

Creating Citizenship Communities Project



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The full data are stored at the Department of Education and the National Foundation for Educational Research, University of York, and can be made available on request.

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Executive summary

- The project 'Creating Citizenship Communities' was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation during the period 2011–2013.
- The project team was based at the Department of Education at the University of York and the National Foundation for Educational Research.
- The project investigated the thinking and actions of professionals in schools and young people about forms of citizenship that relate to strong communities and developed educational materials designed to enhance understanding and skill development.
- The key stages of the project were a literature review, secondary data analysis, a national survey of schools (completed by relevant professionals) and focus groups of young people.
- There is widespread agreement about the importance of community but there are different perspectives about its meaning.
- A great deal of work is undertaken by schools to support the development of citizenship communities.
 - However: (a) schools could do more to create a sense of community within schools themselves and (b) schools could do more to help young people engage with their local communities.
- The teaching and learning about citizenship and communities in schools does not have the same status as other areas of the curriculum.
- Young people suggest that schools should take citizenship education more seriously and that the content of citizenship education could be more directly relevant to their lives.
- The co-ordination of curricular and whole-school approaches to citizenship and community is not always strongly developed.
- There is at times relatively little attention paid to young people's existing knowledge and experience in the development of education to explore and support citizenship communities.



Introduction and aims of the study

Policy makers, the media and others urge schools to ensure that young people recognise the value of community cohesion and contribute to its achievement. Teachers may assume that community cohesion can be achieved through learning from the formal curriculum (eg in citizenship lessons); through whole-school projects (eg learning about business enterprise); and by community liaison (eg developing positive relationships with members of older people's residential homes).

Through this process community cohesion is characterised generally, as part of a rather vague intention to improve society, and students are often seen as part of the problem. Young people are seen by adults as being in need of reform through the imposition of officially sanctioned forms of knowledge and specific types of engagement. As such students' existing informal and officially unrecognised understandings and actions to create communities with peers and others may be disregarded.

We suggest that inappropriately vague understandings of community and negative perceptions of young people lead only to the failure of educational strategies to promote community cohesion. This report is of a study that: explores young people's characterisations of – and actions for – community cohesion; contributes to an enhanced recognition by policy makers and others of the positive contributions that are – and can be – made by young people; and makes it possible for professional educators to take action that is more likely to have real impact in the strengthening of communities.

The research was supported by a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (ref: 10-1102). The project was conducted by the Department of Education at the University of York in partnership with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The research began in January 2010 and was completed at the end of December 2012. This introductory section includes the aims of the study and the context of citizenship and community cohesion in the United Kingdom.

Using a variety of research methods that include a literature review, analysis of secondary data, a representative survey of schools in England and 16 focus groups with students in eight schools, the research aimed to:

- ascertain activities for community cohesion that are managed by schools and to what extent these initiatives are perceived by students to contribute to their understanding and practice;
- ascertain how students characterise community cohesion and what range of community (both virtual and actual) activities they are engaged in within and beyond school;
- produce exemplar resources for new approaches to learning (for policy makers, academics, professionals and young people).





Overview of methodology

The central elements of the methodology for this project were a national online questionnaire survey of schools followed by qualitative fieldwork in eight schools. These were preceded by an extensive literature review and secondary data analysis. The literature review was achieved by means of an extensive search through academic databases, analysing different types of literature (reviews, articles, reports, books and monographs, conference reports, information on current research studies and 'grey literature'), focusing on the secondary-age phase (11–18) in work relevant to England. The analysis of secondary data provided some national context on young people's participation in community activities and sense of community cohesion with data taken from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE).

The school questionnaire was administered by NFER to identify current thinking and practice in schools in relation to community cohesion, and to begin exploration of young people's perceptions and practice as a basis for further investigation in the student focus group phase. The survey sample consisted of 800 secondary schools in England. Target respondents for this survey were members of staff with responsibility for community cohesion and/or citizenship within their school.

A total of 132 respondents participated in the survey, from 119 schools. One response was selected at random from each duplicate school, resulting in 119 individual responses. Schools were stratified by (1) urban/rural schools, (2) percentage of white British students and (3) schools' position within the index of multiple deprivation. The responses received were largely representative of the national population of schools in relation to each of these criteria. The majority of respondents (71 per cent) had responsibility for the curriculum in relation to citizenship and community. Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) had strategic responsibilities for citizenship and community, and/or responsibilities for school-wide planning. Almost three quarters (74 per cent) of respondents were teachers with responsibilities for citizenship education, and almost one quarter (23 per cent) were members of their school's senior management team. A small number of respondents (4 per cent) were teachers without responsibilities for citizenship education, and a further 3 per cent were non-teaching staff.

Sixteen focus group interviews were conducted with year 10 and year 11 students across eight schools. The sample was drawn from a list of 39 schools in England that participated in the school survey and agreed to be contacted to take part in the qualitative phase of this project. The selection of schools was directed by three main factors; geographical location (urban/rural), ethnic mix (predominantly white/ethnically diverse) and disadvantage (defined as neighbourhood deprivation).

The young people were asked about:

- communities
- engagement and belonging to community/communities
- community cohesion
- the role of schools in fostering a sense of community, promoting community cohesion and civic engagement
- links between understandings of community, community cohesion and citizenship education.





Findings – previous research

The narrative synthesis of research findings was developed by analysing 154 studies published since the end of the 1990s to 2011, principally about students aged 11–18 in England with keyword searching ('community cohesion', 'citizenship', 'citizenship education' and 'youth community engagement') of a range of databases.¹

What is 'community'?

There are no unanimously accepted definitions of community and citizenship but emphases are placed on status, identity, common vision and sense of belonging, strong positive relationships and action in various contexts for equity, equality and diversity. 'Community' is seen variously as a place, an idea, an ideal and as engagement. Debates about preferred forms of citizenship and community range across 'private' and 'public' matters with varying emphases on gender, social class and ethnicity. General surveys of levels of community and citizenship have been published and there are responses to specific crises (eg the 2011 report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel). Relatively little attention has been given to young people's understandings of community.

What sorts of engagement are occurring?

There are many references to apathy, ignorance and cynicism about public engagement. But young people are positive about engagement and act as volunteers. Some suggest participation levels are already high and can be improved upon still further. Surveys show that close to one half of young people have experience of volunteering and around three quarters of young people have been involved in constructive social participation through community networks, neighbourliness, campaigning or informal political action. These actions may be associated with family responsibilities, sport, religion and many other contexts. Young people may be poorly represented in traditional forms of political engagement (eg voting) but there is involvement in other contexts such as campaigning on specific issues. There is increasing attention devoted to virtual forms of citizenship which challenge our traditional notions of linear, formal, physical engagement.



¹ For reasons of space references to work cited are not provided in this report but full details may be seen on our web pages (www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/citizenship-communities).



Who is taking part?

Urban youth from deprived neighbourhoods already make contributions to – and have a detailed and highly specialised knowledge of – their local communities but, generally, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be less likely to engage in civic action. Poverty, ‘minority’ ethnicity, disability, lower social class and male gender are associated with less volunteering and may be connected with low levels of formally and positively recognised public engagement. A variety of paths and types of community and political engagement are chosen by individuals.

Why do people engage?

Key factors associated with engagement include individually framed social and altruistic tendencies, preferences for specific civic action and entrepreneurial approaches that develop particular skill sets in relation to potential future opportunities in education and employment. Generally, engagement occurs if resources are available to the young person (in terms of time and money) and if there is civic capital in the form of knowledge, skills and a sense of efficacy. There may be a positive relationship between participation and health, educational performance and life satisfaction, and an inverse relationship between participation and crime. However, cause and effect need to be considered carefully and the characterisation of involvement needs at times to be considered beyond membership of established charitable bodies. The adult public, unreasonably and in the absence of evidence, regard young people as a threat, and this may hinder positive engagement. Wider social factors may be as important in generating involvement as individual motivation.

How might more young people become involved in communities?

The strategies frequently highlighted as promoting engagement include: encouraging more young people into part-time volunteering; incentives that include tangible rewards, skill development and recognition of other factors such as peer pressure; publicising opportunities; and targeting key decision makers who can influence young people. An inclusive ethos, a welcoming physical environment and a willingness to deal realistically and honestly with issues that affect individuals and communities in contemporary society are attractive to young people. Those who work with young people need high-level interpersonal skills to create a positive process of participation while maintaining realistic commitments.

What might schools do to facilitate higher levels of young people’s engagement in communities?

An active, open, conversational and non-biased tone that welcomes disagreement and diversity may promote engagement. Citizenship education does the most for community cohesion and engagement when it encourages students to debate the issues of the day in a constructive, unbiased way. Citizenship education should be based on a coherent conceptual base and include probing of controversial issues. Service learning may help promote engagement and the development of a range of skills (public speaking skills, critical reasoning, problem identification, problem solving, petitioning and advocacy). Determined efforts are needed to ensure an inclusive approach.



Findings – secondary data analysis

The LSYPE data provided a national picture of students' engagement in various community activities and indicators of community cohesion.² LSYPE is a national representative longitudinal study in which young people were first interviewed in 2004 when they were 13 or 14 years of age. Data were collected from the same young people on an annual basis until 2010. It should be noted that in 2009, when the young people were 19 or 20 years old, they were asked a number of specific questions regarding community cohesion.

Participation in community activities

In 2004 and 2005, the young people were asked which community activities they had participated in during the previous four weeks.

- Only 1 per cent of 13/14-year-olds reported going to a political meeting, march, rally or demonstration. This had risen to 2 per cent by the following year when the young people were 14 or 15 years of age.
- Just 4 per cent of 13/14-year-olds reported doing some sort of community work (eg helping elderly, disabled or other dependent people, cleaning up the environment, helping volunteer organisations or charities) in 2004. By the following year, this had risen to 6 per cent.
- One fifth (20 per cent) of 13/14-year-olds reported going to a youth club or similar activity (eg scouts or guides). In 2005, this had dropped slightly to 17 per cent for 14/15-year-olds.

Sense of community cohesion

In 2009, when the young people were 19 or 20 years old, they were asked a number of specific questions regarding community cohesion. Below are a portion of the results from the analysis.

- The vast majority (79 per cent) of young people reported that it is easier for people like themselves to get on/improve than it was for their parents.

² For more information about LSYPE please visit <https://www.education.gov.uk/ilsype>.





- Over half of the young people (56 per cent) agreed that in Britain today, people are usually treated fairly regardless of background. Higher levels of agreement were reported by Indian (73 per cent), Pakistani (75 per cent) and Bangladeshi (75 per cent) youth.
- 70 per cent of young people reported that being British was important to them. However, there were lower levels of agreement reported by black Caribbean youth (52 per cent).
- Some 60 per cent of young people reported that Britain is a free country where rights are respected regardless of background. Lower levels of agreement were reported by black Caribbean youth (47 per cent).
- The vast majority (79 per cent) of young people reported that newspapers these days make young people out to be much worse than they are.
- Over half (52 per cent) of young people reported that there is too little respect for religion and religious values in Britain today. Higher levels of agreement were reported by Jewish (71 per cent) and Muslim (63 per cent) youth.
- Some 59 per cent of young people reported that young people today are often stopped by the police for no good reason. Higher levels of agreement were reported by poor youth (72 per cent) and by black Caribbean (79 per cent) and black African (68 per cent) youth.

Conclusions from the LYPSE data

The secondary analysis of the LYPSE data provided a national picture of young people's participation in various community-based activities and an indication of their sense of community. The findings from the analysis also informed our approach to the school survey and focus groups. The results above indicate that few young people are participating in community activities. Understanding why this may be the case was a focus of this research project. In addition, young people's sense of community seems to vary by ethnicity and socio-economic status. Therefore, these findings informed us of the need to achieve a broad sample for the school survey and focus groups.





Findings – school survey

Key finding 1: Schools are committed to citizenship and community

- The vast majority of schools mention citizenship and community in their mission statements (78 per cent).
- The vast majority of schools have specific targets or objectives on citizenship and community (87 per cent).

Key finding 2: Schools are hugely active in promoting citizenship education and community cohesion

Schools report the following characteristics of their approaches.

Schools:

- develop students' sense of social responsibility (98 per cent)
- help young people to respect and celebrate diversity (98 per cent)
- help students understand their rights as citizens (95 per cent)
- emphasise developing young people's sense of social justice (92 per cent)
- work to raise participation in the democratic process (92 per cent).

In addition, they encourage self-reliance (82 per cent), encourage volunteering (80 per cent), work to develop young people as informed consumers (77 per cent), equip students to access public services (71 per cent) and develop an entrepreneurial mindset in students (70 per cent). Schools least commonly reported developing a faith-based approach to citizenship and community (33 per cent).

Key finding 3: Teachers use a wide variety of strategies in relation to citizenship and community

At an outward-looking level, strategies include:

- making links with local businesses (91 per cent)
- developing work with charities including disability groups and faith groups (80 per cent)
- developing links with local schools with a different student population (77 per cent)
- opening up extended schools provision to others (67 per cent)
- encouraging local people to participate in volunteering and creating community spaces (60 per cent).

With a student focus, strategies include:

- providing opportunities for students to discuss difficult issues (98 per cent)
- creating an environment based on mutual respect and trust (93 per cent)
- ensuring there are opportunities for students to represent their peers on advisory committees and working parties (91 per cent)
- offering informal volunteering opportunities (87 per cent)
- providing formal volunteering opportunities (79 per cent)
- developing enterprise activities (78 per cent)
- teaching citizenship through lessons (90 per cent) and the wider curriculum (75 per cent).





Some examples included:

Approaches to citizenship and PSHE lessons include making links with: community projects, the wider curriculum, the whole curriculum	Involving external speakers and visitors in the school	Organising special 'off timetable' events such as week-long projects and community action days
Providing additional community and citizenship lessons and courses (eg values and ethics lessons)	Encouraging student involvement in community and environmental groups (eg Fairtrade groups)	Using online software (eg Boardwork)

Key finding 4: Schools provide a strong sense of community

Schools feel they are effective in building a strong sense of community locally.

They:

- provide opportunities for community engagement within the immediate neighbourhood (76 per cent)
- contribute to community cohesion and citizenship within the community in which they are located (68 per cent)
- believe that 'all' their students feel they belong to the school community (61 per cent 'all', and 36 per cent 'most')
- promote the engagement of all students within their own community (55 per cent).

Schools feel they are less effective in contributing to a sense of community more widely. This reflects their perceptions of students' sense of belonging – strongest locally, weaker more globally.

Key finding 5: Schools face strategic challenges in linking up opportunities for young people

At a strategic level, it is a minority of schools that:

- work with a pre-approved list of 'volunteering' organisations (40 per cent of schools)
- undertake outreach activities to identify opportunities for volunteering (39 per cent of schools)
- involve parents and family in the delivery of the curriculum and/or after-school activities (36 per cent of schools)
- have policies and systems to respond to opportunities provided by organisations that directly approach their school (35 per cent)
- have policies and systems to support students to undertake volunteering opportunities they have identified themselves (28 per cent).





Key finding 6: More could be done to support young people to feel valued and to engage

A substantial proportion of teachers feel that only 'some' of their students:

- have the knowledge and skills to engage independently in community cohesion and citizenship activities (62 per cent)
- feel they play an important role in planning community cohesion and citizenship activities (60 per cent)
- feel valued as contributors (43 per cent)
- find their involvement in community cohesion and citizenship activities meaningful (32 per cent).

Key finding 7: Schools recognise barriers to engagement for certain groups

Schools feel the following act as barriers to student engagement:

- socio-economic status of students' families (25 per cent)
- living in a deprived neighbourhood (24 per cent).

Schools feel the following factors influence students' likelihood of volunteering or taking part in community activities:

- high-achieving students are more likely than their peers to take part in volunteering/ community activities (78 per cent)
- boys are less likely than girls to do so (31 per cent).

Schools work proactively to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Activities for supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds include:

- using mentors and role models from students' own communities (71 per cent)
- working with organisations with particular expertise in engaging disadvantaged students (63 per cent)
- subsidising transport so that disadvantaged students can take part in community-based activities (52 per cent).

key finding 8: Schools could do more to make their strategies count

it is a minority of schools that:

- consolidate learning from volunteering in the classroom (44 per cent, ie less than half, report doing this)
- link citizenship and community at a strategic level (39 per cent of those that reported had specific objectives and targets on citizenship and community)
- involve parents in the delivery of the curriculum or after-school activities relating to citizenship and community (36 per cent)
- produce community newsletters (33 per cent).

Conclusions from the National Survey of Schools

The findings of the school survey highlight the many ways in which schools are developing, promoting and facilitating citizenship education and community cohesion. Schools report that they 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.



However, the findings also illustrate the need for more to be done to support young people in this respect. The survey highlights a need to co-ordinate work in schools by developing more liaison between citizenship education teachers and those responsible for whole-school initiatives to promote community engagement. Additionally, there may be a need to help teachers to build on young people's existing knowledge and expertise in community matters to help them understand and act more effectively in society.

Schools 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. Schools also report that there is progress to be made in ensuring that students feel valued as contributors to their own citizenship education and community involvement. Furthermore, schools reported that their high-achieving and high-ability students are more likely than their peers to do voluntary work or take part in community activities whereas students from a disadvantaged background are less likely to do so, although many schools proactively support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to become more involved in their communities.

This suggests that it may be valuable to explore further the connection between work in schools and the lives of young people beyond school; as well as co-ordination between the citizenship education teacher and those in the school charged with the responsibility for strengthening community involvement.



Key questions

1. Can more be done by schools to support young people to feel valued as contributors and to understand and become more involved in society?
2. Could greater connections be made between citizenship education and community cohesion strategies?
3. Could teachers build more on young people's existing experiences, linking work in school with young people's lives beyond school?



Findings – young people's focus groups

What is community?

Young people in the focus groups had a strong sense of what constitutes community. Communities bring people together and unite people over common causes or interests. However, contradictions in conceptualisations of community exist. There was little consensus in terms of whether community was associated with positive action or not. For some young people, community could be found in coming together for protest, segregation and even violence.

... with the whole religion topic they think because traditionally England's supposed to be a Christian country and we see all different religions and they are thinking perhaps they are starting to take over and lose their identity so they are fighting back against the other community ... becoming their own little community within the community.

I think the difference between the community that rioted and the community that did all the cleaning is that the community that rioted were just like individuals that were going to riot ... they like just did it because everyone else was doing it, whereas the community that was cleaning up ... they didn't want to be recognised but they actually want to do something positive. They were able to form like a stronger bond with each other through doing a good thing ...

[in response to a picture of a right-wing demonstration] I am afraid they are a community because they all share a common link with one another; they all have the same views.

Schools themselves were not always viewed as communities because of their perceived exclusionary organisation or cultures.

[School] doesn't define a community at all ... it's not as if we have got respect for another is it?

We have to put up with school, we have to go to school and most people at the school you wouldn't mix with.

A community is somewhere where you, just like, fit in and in the school, most people just don't.

[School is] rubbish at making us feel like a community ... after-school clubs, they say years 7, 8 and 9 can come along but then we get a group like year 7s will sit in one place, year 8s will sit in one place and year 9s will sit in one place and they will delocalise themselves from what is meant to be a community and form their own little communities.

However, the young people did talk about mechanisms by which community could be formed – sometimes within school – between groups of people or individuals who would not usually interact. Youth clubs, sports activities and extracurricular groups were characterised as communities in themselves. Community can be formed even with pupils from other schools through sports clubs, for example.

I mentioned the sort of club I was part of, we have like obviously people from all different religions and cultures and they all came together because we were bored in a way, nothing to do. I think it helps to bring us together really. To forget about the reasons we are different and think about what we have in common.



I started [gymnastics] really young and ... we worked together because it mattered to you to do well in competitions and when we got the trophies, we were a community then.

[In my area there are youth clubs] where, like, people from different religions, ethnic groups are sort of able to come together and they like mix really well and they get on and when I go there, there are no incidents, no fights with anyone. I think [youth clubs] really encourage people who wouldn't usually mix with each other to mix with each other.

Young people expressed concern that teenagers were viewed as a community, but in a negative light. They felt that they were portrayed negatively in the media and that expectations of them – by adults in general – were low.

I think teenagers are, like, a very negatively stereotyped community. The teenage community looks worse because of stereotyping, because of making assumptions ...

[in response to photo of London riots] They blamed every teenager up and down the country even though it was only a small minority that actually committed the offences.

What do schools teach about community?

All the young people who were interviewed reported that they learned about citizenship and community in school. This usually took place in formal lessons, such as citizenship education. Young people learn about democracy, civil justice, community cohesion and fragmentation but the data suggest that they do not always engage with these issues.

It's more like common sense really.

We didn't go into very much detail.

It's just really what you already know.

Young people appeared to note a gap between curriculum content and school action in terms of creating a sense of community or engaging young people in school or local community. This was perhaps reinforced by the perception that schools do not always take citizenship education as seriously as other subjects.

If we had been taught by an actual citizenship teacher who was more into the subject, we would have been more interested as pupils.

Your citizenship teachers is not necessarily, like, it's not her subject so sometimes it has other priorities.

I think there might only be, like, one actual trained citizenship teacher in the school and he can't teach every class, so I don't think the school views it as maybe not important, so just says anyone [any teacher] that's free can do it. But it is almost like the teachers are reading it off a sheet to you because they don't know enough about it to actually teach you in an interesting way.

The teachers sort of didn't really know anything and because they weren't engaged in what they were doing, we didn't really care, and we just sort of saw it as a bit of a mess around where we could like play or relax.



While it could be argued that topics such as democracy or voting rights might not reflect the interests or the lives of some young people, the perceived lack of value that is attached to citizenship education permeates topics which might affect pupils directly in school, for example bullying. The pupils' comments suggested that even issues such as violence or bullying were not taught in a way that interested or engaged them.

Sometimes we go over and over again, like bullying, we all know what bullying is and that just like got a bit boring.

We all know about it [bullying]. Everyone is always going on about it.

What more could schools do to enhance a sense of community?

Young people in this study did think schools could do more to encourage a sense of community within school and between different groups in the local community. They were particularly vocal about the notion that schools could encourage interaction between different groups within the school.

[The school] did this thing last year called the Lionheart Challenge ... you got put in groups and you had to work with the people in those groups ... It meant you couldn't choose your groups and ... you got to know them more and like, it was, like, people you would automatically choose, it was like getting to know other people and that was really fun.

I think in lessons we always used to sit in our form but now we have got, like, mixed up. I think that has really helped because now more people get friends with other people.

I think people should be, like, more encouraged to take part in different things which do bring people together more and then they do interact with different people.

... they should really be trying to solve the problem [of teenagers being perceived negatively], helping out, like those who have nothing to do, organising activities and doing things to try and help get teenagers ...

Opportunities for working with young people in other schools were particularly welcomed as a means for getting involved with the local community.

I don't think we do anything with other schools but I think it might be quite interesting if we did. Because like if we did have some kind of project with other schools it would bring the community together more and then we would interact with other people which we would normally not.

In my primary school we did this thing where you went to a special needs school and helped pupils, and I found that was like a really good experience because it kind of like opened your eyes and you didn't expect to experience that. So I think if they [the school] did something like that it would be good [in terms of making links with the local community].

An interesting finding was the perception held by pupils across the participating schools that some opportunities were only available to certain people. This perceived bias is important to consider in terms of the potential for schools to create a sense of community within school, or encouraging young people to see opportunities for engaging in their communities.



I kind of wanted to join like a music group, like in or out of school, but it's just the fact that there's not many people who do it and then there's like sometimes you feel that ... people in the school, like the teachers seem to choose you, favour you, like 'oh yes join this group', but if you don't get picked you just kind of feel a bit ...

School does stuff for the specially picked people, like for example, if you are good at a subject they pick you.

Pupils expressed a view that the school felt their responsibility towards them stopped at the school gates and that links between school, family and neighbourhood were weak.

Conclusions from the young people's focus groups

The focus group data indicate that schools have an important role to play in fostering a sense of belonging to a community and civic engagement among young people. Young people articulate clearly their understandings of community and talk about the positive benefits of belonging to communities within and outside of school.

However, the majority of young people in this study do not identify strongly with school as a community and feel that schools could do more to help them to play a part in their local community. There appears to be a disconnect between school discourse around the importance of community and civic engagement, and what is taught in schools. Citizenship education is not always viewed as a subject that is taken seriously by schools. Young people in this study did not feel that teaching about community and citizenship fully prepared them to take an active part in their school or local communities.

Young people have strong opinions on what schools can do to recognise the contributions they already make to their communities, as well as to support young people in engaging in civic action. These include building positive links with other schools in their community; actively encouraging interaction between different groups of pupils within and outside of school; making sure that opportunities to get involved with in- and out-of-school projects are equally available to all students; and taking an interest in pupils' lives beyond the school gates.

The findings indicate that more targeted work could be done with teachers to ensure that schools have a positive, and even inspirational, impact on young people's sense of belonging to a community and their perceived capacity to make a contribution to this community.

Key questions

1. Can more be done by schools to expand their strategies for engaging families, parents and local communities and also for providing support to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?
2. Could schools do more to employ citizenship education and community cohesion strategies that promote positive interactions and a sense of togetherness among young people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds?



Conclusions – what have we learned?

Creating Citizenship Communities is both the title of our project and an aim to which many (policy makers, professionals, young people and others) attach great significance. We wanted in our project to explore the important issues regarding citizenship and community, finding out what schools and students think and do. Our online survey with schools and the focus groups with students revealed a positive response by schools to the promotion of citizenship education and community cohesion. Schools reported that learning took place in a number of contexts, mainly through timetabled lessons and whole-school and out-of-class activities, but also through links with outside organisations, volunteering and other charitable work. However, despite the value that was placed on citizenship education and community, the research indicated that there were very different ideas about what community meant and, in practice, schools made relatively little use of their local area within the citizenship curriculum.

The focus groups also suggested that the interpretation and delivery of citizenship education were primarily shaped by teachers' views, expertise and commitment, and that students' local and personal knowledge was used relatively less often in the development of the lesson or programme.

These findings are important in themselves. Unless we have evidence-based accounts of what is happening then it is possible for us to misunderstand what is currently occurring and to make unrealistic and inappropriate pronouncements about what needs to be done. We have tried through this project to go beyond declaring our findings and have developed educational materials. We are attempting to address our research findings by developing an approach to teaching and learning that makes greater use than is customary of students' knowledge and experience of the issues and of resources that may be available in the local community. In practice, this means trying to raise the level of student input in determining priorities for discussion, and identifying and answering

questions in the classroom. It also means working to achieve closer links between the citizenship classroom and the rest of the school, governors, parents and the wider community.

We have found through our collaborative project much to be proud of in the thinking and practices of teachers and young people. In areas as important and sensitive as citizenship and community there is always more to be done. We hope that our project has clarified some significant ideas and issues and that we have suggested in very practical ways what could be done to improve the quality of citizenship learning and raise the level of engagement between the school and the local community.

Please visit our project web pages to access other reports, research briefs, teaching resources, and information about the Creating Citizenship Communities research study: www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/citizenship-communities





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