

Teachers' views on students' experiences of community involvement and citizenship education

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Abstract

Based upon the findings of a national survey of school coordinators and leaders on community cohesion and citizenship, this research indicates that teachers perceive their students to feel a sense of belonging to multiple communities, each with their own required actions for effective participation. There appears to be wide variation in the characteristics of students' engagement in community activities depending on their individual needs and circumstances. Whilst there is convincing evidence of schools successfully implementing strategies to equip students with a conceptual understanding of their roles as citizens, the research also identifies a need to develop students' practical skills and self-efficacy to interact with their immediate and wider communities. In order to support students to participate most effectively in their communities, there is a need for schools to provide tailored support to those groups of students who may otherwise be least likely to participate in community activities.

Keywords

Community cohesion, citizenship education, schools and communities

Introduction

A changing society must reflect on the emphasis for, and meaning of, rights and responsibilities for those who belong formally and in other ways to 'majority' and 'minority' groups. Nation states can be "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) and this applies to local and global contexts where particular interest, norm related or friendship groups may exist. Actions in - and for - communities may take place in different ways and for varying purposes (Johnson and Morris, 2010). In such a context, we need to identify what we know about some of the key dimensions of citizenship and community engagement.

Schools have been widely urged by politicians, the media and others to ensure that students recognize the value of community cohesion and citizenship (Cameron, 2010; Crick, 1998; Citizenship Foundation, n.d.; DfCFS, 2007). As such, the responsibility often falls on schools to facilitate higher levels of student community engagement and citizenship. The purpose of this research was to determine the ways in which schools are developing, promoting, and facilitating community cohesion and citizenship education. Furthermore, in order to ascertain teachers' views about their students' familiarity and connection with different types of community, and more fundamentally students' definitions and characterisations of community, respondents were asked to comment on students' sense of belonging to a range of community domains (e.g., their school or neighbourhood).

The results reported here are based on an online school survey that was part of a much larger research project titled Creating Citizenship Communities and funded by a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The project aimed to identify current thinking and practice in schools, explore young people's perceptions and experiences and, through the development of a focussed impact strategy, encourage partnerships to be established

between professionals and others. In addition to the school survey, the larger research project involved a review of literature on citizenship and community engagement, secondary data analysis, and multiple student focus groups fieldwork across eight schools in England. As previously indicated, the results reported here pertain to (1) teachers' views of their student's perceptions of community (2) the extent of students' engagement in community activities and (3) reports of the schools' approaches and strategies for engaging students in community activities and citizenship education.

Background

While generalisations about young people should be avoided (Cusworth et al., 2009), young people seem positive about engagement (Haste, 2005) and involve themselves in volunteering activities (Davies, et al., 2006; Gaskin, 2004; Pye et al., 2009; Roker et al., 1999). Morrow (1994) emphasises regular home and other responsibilities (e.g. minding siblings, helping with the family business). It has been found that young people play vital roles in many immigrant families especially in the role of translator (Becker, Dearden, and Aldridge, 2001; Orellana, Dorner and Pulido, 2003). It should be noted that involvement in charities, sports and single-issue campaigns might be more common than some other activities such as formal civic participation (Norris, 2002; Print, 2007; Whitting, 2003). It is important to recognise that different forms of citizenship expressed through new media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook etc.) challenge our traditional notions of linear, formal, physical engagement in favour of virtual involvement (Bennett, 2008).

Research has indicated that urban youth from deprived neighbourhoods contribute to - and have a detailed and highly specialized knowledge of - their local communities (Alexander, 2008). However, some research has suggested that those from lower socio-economic

backgrounds may be less likely to act civically (Darton et al., 2003; Kahne, 2008) and that women tend to volunteer more than men do (Gaskin, 2004). While some young people are engaging in their communities, it is important to understand what motivates them and what barriers those who exhibit lower levels of engagement and citizenship may face. The national young volunteers service, 'V' (2007) suggests that many young people feel there are barriers to community action. A significant disjunction between their own and legitimated characterizations leads to deliberate disengagement (Boyle, 2000; Bessant, 2004; National Audit Office, 2005). Letki (2008) argues that social deprivation (not diversity) reduces engagement. In addition, social capital (or its absence) is also a significant factor in predicting engagement and participation (e.g. Buxton, 2010; Jansen et al., 2006). People may engage due to altruism; "membership attachment" (Cremin et al., 2009); preferences for civic action; and entrepreneurial approaches that target skills and future opportunities. Whitely (2005) suggest that participation can be successfully encouraged and that families, schools, and social networks may be important in this process (IVR, 2004; ODPM, 2005). Keating et al. (2009) argue for an inclusive ethos, welcoming physical environment and a willingness to deal realistically and honestly with issues. Financial support (Pye et al., 2009) and publicity (Andrews et al, 2006) may encourage engagement and participation. Davies et al., (2009) recommend interpersonal skills; targeting key decision makers to gather support; acting carefully about controversial issues; maintaining realistic commitments; and focusing on catalysts for change. Cremin et al. (2009) highlight the role of peer support indicating that "there is no clear consensus ... on incentives for volunteering, although most agree that getting training, awards, and working with friends would encourage more volunteering" (IVR, 2004: p.v).

Citizenship education focuses on the curriculum, school context and relationships with the community (Keating et al., 2009). Schools are variously described as 'progressing' (i.e., wide ranging actions); 'focused' (i.e., curriculum driven); 'implicit' (i.e., extracurricular); and 'minimalist' (i.e. early stage). Didactic teaching is supplemented by discussion about topical issues; developing skills (Ross, 2007); exploring concepts; leadership opportunities (Dempster and Lizzo, 2007); and action in the community (McLellan and Youniss, 2003). The evidence about the impact of citizenship education generally and specifically in relation to the link with community has been variable. It has been noted by OFSTED (2010), for example, that good links do not always exist between schools and communities. However, the emphasis by government inspectors, NGOs and researchers on the relationship between citizenship and community continues. There are some very positive comments about citizenship education in relation to communities in the most recent Ofsted overview of developments in citizenship education (OFSTED, 2013). Furthermore, the association for Citizenship Teaching continues to promote community involvement as a form of citizenship education.

Whiteley (2012) has suggested on the basis of reviewing longitudinal data on citizenship education in schools in England that there is demonstrable impact on engagement. The revised National Curriculum for citizenship to come into effect in September 2014 continues to emphasise community. For example, 14-16 year olds are being required to understand "the different ways in which a citizen can contribute to the improvement of their community, to include the opportunity to participate actively in community volunteering, as well as other forms of responsible activity" (para. 4, "Key Stage 4")

In conclusion, 'Community' and 'citizenship' are arenas for debating political and social preferences. Some situations discourage engagement. However, many young people are engaged and it is possible to increase levels of participation. Schools can promote citizenship education and community engagement. Our understandings, however, of young people's characterisations of a coherent community citizenship are not clear. In addition, we appear to lack well-established educational practices¹. Therefore, the results presented here and the larger Creating Citizenship Communities project was an attempt to fill some of our gaps in knowledge.

Methods

A questionnaire was sent to 800 secondary schools in England via email. The schools included in the sample were stratified by urbancity (urban/suburban/rural), ethnicity, and the schools' position within the index of multiple deprivation. The target respondents for the questionnaire were members of staff with responsibility for community cohesion and/or citizenship within their school². A total of 132 teachers participated in the online survey, from 119 schools. While the overall response rate was low, the responses received were largely representative of the national population of schools in relation to each of the school background criteria (i.e., urbancity, deprivation, and ethnic composition).

The majority of teachers (71 per cent) who responded to the survey had responsibility for the curriculum in relation to citizenship and community and almost three-quarters (74 per cent) had responsibilities for citizenship education. Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) had strategic responsibilities for citizenship and community, and/or responsibilities for

¹ For fuller review of the relevant literature please see Davies et al (2013).

² To view the questionnaire, please see Appendix B of Jeffes et al (2012) at <http://www.york.ac.uk/media/educationalstudies/documents/research/cresj/Creating%20Citizenship%20Communities%20Survey%20Report%20February%202012.pdf>

school-wide planning. Almost one-quarter (23 per cent) were members of their school's senior management team. A small number of respondents (four per cent) were teachers without responsibilities for citizenship education, and a further three per cent were non-teaching staff.

The results present below are representative of the teachers who responded on behalf of their schools. Furthermore, we present simple summary statistics (i.e., percentages).

Therefore, there are limitations to how representative the results are in terms of other schools that did not respond or those schools that were not part of the original sample.

However, it should be noted that the extensive nature of the questionnaire and the full responses that were received from teachers in 119 schools, allows us to draw some important conclusions concerning teachers views on students' experiences of community involvement and citizenship education.

Results

Defining the characteristics of students' community engagement

In order to ascertain teachers' views about their students' familiarity and connection with different types of community, and more fundamentally students' definitions and characterisations of community, participants were asked to comment on students' sense of belonging to a range of community domains (for example, their school or neighbourhood).

The findings suggest that teachers believe their students feel the greatest sense of belonging to their immediate communities. Whilst the majority report that all or most of their students feel they belong to the school and local communities, they had a weaker sense of belonging to national, European and international communities. Specifically, over

three-fifths (61 per cent) report that 'all' students, and a further 36 per cent report that 'most' students feel they belong to their school community. Just over one-third (35 per cent) report that 'all' students feel they belong to the local community where they live, and a further 54 per cent report that this is felt by 'most' students. Almost one-quarter (23 per cent) report that that 'all' their students feel they belong to a national community, and a further 43 per cent report that this is felt by 'most' students. Just eight per cent of teachers report that 'all' their students belong to an international/global community. However, almost one-quarter (24 per cent) report that this felt by 'most' of their students. A further 60 per cent report that this was felt by 'some' students. Whilst almost two-thirds (66 per cent) of teachers report that 'some' of their students feel they belong to a European community, 13 per cent of teachers report that 'none' of their students feel this is the case. This indicates that students may feel a stronger sense of belonging to the international/global community than the European community.

It is interesting to note that teachers' perceptions of the strength of students' sense of belonging to particular community domains appear to reflect their views about the efficacy of their schools' strategies for contributing to community cohesion and citizenship. For example, just over two-thirds of teachers (68 per cent) report that their school is 'effective' or 'highly effective' in contributing to community cohesion and citizenship within the community in which it is located (with 19 per cent reporting that their school is 'highly effective'). By contrast, whilst just over half (52 per cent) of teachers report that their school is 'effective' or 'highly effective' in contributing to the cohesiveness of the wider community through developing students' understanding of the UK community a further 45 per cent report that their school is only 'moderately effective'. Similarly, half of teachers (50 per

cent) report that their school is 'effective' or 'highly effective' in contributing to the cohesiveness of the wider community through Europe and globally, a further 42 per cent report that their school is only 'moderately effective' and four per cent that it is 'not effective'. This suggests that as communities become increasingly removed from students' school location, strength of opinion and effectiveness of community cohesion strategies appear to diminish.

The survey also asked teachers to comment on their students' sense of belonging to a range of community groups. The findings suggest that students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to a community based around their hobbies and leisure interests than their social and cultural backgrounds. For example, although only a small number of teachers (three per cent) report that 'all' teachers feel a sense of belonging to clubs and societies (e.g. Scouts, Science Clubs), a further two-fifths (40 per cent) report that 'most' and 56 per cent that 'some' students feel that this is the case. To a considerably lesser extent, teachers report that 'most' or 'all' of their students feel a sense of belonging to an ethnically defined community with its own strong identity, and to faith-based communities (21 per cent and 23 per cent report that this is the case respectively, with six per cent and two per cent reporting that this is felt by 'all' students). Just one per cent report that 'all' students feel a sense of belonging to a specific socio-economic group, and one-fifth (20 per cent) report that this is felt by 'most' students. However, a further 59 per cent report that this is felt by 'some' students. Teachers report least strongly that students feel they belong to political or interest groups: none of the teachers report that 'all' of the students in their school feel that this is the case, and just three per cent feel that 'most' do (although three-quarters (75 per cent) report that this is felt by 'some' students).

These findings indicate that students simultaneously feel a sense of belonging to a range of community domains and groups, suggesting that they occupy multiple community identities. Whilst in general, teachers do not perceive the characteristics of their students (for example, their religious beliefs, ethnicity and socio-economic status) to be a contributing factor to their engagement in citizenship and community activities *within school*, this is perhaps because school can be understood as a community shared by all students. Others, however, are more dependent on the students' own interests and self-efficacy to participate (for instance, political interest groups). Indeed, the findings indicate that those students that are high achieving and those that are socially confident are more likely than their peers to do voluntary work or take part in community activities.

By contrast, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than their peers to do so. Around a quarter of teachers report that students' living in a deprived neighbourhood and the socio-economic status of students' families are barriers to their engagement (24 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively). Whilst the reasons for this are likely to be multifarious, this leads us to understand that different students interact with their communities in different ways. Equally, students may interpret the actions required to feel such a sense of belonging to vary between community types. For example, a student may feel that belonging to the European community requires engagement of a different nature to belonging to a club or society. As such, the effectiveness of support offered by schools is likely to be greatly affected by: the varying characteristics and needs of their students; the community domain or group in question; and students' perceptions and understanding of what is required to interact effectively with these communities.

What are the characteristics of schools' approaches to citizenship and community engagement?

Teachers report that their schools are highly active in promoting citizenship education and community cohesion and use a wide variety of strategies to encourage their students to understand and become more involved in society. Schools appear to attach high priority to citizenship and community engagement, demonstrated by the inclusion of specific objectives and targets on citizenship education and/or working with the community in their school mission statements and development plans. This is reported by 78 per cent and 87 per cent of teachers, respectively. However, teachers less commonly report that their schools have specific objectives or targets which *link* citizenship with the community. Just under two-fifths (39 per cent) of those who indicate that their school has specific objectives or targets around citizenship and/or working with the community report that this is the case.

Schools' approaches to citizenship and community engagement are characterised by a wide range of activities, with the most common approaches focusing on fostering students' understanding of their roles and responsibilities as citizens. For example, this includes:

- developing students' sense of social responsibility: 98 per cent report this 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent', with almost three-quarters (73 per cent) reporting it 'to a great extent'
- respecting and celebrating diversity: again, 98 per cent report this 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent', with over two-thirds (69 per cent) reporting this 'to a great extent'

- developing students' knowledge and understanding of their individual rights as citizens: 95 per cent report this 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent', with just over half (51 per cent) reporting this 'to a great extent'
- developing a sense of social justice: 92 per cent report this 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent', with just over half (50 per cent) reporting it 'to a great extent'
- raising participation in the democratic process: 92 per cent report this 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent', with just less than half (48 per cent) reporting it 'to a great extent'.

Teachers also strongly report, albeit to a lesser extent, that their schools' approach is characterised by the development of students' consumer awareness and enterprise skills. For example, this includes: developing informed consumers (77 per cent 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent'), equipping students to access public services (71 per cent 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent') and developing an entrepreneurial mindset in students (70 per cent 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent'). Although these findings suggest that schools are undertaking a wealth of activities, they are also indicative that schools' priorities generally tend to focus on theoretical considerations designed to support students' conceptual understanding of citizenship and community rather than practical activities to develop their skills and self-efficacy in engaging with communities.

This issue becomes particularly pronounced when considering opportunities for students to engage in community issues outside of their immediate neighbourhood. Whilst 60 per cent of teachers report 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent' that their school provides opportunities for students to engage in community issues and activities within their immediate neighbourhood, and an even greater proportion actively promote links with their

local communities, a considerable minority (35 per cent) report that their school only provides opportunities outside of their immediate neighbourhood 'to a small extent'. This suggests that there are fewer opportunities for engagement in community issues and activities outside of students' own locality.

Effectiveness of strategies to encourage students to volunteer

Teachers report that their schools utilise both curricular and extra-curricular activities to promote citizenship and community engagement amongst students. In general, activities more commonly delivered as part of the curriculum tend to focus on the theoretical considerations described above, for example: critical analysis of societal issues (in 72 per cent of schools); understanding the idea of justice (74 per cent); understanding the idea of democracy (66 per cent) and understanding the role of the media (75 per cent). By contrast, the most commonly reported activities to be delivered through extra-curricular activities tend to focus on practical activities such as volunteering. This includes both informal volunteering (in 46 per cent of schools); and formal volunteering (in 34 per cent of schools). These findings show that there is a clear distinction in the types of activities available to students at different points throughout the school day. This is of potential concern when one considers that students who are least proactive or inclined to participate in community engagement more broadly are also likely to be those least likely to participate in extra-curricular activities within their own school community. Likewise, we know that high achieving and more socially confident students are those who are most likely to participate in their communities. It therefore seems possible that many of the students who would most benefit from practical support to develop their skills for community engagement are not being appropriately targeted. This is of particular importance as there is limited

evidence that schools are providing opportunities for students to consolidate learning in the classroom from volunteering (only 44 per cent of teachers report that this is the case).

Teachers report that the most common factors that motivate their students to volunteer or take part in community activities include: contributing to a specific cause they are interested in; improving their future job prospects; and developing new skills. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that schools' strategies to support young people in pursuing volunteering strategies should be tailored towards these aims. In many cases, however, whilst schools appear broadly supportive of their students participating in volunteering activities (in almost three-fifths (58 per cent) of cases frequently responding, for example, to local and national campaigns to encourage volunteering by young people), there is limited evidence of schools proactively seeking out opportunities for their students to volunteer in their local communities. For example, approximately three-fifths (61 per cent) of participants report that their schools do not undertake outreach activities with the community to identify potential opportunities for students to volunteer; and almost two-thirds of participants (65 per cent) have no policies or systems in place to respond to opportunities provided by organisations that directly approach their school. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of participants (72 per cent) have no policies or systems in place to support students to undertake volunteering opportunities they have identified themselves.

Participants report that students are least motivated to volunteer by the views of their family and friends, and by increasing their sense of wellbeing. Teachers therefore appear to perceive that the active role of families and peers in encouraging students to participate in community activities requires further development. Whilst just over one-third (36 per cent) 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that students' families and peers actively encourage getting

involved in community issues and actions, over one-quarter (28 per cent) 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. It is of note, however, that teachers relatively rarely report (in 36 per cent and 33 per cent of cases respectively) that their school involves parents in the delivery of curriculum and after school activities, or produces community newsletters, delivered or available in local shops, libraries, places of worship or cafes. It may, therefore, be beneficial to explore further ways that schools and families can work more closely together to promote community participation amongst their students.

Provision of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds

The provision of targeted support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in community-based activities appears to be common in schools, with teachers reporting that they utilise a wide range of strategies to achieve this aim. For example, the majority (71 per cent) of teachers report 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent' that their school supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in community based activities by using mentors and role models from pupil's own community, with 36 per cent reporting this 'to a great extent'. Also common, albeit to a slightly lesser degree, are schools working with organisations with particular expertise in engaging disadvantaged students (almost two-thirds (63 per cent) report 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent' that their, with 28 per cent reporting this 'to a great extent'). Just over half (52 per cent) of teachers report 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent' that their school subsidises transport so that disadvantaged students can take part in community based activities. However, one-fifth (20 per cent) report that their school does this 'not at all'.

Other specific activities include: participation in activities provided by external agencies; targeted provision/additional or alternative curriculum for identified students; one-off

projects/activities for particular groups; working with young people alongside their families; extended schools programmes and links to other schools and colleges; and provision of additional funding for extra-curricular activities for disadvantaged students.

Whilst the majority of teachers report that their school is providing differentiated activities to meet the needs of different groups of students (e.g. socio-economic groups, ethnicity, gender) or targeting specific groups at risk of disengaging 'to some extent' or 'to a great extent' (74 per cent and 73 per cent respectively), approximately one-fifth (22 per cent and 21 per cent respectively) report this only 'to a small extent'.

Effectiveness and impact of strategies to develop community cohesion

Teachers were asked about the effectiveness of their school-wide approach to develop citizenship and community cohesion. Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) report that their school is 'effective' or 'highly effective' in identifying what needs to be done to promote community cohesion and citizenship, with 18 per cent reporting that their school is 'highly effective'.

Teachers report that their schools' approaches are broadly effective in supporting students to engage with their communities. Almost all teachers (98 per cent) felt that their school fosters a climate where students are willing to discuss difficult issues (66 per cent report this 'to a great extent' and 31 per cent 'to some extent'). The vast majority of teachers (93 per cent) also felt that their school creates an environment where there is mutual respect and trust among students and staff (72 per cent 'to a great extent' and 21 per cent 'to some extent').

When asked about the effectiveness of the teaching and learning strategies they employ to develop community cohesion, teachers report most strongly that their students *enjoy* participating in community cohesion and citizenship activities: the vast majority (71 per cent) report that this is the case for 'most' of their students, and a further four per cent report that this was the case for 'all' of their students. Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of teachers also report that students find their involvement in community cohesion and citizenship activities meaningful (and a further one per cent report that 'all' their students find this meaningful). However, a substantial minority (nearly one-third, 32 per cent) report that only 'some' of their students find this meaningful.

In general, teachers report strongly that their strategies for citizenship and community engagement are having a positive impact on students. Teachers report strongly, for example, that their students feel that their opinions and actions matter: the vast majority (90 per cent) 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that this was the case, with over one-third (35 per cent) strongly agreeing. Likewise, over two-thirds of teachers (70 per cent) 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their students are fully aware of the benefits of taking part in community, with 18 per cent of these strongly agreeing.

Again, however, teachers report less strongly that their approaches are resulting in students' developing the practical competencies to translate their knowledge into action. Just over half of teachers (55 per cent) 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their students have the knowledge, social networks and skills necessary for community action, and over one-fifth of teachers (22 per cent) 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that this was the case.

Conclusions

The findings of this survey highlight the many ways in which schools are developing, promoting and facilitating citizenship education and community cohesion. The findings suggest that students may simultaneously feel a sense of belonging to many different communities, each requiring a distinct contribution. Equally, we understand that there are differences between students in the ways that they interact with their communities, and in the resulting support that schools need to offer if they are to support students effectively.

It is apparent that schools' priorities generally tend to focus on theoretical considerations designed to support students' conceptual understanding of citizenship and community rather than practical activities to develop their skills and self-efficacy in engaging with communities. This is reflected in teachers' perceptions of impact, suggesting that students are more effectively developing an appreciation of their roles as citizens than they are practical skills to interact with their communities.

Whilst schools appear to have well developed strategies for supporting the specific needs of students (for example, those from disadvantaged backgrounds), many of the activities which emphasise this practical component of community engagement are delivered outside of classroom, making it substantially more difficult for teachers to engage with students who are less motivated to participate in extra-curricular activities. This is compounded by a lack of opportunity to consolidate learning from extra-curricular activities in the classroom.

Whilst a conceptual level understanding is clearly critical to students' development and awareness of their citizenship and community responsibilities, it seems that there is a need for schools to offer more tailored offer students if they are to develop a more sophisticated model of support to meet their wide-ranging needs, interests and identities.

Although teachers perceive their schools to be highly effective in delivering citizenship and community and community engagement activities, they also appear to recognise that they face significant challenges in helping young people to understand and become constructively engaged in their communities, particularly in relation to parental involvement and community outreach activities. It is apparent that there is potential for schools to develop their strategies for engaging with families and wider stakeholders to promote community engagement. This suggests that it may be valuable to explore further the connection between work in schools and the lives of young people beyond school, in particular to counteract any disadvantage of deprivation or socio-economic status.

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