

Celebrating 17 years of citizenship teacher education: Reflections from citizenship trained teachers

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PULL QUOTES

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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to focus on the problems we confront with initial teacher education – we have never trained enough Citizenship specialists, they are no longer paid a bursary, and the number of courses has fallen. However Amit Puni has spoken to a number of colleagues who qualified on Citizenship specialist programmes to gain an insight into how their careers have developed and what the legacy of such specialist training has been. The answers are remarkably uplifting – in terms of the impact these teachers feel they have had on young people, and on their own career prospects. This is a timely reminder of the value of this specialist provision, and a reminder of why we must continue to defend such provision. Luckily, as Amit’s new role attests, there are still some exciting innovations in Citizenship specialist ITE.

I completed my PGCE in Citizenship in 2008. Since then I have taught the subject for 10 years, but like many other citizenship specialists, I have also taught a range of other social science subjects on my education journey. I have recently left my post as Head of Social Sciences in an Outstanding teaching school in West London to take on a role that I am very proud of, as course leader of the new Citizenship with Social Science PGCE at Kingston University.

Whilst I was designing this new Citizenship course at Kingston University, and researching this article, I have reflected on my own training and experiences and also drawn on the voices of others who have shared their reflections on their Citizenship teaching journey. Below, I have

highlighted some of the key themes that came out of these interesting conversations with current teachers.

Diversity of Citizenship Specialists

Amongst the many idiosyncrasies of Citizenship, it attracts a diverse range of students with various life and educational experiences. Despite teachers coming from a wide range of subject degree backgrounds, a common thread among Citizenship trainees is that they are drawn to the subject by the interesting and relevant topics the Citizenship curriculum provides. Almost all interviewees agreed that Citizenship was a unique subject in the range of contemporary topics and concepts it addresses. No other subject really gets at the heart of modern society the way Citizenship does. It brings questions of social justice, equality, human rights, power and democracy into the classroom and forces students to engage in them in an informed and critical way.

Power of the Subject

What was unanimous across all the teachers interviewed was their passion for the subject and its scope to empower and transform young people's lives. Nick, who is Head of Sociology and Citizenship in a comprehensive school comments what he likes most about Citizenship is that it is 'a chance to really learn what young people are truly about, as the subject gives them a platform and a chance to speak freely in a way that most others do not.' He also argues that it is unique because the teacher must be prepared to 'have your own views and preconceptions challenged and allow yourself to keep learning, just as we promote to our students.' This view is echoed by Laura, who works in what she describes as a challenging school, who says that 'when citizenship is delivered correctly, it impacts students' lives.' Laura and many others interviewed were able to list the countless organizations and campaigns that students are still very actively involved in years after the course had finished, such as Amnesty International, UKfeminsita and The Model United Nations General Assembly. Teachers often spoke of students leaving school and applying their skills and understanding to the complex world we live in, showing they believe they have power to affect change. This is where citizenship education does much more than the role of a standard school subject, and becomes an empowering and emancipating tool.

Active Citizens

Amongst the many great moments I had teaching citizenship over the years, I have to say some of my favourites were the times when students left the class still very much engaged and discussing the topic. Djamila, a Citizenship and PSHE coordinator in a PRU, recalled how her class had been watching a protest video in lesson, and decided to carry on chanting after the lesson, through the hallways, and down the road. A chorus of students could be heard chanting 'No ifs, No buts. No education cuts!' from the school gate to down to the local bus stop. This is an example of the youthful energy that students bring to the subject. However, as Citizenship teachers we do hold tremendous power given the nature of our subject and how we present the topics. There have been moments when students become quite emotional about a cause or an injustice, and this must be handled with great care and sensitivity, non-specialist teachers can tend to struggle with this aspect of Citizenship.

To help students find a cause that resonates with them, and realising their own power to influence change, are key intentions of the active citizenship projects that are run each year by hundreds of young people. There must have been thousands of social action projects that have

been completed and supported through the arduous behind the scenes work of Citizenship teachers across the country.

Kirsty, a senior leader, spoke with great pride as she shared her story of working with a group of seven, Year 10 boys at GCSE. This group's target grades were modest, their behavior was such that they had been removed from other GCSE subjects, four of the boys had criminal records and many of the teachers deemed them unteachable. Needless to say this was going to be a challenging group! For their active citizenship project, the pupils chose an issue that they felt strongly about, which was the 'stop and search' legislation and rights. As part of the process, they interviewed a police officer who had been invited in by Kirsty, and pupils posed some very difficult questions and shared their experiences of the police. The officer told Kirsty she had found the experience difficult but rewarding, and at the end the pupils and the officer both came to a sense of understanding of each other's position. This resulted in the pupils starting a campaign to educate others within the school about their rights. They presented in school assemblies, and went into lessons to deliver workshops they had designed. The boys all passed and for many it was the only strong GCSE they had completed, however, the real victory was seeing the students passionately engage with a topic that they felt so strongly about.

Tim, another senior leader in a secondary school, discussed the diverse and enriching opportunities the subject provides for students. For instance, the various skills that are developed through competitions such as Mock Trials and First Give programs have a real impact on pupil self-esteem and confidence. These active competitions are essential and enriching life experiences which are invaluable to the development of young people.

Career Progression

Another commonality among the Citizenship teachers I spoke to is that they had gained middle or senior leadership positions shortly after gaining QTS. This may be down to several factors, however Laika and Tim, both senior leaders, gave an interesting insight on how Citizenship provides opportunities to raise your profile within the school. It is likely that you may be the only Citizenship teacher in the school or you may have a small department, therefore there is a lot of scope to organize large projects within school such as, days off timetable for a year group, year group trips, building links with community members and local MPs and organizing guest speakers. All of these events are generally keenly supported by Head-teachers as it raises the profile of the school and tend to be high impact on students. Citizenship projects build your profile within the school, as organizing drop-down days, and school events is great leadership experience as you are working across the school, which is required as you progress in your career. Being a Citizenship teacher and organizing such enrichment for students can equally give you a platform to be noticed. You are having an impact outside of your classroom and are seen to be contributing to the wider school community which is useful for providing evidence for yearly reviews. In addition, being a Citizenship teacher means that you are covering a whole range of evidence for Ofsted, with current agendas of SMSC, and the controversial fundamental British values, and Prevent agenda all linking heavily within the Citizenship curriculum.

Outside of the mainstream

One of the key strengths of Citizenship is that it often transcends traditional classroom practices. Olly, who trained in Citizenship in 2002, and is currently teaching in Japan, says that 'the International Baccalaureate's approach to teaching and learning complimented what I had

been doing in Citizenship in the UK. I took on the role of Service Coordinator and was able to put the skills I had learnt in designing and leading active citizenship projects into good use. Here in Japan, I have worked with students in feeding the homeless, cleaning local beaches and volunteering at temples and shrines.’ Although Olly is no longer teaching Citizenship discretely, he like many others who have trained in the subject, but whose journey has taken them into a different direction, still upholds the subject’s ideals.

Djamila, who currently works in an alternative educational provision says that her passion for the subject led her away from mainstream and into an alternative education setting, where she has developed an enhanced focus on Citizenship throughout the service. She explains that it is the most vulnerable students who cannot access mainstream education for various reasons that are the most receptive to citizenship education. She says the young people she works with ‘become very politicized through Citizenship. This is due to nature of students within the setting, as a lot of them have a story and background which link to citizenship issues such as bullying, domestic violence, trauma, and LGBT rights. When students see that their experience link to human right injustices such as the right to safety and freedom of expression, they become very aware of the injustices done onto them, and tend to become very politicized and engaged.’ It is a combination of a sense of marginalization, and opportunities to study issues of fairness and rights within the Citizenship curriculum, that is especially useful in helping vulnerable pupils discover their voice, and feel like they are able to participate in society, and stand up for themselves.

Changes to over time

Despite the changes to the curriculum, revision of the GCSE specifications and pressures of the EBACC, Citizenship is still thriving in many schools today. Djamila reflected on some of the key changes to the curriculum she has seen over the decade she has been teaching Citizenship. ‘During the early days, under a Labour government, the original Citizenship curriculum seemed to have some strong aspects of being critical and challenging the status quo. There is a sense amongst teachers, that under the Tory government, there is more of an emphasis on compliance and *toeing the line*.’ This can be seen as the role of active citizenship has been de-valued by the new GCSE specifications in favour of a more knowledge-heavy curriculum. However, with the Ofsted agendas of SMSC, FBV, and Prevent Citizenship has found new favour amongst school leaders as it provides a rich source of evidence for compliance with these initiatives.

Power of Social Media

Several teachers highlighted the growth of social media and its role in politicising young people. The power of twitter, Instagram and various other social media platforms has been used to equip young people with information about the world around them, and there is no denying the impact of social media in contemporary society. Laika, a senior leader in a secondary comprehensive school, explains that students come in informed (or misinformed) about topics very much more than when she began teaching Citizenship. With students now having rapid and easy access to information, it is the role of good Citizenship teachers to be able to equip students with the skills to understand how to interpret the abundance of information available to them at their fingertips at any given time. Another opportunity social media presents is that it is easier to research and find examples of citizenship issues to bring topics to life.

Equally, some teachers have also utilised social media to network and share ideas such as Oli who has a successful YouTube channel that has had over 10,000 views around concepts of pedagogy. However, there is clearly some fragmentation and reluctance around using social

media in a professional capacity with some citing work life balance, and general workload issues.

Future of Citizenship Education in Teacher 3.0.

It was truly refreshing and reinvigorating to speak to so many Citizenship teachers and reflect on the subject that brought us into teaching. The very purpose of education is that it *ought* to equip pupils for the skills to participate fully in democratic life and develop their cognitive, social and cultural competence. This is strikingly similar to the very nature of citizenship education.

In the battle for social justice, it has been demonstrated that the ‘quality of classroom teaching has by far the biggest impact on pupils, particularly those from poorer homes’ (Sutton Trust, 2015). Therefore, the role of the teacher is vital to ensure that students are able to leave school with essential cognitive skills developed through the curriculum, but also a social and political understanding that are essential to participate in an ever changing and dynamic society. This is yet another reason why strong Citizenship provision, taught by trained specialists is vital.

Research has shown the impact of teacher quality on educational outcomes (Hattie 2003, McKinsey Report, 2007). However, less attention is generally given to teachers’ key role in the development of non-cognitive skills (Flèche, 2017) that have a long lasting impact on the social development of students, which Citizenship clearly provides. Teacher Education Exchange’s concept of ‘Teacher Development 3.0’ explores the role universities may play in developing a new model of teacher training that is built upon four key values or principles that underpin this new concept of 3.0 model. The 4 key themes are ‘community teachers’, ‘life-long learners’, ‘cultural or societal development’ and a ‘continuum of professional learning’ (Ellis et al, 2017). Both concepts of ‘cultural and social development’ and of ‘community teachers’ are clearly linked to aspects of Citizenship.

The future of Citizenship education according to the model is to place teachers at the very heart of the communities that they work in. This is to try and create more links between schools, pupils and their communities. The very essence of citizenship education is to promote social development so that pupils are able to understand and value the importance of participating in democratic processes and play an active part in social life. There seems to be a real need for strong Citizenship teachers under this new Teacher 3.0 model. The model provides a spark for further conversations about the importance of *strong* citizenship teaching moving forward.

For further information about the Citizenship with Social Science PGCE see the link below (<http://www.kingston.ac.uk/postgraduate-course/secondary-teaching-qts-pgce/>), alternatively, you can contact Amit Puni (Amit.Puni@sgul.kingston.ac.uk).

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