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‘For people so young they had so much to offer’: implementing active citizenship in the UK undergraduate social science curriculum

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Abstract

Citizenship education is not restricted to schools and there have been a number of publicly funded initiatives to develop citizenship education in UK universities and higher education colleges. This paper contributes to the developing literature in this area with reference to evaluation research undertaken in relation to one module, ‘Citizenship and Identity’, delivered to first year social science undergraduates at a Higher Education Institute. This module included an active citizenship element in which students worked jointly with local school pupils at several conferences held at the HEI. We discuss the undergraduates’ reflections on their involvement in the module, including the school participation element, in relation to Faulks’ recent critique of citizenship education and also the local context.

Citizenship education and higher education in England

Citizenship education has undergone a rapid expansion in England during the last ten years with most attention being given to its introduction within the school curriculum following the publication of the Crick Report (QCA, 1998). Critics have argued that the Crick proposals are flawed, not only in relation to problems over practical implementation but also in their ‘failure to tackle the issue of structural disadvantage and its implications for equal citizenship’ (Faulks, 2006: 128). As Faulks argues, such disadvantage includes social prejudice in a variety of forms, as well as enhanced school diversification under New Labour leading to greater inequality.

In his recent insightful paper, Faulks (2006) develops two main theoretical suggestions as to how citizenship education can develop beyond the limitations of the Crick proposals. The first is in relation to what Ken Plummer calls ‘intimate citizenship’ (cited in Faulks, 2006: 129). This involves the importance of shifting social obligations away from narrow ones solely involving the exercise of rationality towards the incorporation of an emotional element based upon valorising trust and challenging negative emotions, such as fear and envy, which undermine citizens’ ability to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Faulks’ second suggestion regarding moving citizenship education beyond Crick relates to the concept of ‘multiple citizenship’ (from Derek Heater, cited in Faulks, 2006: 130). This involves decoupling citizenship from the nation-state and its implied location within a dominant ethnic identity, and thereby recognising a multi-layered and internationalist notion of citizenship that abjures simplistic notions of ethnic homogeneity that are anachronistic in contemporary heterogeneous and globalising societies. For Faulks, one implication of conceptions of intimate and multiple citizenship

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is that citizens develop a 'sense of duty towards and care for strangers' (2006: 135), but he recognises that this can only be achieved by challenging social stereotypes and discrimination in pupils' learning:

'Education for citizenship must begin then with the individual's moral framework and their emotional and physical health. It should seek to develop a positive sense of self and sense of empathy and solidarity with others that may be very different from themselves'. (*ibid.*)

Faulks does not, however, discuss one of the major ways in which 'fear of the other' exists in contemporary British society, i.e. that involving widespread, media-fuelled public stereotypes about young people, notably troublesome youth 'hanging around' in public spaces and thereby signifying social disorder (Rogers and Coaffee, 2005). Such fears are prominent in the Rivershire area of England where the project under discussion was located (Watt and Stenson, 1998).

The Crick proposals and subsequent policy reforms have centred upon schools, but there have also been a number of publicly funded initiatives to develop and support citizenship education in UK universities in recent years, as seen in the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Many universities now offer opportunities for their students to become involved in various kinds of community and voluntary work, for example via the Higher Education Active Community Fund in England (Yarwood, 2005). All the issues raised by citizenship education in relation to schools, such as how citizenship is conceptualised, curriculum content and modes of delivery, are also relevant to higher education. However, in comparison to the statutory sector the exploration of citizenship in UK higher education remains limited including relatively little detailed curriculum research (see Yarwood, 2005, for one recent example in relation to geography). We aim to address this lacuna with reference to research carried out at Rivershire Higher Education Institute (HEI) in south east England based on evaluation of a curriculum project involving a first year 'Citizenship and Identity' module.¹ This particular project follows on from an earlier one that involved third year undergraduates 'teaching citizenship' in local schools (Gifford *et al.*, 2005).

The local Rivershire context

The 'Citizenship and Identity' module was seen as contributing to the 'Aimhigher' initiative, a policy that was promoted along partnership lines between Rivershire HEI and local schools, particularly what are called 'upper schools'. Aimhigher is a national initiative promoting widening participation in higher education for those pupils, college students and adults from under-represented groups (HEFCE, 2006). The Rivershire local education authority in which the schools are situated operates a selective system in which children are assessed at age 11. Those who obtain high marks in the 11-plus examination gain entry to the prestigious 'grammar' schools that routinely feature near the top of the national league tables. In contrast, those children who 'fail' attend 'upper'

¹ The project, *Working with Schools: Active Citizenship for Undergraduate Students*, was funded by C-SAP (LTSN Centre for Learning & Teaching: Sociology, Anthropology and Politics). 'Rivershire' and 'Rivershire Higher Education Institute' are pseudonyms.

schools which are seen as less desirable by local parents and have lower levels of academic achievement as measured by the league tables. Recent OFSTED reports have highlighted the social disadvantages faced by upper school pupils who disproportionately come from deprived and minority ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, grammar school pupils are predominantly white and middle class.

The Rivershire area covers one of the most affluent parts of England characterised by upmarket commuter villages, high levels of home and car ownership, and a strong middle-class presence. Despite this general affluence, there are also areas of deprivation in certain urban and rural neighbourhoods including those in which some of the upper schools involved in the project are located. Previous research by one of the authors has highlighted the tensions that exist between young people from the grammar schools and those from the upper schools (Watt and Stenson, 1998). These tensions revolve around a complex interplay of class, racial and spatial segregationist processes that underpin the local secondary school system. However, Watt and Stenson also found that ‘knowing people’ in the more socially mixed upper schools and neighbourhoods could ameliorate racist and ethnic stereotypes. One of the issues raised in this paper is how far such trust relations based upon negating stereotypes, as discussed by Faulks (2006), can be developed within a local context in which young people in general, but especially those from the upper schools, are considered ‘trouble’.

The ‘Citizenship and Identity’ module

The ‘Citizenship and Identity’ (CI) module was designed to engage students in debates relating to citizenship at level 1 of the undergraduate programme. It aimed to enable students, mainly from Sociology and Psychology degree programmes, to apply citizenship issues to real life contexts and to reflect upon the way in which they and others learn citizenship. The CI module followed a structured lecture and seminar format together with active learning opportunities that included working with schools. The module explored a range of citizenship topics and issues such as human rights and European integration.

The working with schools element involved students having to attend and facilitate at one of four school council conferences held at Rivershire HEI.² A total of ten Rivershire schools became involved, eight of which were upper schools and two were grammar schools; the latter only attended one conference each. Between two and seven representatives from each school council attended the conferences. During the first conference, these school councillors gave the name ‘River Schools Voice’ (RSV) to their meetings and set out a series of aims including meeting regularly to share ideas and explore ways to keep in contact; planning and initiating joint projects and inter-school activities; and also to challenge the existing divisions between schools and stereotyping of pupils.

Rivershire HEI staff facilitated the RSV conferences alongside the undergraduates. The conferences started with a verbal report from each school council and then the councillors worked on different activities and project planning in mixed school groups.

² The Rivershire students could attend more than one if they so wished.

The undergraduates worked with groups of councillors, joined in discussions, acted as 'scribes' and generally helped facilitate. A 'River Schools Voice' website was set up with the support of the Rivershire HEI web design team and it included copies of conference reports alongside general information about RSV.

Students' experiences of the 'Citizenship and Identity' module

The research involved both Rivershire HEI and the local participating schools (see Watt *et al.*, 2007, for details). It included group and individual interviews carried out with ten Rivershire undergraduates at the end of the 'Citizenship and Identity' module and these interviews are our main data source in this particular paper. In addition, the CI students also completed a questionnaire at the end of the module.

The questionnaire and interview data indicated that not only was undergraduates' awareness of citizenship enhanced by the end of the CI module, but that their skills and emotional capacities relevant to citizenship were also increased, for example in boosting their confidence, enhancing a sense of responsibility, improving their ability to work in groups and presentation skills. This enhancement of skills is especially significant given the fact that many of the Rivershire students were themselves from non-traditional HE backgrounds including several adult 'mature' students. The students mentioned how they had developed a greater capacity for critical reflection and also that they were better able to appreciate others' points of view, which for some emerged out of the openly discursive nature of the seminars:

'It was nice because citizenship was sort of in the group itself because we were learning to respect what each other had to say and if we didn't agree, that was also OK. But to still listen to what they had to say, and accept each other for whatever opinions they had, which is what citizenship's about'. (Christine, Psychology)

Christine's comment above crystallises the conception of citizenship education that Faulks (2006) advocates in which learning to appreciate the point of view of others is highlighted. This aspect of citizenship education was especially pronounced in relation to the undergraduates' involvement in the school conferences. The interviews and questionnaire revealed that the majority of Rivershire HEI students regarded attendance at the conferences as a very positive aspect of the module. One student, for example, was adamant that this component of the CI module should be maintained in future: 'I think that it has to be a central part of the module, doing the school council' (Sarah, Psychology). Several significant changes in student learning occurred as a result of working with schools. First of all, the practical elements of the module reinforced the more traditional academic learning. For example, one student described how attendance at the conference provided an exemplar of 'citizenship-in-action':

'It certainly helped me understand what it [citizenship] was about. I think that for me personally when there is a practical example matching the academic example its something that really helps, I think "OK I get it now"'. (Sarah, Psychology)

Secondly, several mature students talked about the way in which the pupils at the school conferences had unknowingly helped them, particularly by giving them confidence in relation to their own presentations:

‘I had been feeling a bit nervous about the presentation, you know just standing up, and after being at the schools conference I thought “this is ridiculous, those children are standing up in a big lecture theatre, in a university in front of lots, lots of their contemporaries that they didn’t even know and they were very forceful”. So for me it made me think “don’t be ridiculous”. So for that I enjoyed it more, so they taught me a thing really. (Laura, Psychology)

This confidence-boosting aspect was especially significant for the Rivershire students given that many themselves came from non-traditional HE backgrounds. Seeing young people being able to cope with presenting in public helped the mature students to not only overcome their own understandable anxieties regarding presentations, but also to empathetically reflect about the capacities and potential of young people *per se*, capacities which the prevalent stereotype of ‘troublesome youth’ conceals:

‘I was a little bit nervous to begin with, but I was also excited at the same time because I wanted to see what these young people had to say. I found the whole day very, very interesting, listening to their ideas. For people so young they had so much to offer and they actually made me feel slightly ashamed’. (Judith, Psychology with Sociology)

Third and relatedly, the undergraduates commented that attendance at the conferences challenged the negative preconceptions that some of their cohort held about young people and in particular regarding those young people from the stigmatised local upper schools:

‘It was really lively, very, very lively, the children were really, in a way you wish that more people could see children like that. Because I think going into it, the students that I’m studying with, some of them don’t have children, so they were very unsure about what they were going to face, you know – teenagers, hoodies and all those stereotypes, and came out just thinking these kids were fantastic, *And* they’re from secondary [upper] schools, they’re not just the pick of the cream of the area. Certainly they [students] were very vocal about how impressed they were with the kids and you don’t really see that do you, that’s not depicted very often? So that’s what I came away thinking – there is hope’. (Laura, Psychology)

As the above quotation illustrates, there was a distinct local dimension to the undergraduates’ more empathetic attitudes regarding young people. Many commented on how impressed they were that the pupils, mainly from upper schools, not only had a good grasp of the inequalities between the schools but also wanted to challenge these by breaking down school-based stereotypes:

‘One issue that kept coming up was the issue about stereotypes, they wanted to make a change, to mix with other pupils from other schools. They did not want to be part of this stereotype or this separation process, where if you are going to this

school you are somehow different to me. They spoke about integration. It was a common theme and it kept coming up'. (Judith, Psychology with Sociology)

Attendance at the school conferences therefore enabled the Rivershire HEI students to critically reflect on their own views regarding young people, not least since the latter sought to challenge some of the negative stereotypes widely held about them.

Conclusion

The 'Citizenship and Identity' module opened up citizenship in a meaningful and challenging way to many of the undergraduates involved. Participating in the school conferences in particular enabled them to relate topical issues and debates to their own citizenship as well as to citizenship in general. Students explored their own identities through negotiating difference and showed a commitment to integrating 'others' and in particular engaging with young people who are often stereotyped as 'troublesome youth'. This engagement had a distinctive local dimension in that the Rivershire HEI students, many of whom were themselves mature, were able to develop an empathy with those young people from the upper schools, schools which are locally denigrated relative to the far more prestigious grammar schools. The fact that the school pupils themselves were both aware of their second-class citizenship status in the Rivershire area and wanted to challenge it greatly impressed the undergraduates. We can therefore see an example of Faulks' notion of citizenship education in which students, working with young people, begin to develop a sense of empathy with those 'others' who are different from themselves.

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