Citizenship at school are now in their early 20s and using data from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) in England, we have a unique opportunity to examine whether the introduction of this statutory subject helped to arrest the decline in youth political engagement. CELS was established in 2001 to evaluate the impact of Citizenship on schools and students and, thanks in large part to the participating teachers, the study contains a host of useful information about the evolution of citizenship education practices in schools and their impact on youth citizenship attitudes during the formative time of adolescence.

This article will focus in particular on the impact of experiential, extra-curricular and informal opportunities for learning about politics at school. One of the key innovations of the Citizenship curriculum in 2002 was that it promoted not only education about citizenship (that is, knowledge and understanding of political institutions and processes), but also education through citizenship – that is, "learning by doing, through active, participative experiences in the school or local community and beyond" (Kerr, 1999: 12). Through hands-on activities such as these, it was believed, students would get the opportunity to put their citizenship learning into practice and to learn from practice. As a result, schools were encouraged to develop projects that involved students working in /with their communities and to institute structures (such as school councils) that would facilitate student participation and 'pupil voice' in school governance and decision-making (QCA, 1998).

The rationale for education through citizenship

The many advantages of this approach to civic learning have been highlighted both in research from other countries and by

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children's rights advocates. The latter, for example, have argued that even if they are not allowed to vote, children and young people are still citizens and therefore it is only right that schools should be providing students with opportunities to exercise their rights and responsibilities and to participate in their schools and wider communities.

Further support for education through citizenship can also be found in research studies from other countries, which have shown that civic participation during adolescence can have a wide range of benefits, both for individuals and for societies. In particular, these studies have found that participation in civic activities can have a positive effect on young people's civic dispositions such as tolerance, trust, civic knowledge, political efficacy, sense of commitment to the community, and self-esteem (see Schmidt et al, 2007 and Furco and Root, 2010). For example, a Belgian study found that adolescents who were members of voluntary organisations were more like to engage in political activities such as protesting, contacting politicians, and signing petitions (Quintelier, 2008). And in a comparative analysis of five European countries (including England), Hoskins et al (2012) found that students who take part in participatory learning activities (such as school councils, volunteering in the community, or charitable fund-raising) were more likely to express participatory attitudes (such as intentions to vote and engage in civic and political activities in the future). It has even been suggested that the benefits of civic participation are not limited to the civic and political spheres; Schmidt et al (2007) found that taking part in community service programmes can also improve academic performance and student behaviour.

Some studies in the United States (US) have been able to go even further, and to suggest that

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experiencing civic activities at school can set young people up for civic engagement in later life. There are currently two key hypotheses as to why the effects of these activities can last so long - one skills-based and one rooted in theories of socialisation. In terms of the latter, socialisation and psychological theories suggest that adolescence is a formative period in youth civic and political identity-formation and that the habits and identities that are forged during this period persist into adulthood where they continue to shape attitudes and behaviours (Henderson et al, 2014; Kahne et al, 2013: 421). In the course of participating in experiential activities, the theory goes, young people are exposed to norms of 'good' citizenship that they subsequently internalise, replicate and perpetuate. If these dispositions also become habit at this point, this bodes well for future participation, or at least for certain types of political engagement; citizens who participate in elections are consistently more likely to continue to do so in the future and thus habit-formation has also proved to be a recurring thesis in the voting behaviour literature (Plutzer, 2002: 42).

Yet socialisation does not appear to be the only reason why adolescent participation matters. Experiential learning activities can also provide different types of resources that stimulate or buttress civic and political engagement during adulthood. From a cognitive engagement theory perspective, one could argue that the import of learning through practice is that it provides young people with practical skills rather than merely norms of good citizenship. Quintelier (2008: 357), for instance, hypothesises that youth participation in extra-curricular activities and voluntary associations can provide politically-relevant skills such as: 'deliberation, compromise, speaking in public, expressing an opinion, learning

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to work in groups, and assimilating other people's opinions.' Furthermore, these types of activities provide young people not only with the skills that they need for future participation, but also with an heightened awareness that helps them to identify the problem(s) that are in their communities, and the sense of political efficacy with which to go and tackle these problem(s) (McFarland and Thomas, 2006; 404).

Do these adolescent activities affect attitudes among young adults in England?

Until recently, it has not been possible to replicate the findings of these US studies in the UK because of a lack of longitudinal data. However, we have kept in touch with some of the young people who took part in the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) in England, and through them we have been able to assess whether their experiences of learning about citizenship at school have increased their civic engagement after they have left school.

In our latest analysis, we have focused in particular on the potential impact of school-based activities that we thought might promote politically-relevant skills – namely school councils, mock elections and debating clubs. The latter are believed to help students to acquire deliberative skills (Quintelier, 2008), while school councils and mock elections provide opportunities for hands-on experience of voting and democratic decision-making (at least in theory) (Torney-Purta et al, 2001). We chose to focus on these activities in particular primarily because of the interest in these activities in policy circles in England (Keating and Kerr, 2013; Whitty and Wisby, 2007), but also because CELS data from schools indicated that these activities have been widely (and increasingly) used in schools.

Using advanced statistical models of CELS data, we were able to confirm that activities such as these do indeed have a positive impact on political engagement among young people in England.

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These effects were apparent above and beyond the impact of other factors that we know are related to political participation (such as socio-economic status or prior disposition towards participation), as we were able to include a range of variables in our models to control for these alternative explanations). What is more, these effects could be seen both in the short-term (while the participants were still at school) and in the medium term (when the participants were aged 19/20 and were eligible to take part in political activities such as voting). However the positive effects of these political learning experiences were not limited to increasing young people's propensity to vote as adults; students who participated in school councils, mock elections and debating teams were also more likely to sign petitions, contact their local councillor or MP, and/ or take part in various protest activities (such as boycotts or street demonstrations), even after they had left school.

One final (and unexpected) finding that emerged from this analysis was that participatory experiences in Year 11 had a stronger and more enduring impact on political engagement than if these activities were undertaken in Year 7. This suggests that school-based political activities such as school councils may be most effective in mid rather than early adolescence. One reason for this may be that young people may be more receptive to this education through citizenship model of learning in their mid-teens, and/ or more confident to be able to carry out tasks that typically involve public speaking and decision-making.

Conclusions

In short, the CELS data provides further evidence that learning-by-doing strategies can have a lasting impact on young people's political engagement, and that schools and teachers can play an important role in this by organising school councils, mock elections and debating teams. Providing opportunities and resources to organise these activities can, of course, be challenging, and CELS data from schools showed us the institutional,

cultural, and practical obstacles that schools and teachers face when trying to do so (see Keating et al, 2009). However, in light of this latest data, continuing these efforts seems worthwhile, particularly when one considers the scale of the challenge we face in trying to encourage young people to exercise their democratic rights and to have their voice heard in political spheres.

This article draws on a longer research paper, Keating and Janmaat (2015) "Education through citizenship at school: Do school activities have a lasting impact on youth political engagement?"

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