Creating Citizenship Communities: Young people’s views and experiences of community, belonging, citizenship education and community cohesion

Introduction

The Department of Education at the University of York, in collaboration with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), is conducting a study into Creating Citizenship Communities through new approaches to learning, funded by a generous grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

The project aims to identify current thinking and practice in schools, explore young people’s perceptions and experiences and, through the development of a focussed impact strategy, encourage partnerships to be established between professionals and others. The main stages of this project include a review of literature on citizenship and community engagement, secondary data analysis, an online survey of schools and fieldwork in eight schools.

This research brief is the fourth of a series that provide a summary of major findings, and focuses on young people’s understandings of community and experiences of citizenship education, community involvement and community cohesion. It concentrates on the fieldwork conducted in 8 schools in England by the Department of Education, University of York. The qualitative phase of this project was conducted to raise understanding about young people’s views and explore links and discrepancies between current practice of citizenship education and community involvement in schools and young people’s perceptions and experiences in relation to community, community involvement and community cohesion.

The qualitative sample

The qualitative sample was drawn from a list of 39 schools in England that participated in the national on line 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). Sixteen focus group discussions were conducted with year 10 and year 11 students, transcribed and analysed thematically.

Understandings of community

Young people’s understanding of community varied within and across schools. Community was understood as a group of people with a shared identity, common purpose, interests and strong ties. Schools, youth clubs, face-book, sports teams, friendship groups, neighbourhoods, gay/lesbian, religious/ethnic groups and the police were described as communities. Groups of people coming together for a single event (e.g. the Royal wedding or the Olympic Games) were also described as communities. Groups of people coming together for a single event (e.g. the Royal wedding or the Olympic Games) were also described as communities.

Notions of community were associated with civic engagement and the sustainability of a peaceful society. However, some young people felt that communities should not always be associated with ‘do-good’ behaviour and good causes. Although all young people expressed strong beliefs against racism, some understood racist groups as communities because of their shared beliefs and practices.
Sense of belonging

Most young people felt they belong to their immediate communities, including the school and local communities. In our study, young people in deprived areas and disadvantaged schools did not generally feel a sense of belonging to their school and/or their local communities. Young people’s sense of belonging to the European, international and even the British community was very weak and strongly associated with parental influence and education, socio-economic status and the schools’ strategies to citizenship education and community cohesion.

Experiences of citizenship education and community engagement

Interpretation and delivery of citizenship education varied across schools and was strongly associated with teachers’ views, expertise and commitment, as well as the geographical location, socio-economic status and ethos of schools. Most young people reported that citizenship education focuses more on the curriculum and less on building relations with the community. Young people’s experiences of citizenship education clearly demonstrate emphasis on discussion of topical issues (e.g. racism, cultural and religious diversity, health attitudes, the riots and civic behaviour); some attention to extra curriculum activities, field trips and projects, particularly in schools in affluent areas; and very rarely action in the community, such as visiting an old people’s home or taking part in international festivals aiming to celebrate diversity and difference. Active engagement of parents and families in community action and support for disadvantaged students was weak in nearly all the schools that participated in the qualitative phase of the project. This might indicate a need for schools to expand their strategies for engaging families, parents, local communities and also for providing support to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Citizenship education and community cohesion

Although teachers’ practices and school policies are aimed at fostering a sense of community and promoting community cohesion, young people’s experiences suggest that citizenship strategies were not always effective. Some young people discussed tensions and divisions among some ethnic and religious communities in schools with a diverse student population. When prompted to discuss their views and experiences further, most young people reported lack of interest and knowledge of diversity and difference in schools and the wider British society. Many young people felt that community cohesion on a local and national level is weak and incompatible with the diversity of languages, religions and ethnicities in Britain. This might indicate a need for schools 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

The qualitative findings of the study: ‘Creating Citizenship Communities’ enhance our knowledge and understanding of young people’s experiences of community engagement and community cohesion. They will inform the development of a focused impact strategy aimed to improve citizenship education practice.