

Becoming citizens through school experience: A case study of democracy in practice

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Abstract

This paper offers a critique of current definitions of active citizenship and argues that children and young people need to be seen as citizens within their school communities and not just citizens of the future. Pedagogy and school decision-making should reflect the aims of active citizenship and thus engage children and young people as active participants within their school communities. This requires a radical change to the way in which many schools are currently structured and organised. A case study of a small democratic school is used as an illustration of an exemplary model of education for active citizenship. This school does not offer citizenship as a curriculum subject nor explicitly aim for active citizenship – and yet active citizenship is integral to its ethos, values, structures, processes and pedagogy. Throughout the paper, it is suggested that democratic schooling is not just one way – but the best way – of providing education for active citizenship.

Keywords: Democratic education, active citizenship, experiential learning, critical thinking, citizenship schools

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Introduction

In the summer of 2011, David Cameron, British Prime Minister announced that he wanted to “mend our broken society” following years of “slow motion moral collapse”. This was in the aftermath of the extensive riots in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and other towns across Britain. Cameron’s focus was on re-building society, to create a culture of “us” rather than “them and us”, to restore a sense of moral values to alienated and angry young people. Schools, as well as his new National Citizen Service for 16 year olds, were crucial within this agenda (Cameron, 15 August 2011).

Concern with young people’s attachment to and alienation from society is not new. Britain has been described as having a ‘democratic deficit’ for several years (Osler and Starkey, 2006, Crick, 2010). Voting levels have declined amongst the whole population but amongst young people in particular. Levels of ‘anti-social behaviour’ have been highlighted as a major concern for governments and communities. It is hard to pinpoint the exact date that these concerns started; some even argue that there were problems with alienation and anti-social behaviour as far back as Ancient Greece (Pasoula, 2000). What is certain, however, is that 1988 was a “vintage year” in terms of the development of the modern citizenship agenda (Deem, Brehony and Heath, 1995). This year marked the first time that a government minister (Douglas Hurd) used the phrase “active citizen” (Deem et al., 1995). It is also the year that citizenship was introduced as a cross-curricula subject on the new National Curriculum. At a similar time, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stated that children had the right to influence the decisions which affected them. Later, the Every Child Matters (2003) policy explicitly aimed for every child to have the opportunity for “making a positive contribution: being involved with the community and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour” (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). These all contributed to the increasing profile of the citizenship agenda within British schools.

This paper will use *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools 1998* (‘The Crick Report’) as a watershed in the way in which citizenship education was perceived and delivered within British schools. This report, agreed by an Advisory Group of people from different political persuasions and professional backgrounds, was adopted by a New Labour government and became a cornerstone of education policy. By 2002, citizenship had become a statutory part of the secondary National Curriculum, and has remained so for ten years. The aim of the report’s authors – to change political culture – is clearly defined:

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; 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 (QCA, 1998 p 7-8).

The Crick Report uses the phrase “active citizens” or “active citizenship” on twenty two occasions, and there is no doubt that this was deliberate (Crick, 2010). *Active* citizenship is different from citizenship, and indeed, from passive citizenship. This paper will specifically focus on the role of schools in the development of active citizens, and in particular, it will consider *how* children and young people might be best able to learn to be active citizens. In order to do this, debates about the meaning of the terminology will be explored, and the usage of specific terms within this paper clearly explained.

This paper will argue that schools have a key role to play in supporting the development of active citizenship. It will use one school as a case study to illustrate how

active citizenship can be developed as part of the educational process. This is a small democratic school based in Devon, England. Through exploring this school, it will be argued that democratic schooling is not just one way, but the best way, of effectively offering education for active citizenship. This requires a change in values, accompanied by structural change, in the way that many mainstream schools are currently organised.

What is Active Citizenship?

What does the phrase ‘active citizenship’ mean? Does it mean that people are actively involved in their communities, as school governors, as volunteers, as members of Neighbourhood Watch? Does it mean that people are expected to take an active role in political processes, by for example, voting, sitting on juries, standing for election? Does it mean that citizens get involved in Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ by running schools and hospitals or getting involved in local decision-making?

Active citizenship is a contested term (Lawson, 2001, Kennedy, 2007, Mayo and Annette, 2010). There is no single definition. It certainly implies a role where one is *actively* involved in community and political life but what does this mean exactly? Is it synonymous with being a ‘good’ citizen or indeed, a ‘good person’? All of the examples in the above paragraph are likely to be classified as ‘good citizenship’ but they also suggest a degree of compliance to existing political structures and processes. Would the Occupy London supporters who illegally camped outside St Paul’s Cathedral in protest at global capitalism be classified as active citizens? Would a Quaker who risks getting sent to prison for withholding taxes which pay for armaments be an active citizen? Would young people who decide not to vote but join several single-issue protest groups be active citizens?

Ken Osborne (2005) makes the distinction between being a ‘good person’ and a ‘good citizen’, arguing that citizenship demands an investment in making a better society rather than a mere focus on individual behaviours. Schools, he argues, are often effective in helping students to become good people, but less effective in terms of encouraging their engagement with the wider society. Good citizenship, for him, “requires a willingness and an ability to play an active and morally principled part in the public life of one’s society” (Osborne, 2005 p 13). But what does this active part in public life really mean? Take the examples of the Suffragettes, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or the student protestors at Tiananmen Square in China. These were all passionate, inspiring people with a deep commitment to developing a better society. With the benefit of hindsight, we might argue that they are all shining examples of good citizenship. At the time, however, many of them were publicly vilified and imprisoned by those in authority – and certainly not seen as good citizens. It seems important, therefore, to remove the concept of citizenship from the potentially loaded terminology of being ‘good’.

Henry Giroux (2005) argues that education for good citizenship is often seen in terms of teaching young people to fit in with society and conform to societal norms. For him, active citizenship is different because it does not imply an adherence with the status quo. Rather, he argues that the notion of citizenship is in itself a radical term which “must be removed from forms of patriotism designed to subordinate citizens to the narrow imperatives of the state” (Giroux, 2005 p 6). From this perspective, the Suffragettes, Ghandi, Mandela, protestors outside St Paul’s, Quakers who withhold taxes and young people who choose not to vote could all be classified as active citizens – even if they are breaking the laws of the state. The issue is about their engagement with political life and not about conforming to current political agendas. They might be ‘active citizens’ without necessarily fitting in with society as ‘good citizens’. For Giroux at least, citizenship entails a degree of criticality rather than mere conformity.

In Britain, the Citizenship Foundation has been highly influential in terms of the development of citizenship education in schools. They have taken a clear stance on whether active citizenship and good citizenship are the same by arguing that:

Citizenship education is about enabling people to make their own decisions and to take responsibility for their own lives and their communities. It *is not* about trying to fit everyone into the same mould, or about creating 'model' or 'good' citizens (Citizenship Foundation, 2012, emphasis in original).

The Crick Report used the phrase 'good citizen' or 'good citizenship' on eight occasions. Some of these are in the same sentence as 'active citizen', and at other points, the phrases appear to be used interchangeably. Neither term is explicitly defined and therefore it is easy for the reader to assume that they mean the same thing. In other work, however, Crick has been clear that they are different:

It seems to me elementary that there is a difference between being a good citizen and being an active citizen (Crick, 2000). One can be a good citizen in an autocratic state. One can also be only a good citizen in a democratic state, that is one can obey the law, pay taxes, drive carefully and behave oneself socially ... It is this minimalist approach to citizenship that made me, thirty years ago, voice scepticism about an old tradition of citizenship education as Civics which stressed the primacy of 'the rule' of law and learning about the constitution. For citizenship surely involves public discussion of whether laws work badly or are unjust and how they can be changed (Crick, 2007 p 243).

This paper is based on the premise that education for active citizenship has an agenda which is about encouraging young people to engage with society and with political processes. It is not about encouraging young people to unthinkingly follow the guidance of others, but rather, to actively engage in critical thinking about their own values, attitudes and behaviours. It is about supporting young people to develop the skills and confidence to make their own informed decisions. It is assumed that this is not just about teaching young people to respect the laws as they are set out, to adhere to a specific moral code or to behave in ways which are deemed by others as appropriate.

Active citizenship also implies an investment in community, in whatever ways that might be defined (geographical, social or political). The traditional liberal individualism approach to citizenship is predicated on a rights-based agenda where freedom is attached to moral and legal *rights* of individuals to assert their own interests. This perspective does not fit with active citizenship. Active citizens cannot simply claim their rights and then withdraw from community (Lawson, 2001). Active citizenship demands engagement with others. It fits better with a communitarian approach to citizenship in which rights are seen in tandem with *responsibilities*. From this perspective, individuals cannot use their rights as a trump card. They accept that the exercising of their own rights has an impact on others, and that they have a responsibility to take the needs of others into account when making decisions about their own values, attitudes and behaviours. Active citizens have an investment in the community in which they operate. If everyone within the community is to be an active citizen, then a genuine sense of belongingness becomes crucial (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

How is citizenship learnt?

In discussing the role that schools might play in the development of active citizens, it is vital to discuss not only the definition of citizenship, but also the central issue of how it might most effectively be learnt. This is a pertinent issue, in part, because research has highlighted a major "implementation gap" between policy and practice (Cleaver and Nelson,

2006). Issues of pedagogy are of particular relevance here, arguably more so than for any other subject on the school curriculum – and herein hides an issue. Should citizenship be seen as a curriculum subject or is it different from this? And if it is a ‘subject’, how should it be taught?

The Crick Report states that “effective education for citizenship” needs to develop *knowledge, skills and values* in three interrelated areas; *social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy*. It argues that these are “mutually dependent on each other, but each needing a somewhat different place and treatment in the curriculum” (QCA, 1998 p 11). It also argues that it is as “intellectually demanding and as capable as any other subject of being taught and assessed at any level” (QCA, 1998 p 8). The language here clearly lends itself to citizenship being taught as a discrete curriculum subject, assessed in nationally recognised tests in the same way as any other subject. This is indeed what has happened in most schools (Cleaver and Nelson, 2006). The ‘knowledge’ aspect of citizenship has been taught and then tested. In addition to this, many schools have introduced schemes which encourage community volunteering by young people. These have attempted to develop skills and values. Alongside these initiatives, some schools have attempted to develop a whole-school approach to citizenship, including developing strong school councils and other ‘pupil voice’ initiatives (Davies, Williams and Yamashita, 2005a). These have all attempted to enable young people to develop political literacy.

A key question to address at this point is that of how children and young people learn. For many years, educationalists have argued that *teaching and learning* are two distinct activities (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994, Alexander and Potter, 2005, Apple and Beane, 1999, Freire, 1970, Neill, 1962). A student can be taught to pass a test. They can absorb information and facts without necessarily making meaning from them. The facts can become divorced from the meaning (Cleaver and Nelson, 2006). In the case of citizenship, this is not useful learning. The Crick Report itself states the importance of knowledge, skills and values. How can skills be developed? How are values challenged? One thing is certain – this requires deep learning on the part of the student (Marton and Saljo, 1976). Surface learning for the purpose of passing an exam is not sufficient if the aim of developing active citizens is to be achieved. Now, there is no simple way of assessing the examples given in the previous paragraph. If citizenship is a discrete curriculum subject, will students engage in deep learning about values? They might – but not necessarily. If they engage in community volunteering, will they develop the skills needed to be active citizens? Possibly - but only if the project is designed in such a way as to enable this. Are school councils automatically linked to political literacy? No, some are extremely tokenistic and actively work against genuine political involvement (Garratt and Piper, 2008, Maitles and Deuchar, 2006) – but some are excellent and undeniably support young people in developing their skills, values and knowledge (Davies et al., 2005a). The deciding factor in all these cases is not what is offered as such, but how it is organised and the values which underpin this work.

This paper argues that the importance of the value-base of staff within schools which want to develop active citizenship cannot be underestimated. This is not just in terms of having clear values about the purpose of citizenship education, but also about the way in which they see children and young people. An example is given by Ponder and Lewis-Ferrell (2009) of a primary school project in which children collectively agreed upon an issue which concerned them and then worked together to make a local impact in relation to this concern. The staff showed that they had a high level of trust in the children’s abilities. They believed that they could make good decisions. They valued their input. They believed in the importance of the project being genuinely child-led. This links with a key debate in the field of citizenship education. This relates to whether children and young people are seen as citizens now, or whether the purpose of citizenship education is to develop young people so that they can be active citizens as adults (Alderson, 2000). In short, are they citizens or

citizens-in-waiting (Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006)? This is far more than a semantic distinction, as it underpins the ethos and values behind citizenship education. If they are the latter, then the job of citizenship education is to make sure that they are ready, when the time comes, to take on their responsibilities as an active citizen. This is quite different from if they are seen as the former – as citizens – which means that they take on some of these rights and responsibilities as of now. In the case described above, the staff clearly believed that the children could be treated as citizens now. Coffield and Williamson believe that this is a vital part of effective citizenship education:

... learning about citizenship is not simply a matter of pursuing a course of study. It is an experience and a practice that changes our identities; we become citizens when we are treated and valued as citizens (Coffield and Williamson, 2011 p 60).

If children and young people are seen as citizens – rather than citizens-in-waiting – then it is hard to see a better way to learn about active citizenship than experiential learning. In fact, it is hard to imagine that *active* citizenship can be learnt in any other way. Active citizenship is not about facts and information. It is about criticality, about values, about the balance between rights and responsibilities, about community and belongingness. How can this be taught? Surely it has to be learnt? Again, the distinction between teaching and learning is important. This is a point on which Crick himself agrees. In 2007, he wrote:

Citizenship by prescription, order, rote, grid or check-list is not true citizenship at all. The name of the game is, of course, not citizenship *teaching* but citizenship *learning* (Crick, 2007 p 242, emphasis added).

Experiential learning is not a new idea. Aristotle wrote: “Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it... We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate ones, brave by doing brave ones” (Aristotle, 1976: Nicomachean Ethics, Book II p 91). This seems particularly pertinent when considering active citizenship. Young people are more likely to learn through being citizens – not through being told how to be citizens. They will learn about the complicated balance between rights and responsibilities if they have a chance at experiencing this, making mistakes, reviewing and reflecting on their experiences. This is not about subject knowledge. It is about learning to be members of a community.

Dewey, an early proponent of democratic education was also a key thinker on experiential learning. He argued that schools should run as democratic communities because “the very process of living together educates” (Dewey, 2004 p 6). As part of this, he advocated that experiential learning is crucial because:

To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction ... (Dewey, 2004 p 134).

This paper argues that experiential learning is crucial for learning about active citizenship. This presents a challenge to the dominant pedagogy in many schools. It places far greater emphasis on creating the conditions for learning, rather than on teaching itself. It has echoes of Rogers, founder of the person-centred approach to education, who stated that: “Teaching is, for me, a relatively unimportant and vastly overvalued activity” (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994 p 51). By this, he meant that the focus on the teacher is unhelpful as they do not have it within their power to make someone learn. Rather, the internal process of the student is of far more interest. The job of the teacher (or as Rogers preferred, ‘facilitator’) is to facilitate learning. This means creating the conditions through which learning is more

likely to happen. This entails ensuring that the student has control over the learning process and that there is a genuine, understanding and open relationship between student and facilitator. In the language of citizenship, this might be translated to mean that students are treated as active citizens with a genuine involvement in decision-making. It also strongly reinforces the importance of providing opportunities for experiential learning.

The implications of offering education for active citizenship are more far reaching than just pedagogy. If students are to be viewed as citizens, then this demands the democratisation of schools. Teaching young people about citizenship without giving them the opportunity to participate is, according to Garratt and Piper (2008), nothing more than tokenism. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (Hart, 1992). This point is reinforced by Fielding and Moss who argue that democracy should be a “fundamental value running through the whole education system and process” (2011 p 58-9). In fact, they argue that democracy “should *precede* citizenship” (Fielding and Moss, 2011, emphasis added). This affects the structure of schools, governance, hierarchies, processes for decision-making and relationships. It affects how educational outcomes are measured (Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006, Wrigley, 2003, MacBeath and Moos, 2004). It requires the development of “citizenship schools”, defined by Alexander as ones in which “citizenship is practiced as well as taught” (Alexander in Alexander and Potter, 2005 p 140). This requires nothing short of a whole-scale reform in the way that schools are run.

Case study of a ‘citizenship school’

Sands School is a small independent secondary school based in South Devon. It has spaces for approximately 70 students. It is one of only two schools in England which explicitly describes itself as a ‘democratic school’. It was established in 1987 by a small group of teachers and students – this might in itself be seen as ‘active citizenship’ in action. It is underpinned by a strong ethos about enabling students to have control of their own learning and their own lives. It is based on values about trust, equality and mutual respect. Teachers and students have equal status and decision-making is carried out through the use of a number of democratic processes. The school operates as a community.

This school was studied as a part of a three-year research project which explored students’ experiences of democratic education (Hope, 2010). This project used Grounded Theory methodology which meant that there was no hypothesis and no specific set of research questions (Charmaz, 2006, Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Instead, the researcher had an open mind about what would emerge. There were three research visits to the school during which six students were interviewed in depth, informal conversations were held with many other students, lessons were observed, School Meetings and Staff Meetings were attended, and there were informal discussions with almost every staff member. An extensive piece of documentary analysis was also undertaken which included the school website and publicity materials, policies and timetables.

As an independent school, Sands School is not obliged to follow the National Curriculum. Instead, it develops its own curriculum in negotiation with the students. Sands School does not have ‘citizenship’ as a subject on the timetable. They do not offer it as a GCSE subject. At no point during the research did a single student or a single teacher use the word ‘citizenship’ or ‘citizen’. Yet, Ofsted’s most recent inspection stated that “Students make an exceptional and exemplary contribution to the school community” and that “The school’s strong focus on developing students’ skills and attitudes towards working with each other, tolerating difference and becoming involved in community events provides a rich and rewarding range of experiences which prepare them very well for their adult lives and economic well-being” (Ofsted, March 2010). This paper will argue, therefore, that when viewed through the lens of citizenship education, Sands School can be presented as a

‘citizenship school’ - an model of active citizenship in action, and one from which other schools might learn.

As an independent school, there is an obvious limitation with using Sands School as an outstanding example of active citizenship in action. Although a community in its own right, the school cannot realistically be seen as a microcosm of wider society as the student population is in no way representative of the wider community of the UK. By virtue of being a fee-paying school, it is inherently selective, and although applications are welcomed from people from all backgrounds, there are only a limited number of financial bursaries available. Therefore, the vast majority of students come from families which can afford to pay the school fees (approximately £8700 per annum). This is not to suggest, nonetheless, that all students are wealthy. This is not the case. The school has arrangements with at least one local authority which pays the fees for students with a special educational needs ‘statement’. Other students described the ongoing problems that their families endured in order to find the fees – such was the commitment to wanting their child to attend the school. It should also not be assumed that all students are high achievers, highly motivated or that they would thrive within any school. Students offered extensive evidence to the contrary – many had negative experience of being in large mainstream schools.

The process of becoming part of the Sands School community also makes it a different type of community from those in the wider world. In order to be accepted to attend Sands School, students have to actively *want* to go. All potential new students are invited to attend a ‘trial week’ at the school. By the end of this week, the student decides whether they want to join the school. If they do (and their parents or guardians are supportive, of course), then their case is taken to a whole school meeting for a decision. They are accepted if – and only if – the school feels that the student has grasped the ethos of the school and are able to work within it. This is not a mechanism for trying to keep people out of the community; rather, it is a way of ensuring that only those who genuinely want to be involved are invited to be. This is of course very different from most communities – and almost all schools. In these other settings, members might well have *not* made an active choice to be defined as a community member. This makes a qualitative difference to the nature of active citizenship within Sands School to that of other communities.

Nonetheless, the experience of Sands School still offers some useful learning for educationalists working in other settings. Although the context might be different, Sands School is still a secondary school, working with young people from the ages of 11-18 - an important transition period from child to adult. It offers a broad and balanced curriculum. It supports students to sit the same nationally recognised exams before they leave school. It is inspected by Ofsted, the same body as all other schools. The *what* they do is similar but the *how* they do it is substantially different.

Sands School offers students an experience to live and work as a community, based on the premise that this is in itself educational. This is not to suggest that this is all that they do. Although they do not offer citizenship as a discrete curriculum subject, they do offer General Studies, and they also integrate many aspects of citizenship in a cross-curricula fashion. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that Sands School does not view citizenship as a curriculum subject but as a *way of living*. This fits with Dewey’s argument that “the very process of living together educates” (Dewey, 2004 p 6). The school was established before citizenship became popular parlance within educational policy and yet the values of active citizenship permeate the whole school. The core principles of the school focus on treating students as citizens, as active members of a community, as participants. Students have many rights – the right to choose whether to attend lessons, the right to make decisions, the right to set the rules – but with these rights come responsibilities. This clearly models the

communitarian approach to citizenship (Lawson, 2001). The school is clear about the balance between rights and responsibilities:

At the heart of what we believe is that children, when given the opportunity, are kind, trustworthy and responsible and that they are eminently capable of helping run the place within which they work. In fact, it is an expectation that in return for the freedom and trust they are offered, the students must respond by behaving in a responsible and trustworthy manner (Sands School, 2011).

This delicate balance between rights and responsibilities is a crucial component of citizenship education which at Sands School is learnt experientially. Students have freedom to make their own decisions but it is also clear that they have a responsibility to the wider community if these decisions have an impact on others. For example, students can negotiate their own learning programme and they can choose whether to attend formal lessons. As a result, some students might be sitting outside in the gardens whilst others have chosen to be inside in lessons. The school rules make it very clear that the students have a *right* to choose to be outside – but they do not have a right to disturb those who have chosen to be inside. They have a *responsibility* to ensure that their behaviour does not have a negative impact on others. And this rule is upheld by the community – not necessarily by teachers – but by other students. It is a frequent occurrence to see students asking other students to be quiet. This is active citizenship at its best. Everyone feels a responsibility to the community.

But where are these rules made in the first place? They are made by the community as a whole through the School Meeting. This takes place every week and is the central decision-making body of the school. All students and all staff are able to attend, to raise issues, to speak freely and to influence the final decision. The school tries to make decisions by consensus but failing that, a vote is taken by all present. Given that the number of students outweighs the number of staff members, this gives students considerable power. Now, all students have the *right* to attend this meeting but they are under no obligation. However, the vast majority do choose to attend every week, and as one explained:

... sometimes they drag on for a bit and you get a bit bored after like, two and a half hours going round in a circle, but if we didn't have them, we wouldn't have such a great atmosphere and such a great amount of people at Sands as we do now, if we didn't decide what goes on in it, cos if everybody else decided it for us, then it just wouldn't work, because that's not what we want. We want a school where we decide what goes on, and we decide who comes in and who doesn't, and what's going to happen with it ...

This student clearly understood that if she wanted to be in a school where the students have the power to make decisions, then she also has a responsibility to participate in meetings which she sometimes finds boring. This illustrates that the students themselves, albeit unconsciously, have understood the values embedded within the communitarian approach to citizenship.

Balancing rights and responsibilities can, in practice, be challenging. With reference to Summerhill School, the first democratic school in the world, A.S. Neill described this as a “perennial problem that can never be solved.” He called it the “problem of the individual vs the community” and stated that:

In the disciplined home, the children have *no* rights. In the spoiled home, they have *all* the rights. The proper home is one in which children and adults have equal rights. And the same applies to school (Neill, 1962 p 107, emphasis in original).

This is a key issue for a democratic society. How do children and young people learn how to exercise their freedom without taking away the rights of others to do the same? How do they learn to take the needs of a wider community into account? Democratic schools are no different. These issues can be real, painful and challenging. At Sands School, one student felt that democracy “gets on top of you sometimes” because “you’ve just gotta weigh everything up and see what happens, which is hard”. She went on to explain how she had been part of a decision to expel a fellow student. This was a rare occurrence but nonetheless an extremely painful one. She explained how the School Meeting had talked at length about the issues involved. It was stressful because she felt close to the other student but eventually, she agreed with the decision to expel the student. She was clearly able to prioritise the needs of the community as a whole over her own personal feelings. Given that she was 15 (and some students involved in this decision were 11), this is clearly ‘deep learning’ (Marton and Saljo, 1976). It is hard to imagine how this type of learning could have occurred if citizenship was merely taught as a curriculum subject. Here, the experiential nature of the school meant that she was able to learn from being a part of democracy in action.

Students can only take this level of responsibility if they are trusted. This trust is embedded in the values of the school and it is powerfully experienced by students. Although some students recognised that it could take time to trust others and to feel trusted by others, all highlighted the importance of this trust. This level of trust enables students to feel that others have confidence in them – and in turn, they learn to develop greater confidence in themselves. Running alongside this trust – and underpinning it – is an organisational structure based on equality. Equality between students and teachers is of great significance to this school, and it is this which enables the development of a genuine democratic community. Democratic communities are characterised as being self-governing. An exploration of the ‘rules’ at Sands School illustrates the nature of this self-government. In contrast to mainstream schools, which one student described as being “bells and rules”, many Sands students struggled to clearly identify the rules at all. One said, for example, “They have boundaries but I wouldn’t say that they have major rules.” Another said, “I didn’t do well under rules, whereas here I have none.” Further analysis of data revealed that Sands School does have rules but that these rules have a completely different tone to them. They are explicitly based on common sense. One student explained that “you know what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable, and you should know that from your own common sense.” The Sands School website states that:

The school prides itself on its common sense approach to daily life and from its inception in 1987 the use of petty rules and punishments has been avoided as much as possible and has been replaced by discussion, negotiation and conflict resolution (Sands School, 2011).

Sands School, therefore, can afford not to have a large number of explicit rules as it has a powerful culture of self-governance. New students do not need to be told what to do (or what not to do); they can work this out for themselves. Students can learn to trust their own common sense. They can learn to be responsible for themselves, and to be responsible to others. And if this is not enough, then the forum of the School Meeting can be used for discussion and if necessary, an agreement to implement a formal rule. Yet the feeling of not having a lot of rules adds to the feeling of freedom and of trust. Rules are restrictive. The ethos of using common sense is not. Students feel more responsible for themselves and more ownership of the school. Through the lens of citizenship education, these are important foundations from which transformational learning can take place.

Being a self-governing community brings its challenges for staff. Self-governance does not mean governance by young people alone – it means governance by all those involved within the community. This gives a clear role to staff and one that is not easy. They

have to be willing to share responsibilities with students whilst also maintaining their own sense of rights. They have a right to be heard, to influence decision-making, to have freedom – and balancing the rights of students with those of staff is a continual challenge. Take the example of ‘negotiated learning’. Students have freedom to choose which lessons to attend (or in some cases, to attend none at all). However, once the decision has been made, they are expected to turn up to the lessons they have chosen and be ready to engage with learning. The teacher prepares the lesson for the number of students who have chosen the option. Issues arise if, having chosen particular lessons, the students do not turn up. In effect, they have broken their side of the agreement. Now, it could be argued that students have to take responsibility for their decision and that they cannot expect to be able to pass an exam, for example, if they have not turned up. This is of course true, but there is another issue. The teacher, having prepared the lesson, has a right to be annoyed, upset or even angry. What do they do with these feelings? During this research project, one teacher decided that the way that he wanted to express his anger was to go ‘on strike’ for one day. He came to school but he did not turn up to any of the lessons he was supposed to teach. Instead, he did what he wanted to do – spending time having coffee and chatting, re-decorating his classroom. His aim – or at least his stated aim – was to encourage students to think. When students turned up to lessons and he was not there, he wanted discussion to ensue, particularly in terms of rights and responsibilities and the impact of taking unilateral decisions. Of course, the merits of his decision to strike can be debated at length (as indeed they were at the weekly staff meeting), but what is certain is that his motives were consistent with the agenda of encouraging active citizenship. He wanted students to think about their – and his – responsibilities to one another. Establishing rules which are based on common sense means that students (and staff) have to *think*. This is an important aspect of active citizenship. Students cannot proceed unthinkingly through school, sticking to the rules and coming out unchanged. Students have to engage with the school processes. They have to engage with others. They have to decide how they want to behave. They have to be prepared to be accountable to others. They have to be critical thinkers. This is a powerful experience, and students change as a result. One explained that:

... my opinion on things changed a lot, and whereas before when I first started coming here, I was you know, I was a little sheep, followed the fashion, had to talk cool, know the latest words and have the latest CD or whatever, and since coming here now, I’m so chilled back and relaxed, my mum’s just like ‘you’re completely different person’. It does change you a lot, coming to a school like this ...

The reason that students change – and are able to reflect on this change – is because of the way that they engage with each other and with the school. They feel accepted as individuals, but they also feel connected to others and invested in others. The sense of belonging helps students to experience a strong sense of community, and this motivates them to want to adhere to the ‘rules’ and philosophy of the school. This is a crucial part of citizenship. It suggests that not only do these students feel connected as citizens within a community now, but that they have developed the attitudes, values and skills which will help them to be active citizens once they leave school too.

Sands School students, then, might be seen as active citizens, but they are not necessarily compliant citizens. They are not likely to unthinkingly follow rules which have been laid out by others. They are more likely to ask questions, to argue, and even to resist. One student, for example, argued that democracy is a model of government that can only work on a small scale. He said that “I believe that democracy, country-scale democracies are just a waste of time, to be honest.” Another explained that her long-term plan after she left school was “to change education really”, specifically because “people need more choice about where they go to school, and they need to want to go to school.” These are not the words of compliant citizens but of ones who wants to challenge the status quo. They will be engaged and active, but critical, citizens (Giroux, 2005).

Discussion

The citizenship agenda for Britain's schools is, on paper, a radical document. It aims for "no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally" (QCA, 1998 p 7). In many schools, nonetheless, there appears to have been an "implementation gap" between policy and practice (Cleaver and Nelson, 2006). Although citizenship has been formally taught as a curriculum subject, it has not had the impact in terms of developing engaged and active citizens. The danger of this was forewarned within the Crick Report when it stated that:

Also it is obvious that all formal preparation for citizenship in adult life can be helped or hindered by the *ethos* and *organisation* of a school, whether pupils are given opportunities for exercising responsibilities and initiatives or not; and also whether they are consulted realistically on matters where their opinions can prove relevant both to the efficient running of a school and to their general motivation for learning (QCA, 1998 p 25, emphasis added).

Sands School has not experienced an implementation gap between policy and practice for one obvious reason; it is not trying, in any way, to implement policy. Rather, the ethos, values and organisation of the school, by default, are consistent with the active citizenship agenda. By explicitly describing itself as a 'democratic school', the intention to actively involve students as participants within all elements of school process is at the forefront of the agenda. This is not because the government has instructed them to, but because this is inherent within the values of the school itself.

It is perhaps this value-system from which other schools might learn the greatest lessons. The majority of schools have, after all, attempted to involve children and young people in decision-making through the development of school councils and forums – and yet, many of these have been criticised as being tokenistic and ineffective (Garratt and Piper, 2008). The reason for this is not a fault of the mechanisms themselves but a problem with an inconsistency of the values which underpin them. Treating students as citizens rather than citizens-in-waiting requires a change in the culture of schooling (Fielding, 2001). It is not about ticking boxes. It is about genuinely believing that the involvement of children and young people is the right thing to do.

Schools which offer genuine opportunities for active citizenship show, almost without exception, that the outcomes for students, for teachers and for the school itself are overwhelmingly positive (Davies, Williams and Yamashita, 2005b). Students have increased self-esteem, better interpersonal skills, a sense of belonging and improved personal efficacy. Schools have better atmospheres, the relationships between teachers and students are improved, student behaviour is less disruptive and relationships between peers are enhanced (Davies et al., 2005b). Research into democratic schools in particular has shown that these schools have better communication, improved decision-making across the schools and an increased sense of belonging. Rules are more likely to be kept. There is less likely to be a culture of "them and us" (Harber, cited in Trafford, 1997 p 9).

Citizenship schools have been defined as those in which citizenship is practised as well as taught (Alexander and Potter, 2005). This is crucial. Citizenship is not like a traditional academic subject. It has to be learnt through experience. It is only through the experience of having rights and responsibilities, of being accountable to others, of feeling a sense of belonging, that children and young people can really grapple with the complexities that come with 'active citizenship'.

Conclusion

This paper started with the widespread civil unrest of August 2011. A culture of “them and us” is exactly what David Cameron warned about in the days following the riots (Cameron, 15 August 2011). The rioters, according to Cameron, had little invested in society. They were alienated. They felt no sense of responsibility to the communities in which they lived. They had no sense of belonging. These individuals were not all young people, of course, but one can but wonder how different it might have been if they had experienced something different at school. Investing time and energy in developing active citizenship in schools is not straightforward, but if done effectively, the payoffs for students, schools, and ultimately for society, would surely be high.

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