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Negotiating participation and power in a school setting: the implementation of active citizenship within the undergraduate sociology curriculum

Abstract

Since the Crick Report, active citizenship has been promoted as a vehicle for enhancing community involvement and political literacy among school and higher education students. This ostensibly progressive educational and social goal is beset with a number of tensions and contradictions, notably around the nature of participation and between enhancing social control and encouraging political engagement. This paper examines the various tensions surrounding citizenship education with reference to an evaluation of an innovative undergraduate sociology module called 'Teaching Citizenship'. The aim of the module was to provide students with an experience of active citizenship based on local community involvement that took the form of students facilitating citizenship education at two secondary modern schools. Drawing upon evaluation research findings, the paper discusses the ways in which the sociology students actively negotiated the dilemmas of participation and power characteristic of citizenship education.

Keywords

active citizenship, citizenship education, community involvement, power, deprivation, racism, sociology.

Introduction

This paper examines the various tensions surrounding citizenship education with reference to the implementation of an active citizenship module on an undergraduate sociology degree programme. As Osler and Starkey (2003: 243) emphasize, 'since citizenship is a contested concept, education for citizenship is also a site of debate and controversy'. The controversial nature of citizenship education is indicated both at a pedagogical level by teachers' own anxieties about content and strategies vis-à-vis the teaching of 'controversial issues' (Oulton et al. 2004), as well as at a wider societal level by the school strikes against the war in Iraq (Cunningham and Lavalette 2004). The implementation of active citizenship programmes, as advocated by the Crick Report, does not efface such controversy but if anything enhances it as students are expected to become involved in local communities. This community involvement raises questions regarding issues of participation and power, issues that are central to the actual implementation of active citizenship in education.

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This paper discusses such issues by drawing on evaluation findings of a third year 'Teaching Citizenship' module delivered at a higher education institution (HEI) in the South East of England.¹ This optional semester-long module involved sociology and sociology/criminology students facilitating citizenship education at two secondary modern schools. Many of the pupils at the schools came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst the surrounding area is generally regarded as one of the most affluent parts of the U.K, **it is also characterised by pockets of deprivation (Watt and Stenson, 1996).**

Citizenship education in the U.K.

Citizenship education has been an ongoing matter of academic and political debate in the U.K. since the 1970s (Crick and Porter 1978; Wringe 1992; Lockyer et al. 2003; Gifford 2004a). This debate culminated in the setting up of the Advisory Group in citizenship education under the Chairmanship of Bernard Crick and the publication and implementation of its final report on Citizenship Education and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools (QCA 1998). The publication of the Crick Report is influencing the development of citizenship education across the UK from primary level to higher education.

The Crick Report identifies three elements of citizenship learning (QCA 1998: 12-13). The first element emphasizes self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour. The second element is concerned with community involvement in which pupils are expected to learn about and becoming helpfully involved in communities. Political literacy is the third dimension and involves pupils learning how to be effective in public life and the decision-making and conflict resolution institutions and processes in modern Britain. The Report sets out what a pupil is expected to have learnt about citizenship at key stages in their school career. Alongside this is an emphasis on the idea of active citizenship, as the Report makes clear: 'It is vital that pupils are provided with structured opportunities to explore actively aspects, issues and events through school and community involvement, case studies and critical discussions that are challenging and relevant to their lives' (QCA 1998: 26).

This emphasis on active citizenship within policies on citizenship education has also been evident in the post-compulsory sector. The Dearing Report into higher education highlighted the importance of work in community and voluntary organisations for undergraduate students (NCIHE 1997). Many higher education institutions in the UK now offer students opportunities to become involved in various kinds of community and voluntary work, for example within the undergraduate sociology curriculum (Hall et al. 2004). Citizenship education can thus be seen to be a core component of the lifelong learning agenda.

Possibilities and tensions in implementing active citizenship in education

Enabling people to become active citizens is at least potentially a radical departure from existing and orthodox approaches to citizenship education. The dominant approach to citizenship learning found in most countries reflects a concern with social control. The context for this has been the formation of the nation-state. The emergence of universal systems of education is associated with bringing about state-directed social integration; through the education system the modern state 'could teach all children how to be good subjects and citizens' (Hobsbawm 1987: 150). A key feature of citizenship education within

this context is a pedagogical framework that clearly stipulates the desired outcomes of the educational process. These outcomes reflect particular dominant national and cultural values and traditions (Hahn 1998). More recently, there are clear attempts to move beyond prescriptive and didactic models of citizenship education but these are not without their problems.

The current emphasis in the U.K. on community involvement in education provides an opportunity to establish a genuinely participative and empowering form of citizenship education that fosters democratic debate and engagement among young people. Nevertheless, there are certain inherent tensions within the post-Crick citizenship education curriculum that the advocacy of active citizenship not only does not eradicate but even enhances. Crick implies that there is compatibility between the social integrationist aims of citizenship education and the more radical active citizenship elements. However, according to Davies (2001: 307), the school has contradictory functions vis-à-vis citizenship education: 'on the one hand, to foster compliance, obedience, a socialisation into social norms and citizen duties; and on the other, to encourage autonomy, critical thinking and the citizen challenge to social injustice'. These contradictions were dramatically highlighted in the draconian response to the school student protests against the Iraq War in the U.K. (Cunningham and Lavalette 2004). As Cunningham and Lavalette argue, the striking students were labeled 'irresponsible truants' rather than 'active citizens' and were reprimanded by educational authorities via school exclusions and suspensions for taking part. It seems that although citizenship classes encourage students to demonstrate a concern for 'the common good', in practice there are strict limits to the expression of this concern based on the maintenance of social order and the status quo.

The promotion of 'active citizenship' in education therefore begs a series of questions as to exactly *what* is being promoted and perhaps even more pertinently *how* it is being promoted, i.e. the social processes involved in enabling young people to be involved with communities and engage in political issues. Davies and Evans (2002) found considerable variation among educationalists in terms of understandings about citizenship as well as uncertainty as to how active citizenship education should develop in practice. According to Oulton et al. (2004), only one in eight teachers felt very well prepared to teach the kind of 'controversial issues' that are covered in citizenship education, while the majority reported that they had not received any formal training. Oulton and colleagues also found substantial variations in teachers' views on teaching controversial topics such as racism and factory farming; only one third of teachers questioned said they would try to influence pupil attitudes in relation to racism. Harland (2000) points to a tension in the Crick Report itself between an emphasis on critical and active citizenship while advocating a learning-outcomes model of education. The latter, Harland (2000: 60) argues, could lead 'to a tightly regulated initiation into a government-endorsed conception of what it means to be a good citizen' and 'where the process and experience of citizenship education is valued only in so far as it achieves pre-specified ends'. Such an approach is not out of step with the concern over the social integration of young people shown by recent governments that has resulted in policies that increase regulation of their behaviour.

Nevertheless research indicates that there is widespread support for an active citizenship agenda employing a participative process among educationalists and young people themselves (Davies and Evans 2002). A particular challenge in schools is to move beyond the hierarchical model of the developing child and the developed adult citizen that constructs the child as dependent and incompetent (Alderson 2000: 133).

An active and open-ended approach to citizenship learning becomes essential for societies undergoing change in which earlier models of social integration are challenged by increased cultural diversity and fragmentation as a consequence of globalisation (Osler and Starkey 2003). According to Osler and Starkey, citizenship education should therefore not imply passive learning about a form of citizenship that is increasingly breaking down, but should instead involve actively generating and renewing citizenship along ‘cosmopolitan’ lines that embrace cultural diversity and the multiple identities that many young people living in urban areas express. What we lose with overly prescriptive national models of citizenship education are citizens capable of engaging in real political transformation:

Democratic societies need to be in a state of permanent transformation. We need to foster attitude, motivation and a willingness to participate even more than specific knowledge about current political arrangements. (Harland 2000: 61)

The implication of this argument is that any learning objectives specified for citizenship education need to be flexible and subordinated to a critical and experiential approach to citizenship learning. Simpson and Daly (2005) have recently gone as far as claiming that a dialogic form of citizenship education at post-16 level can foster re-shaped teacher-student relations along Habermasian lines involving communicative competence and emancipatory knowledge.

If active citizenship means that students should become ‘involved’ in local communities, this raises questions about how this involvement is to take place and whether or not it is truly participative (Burton 2004). A familiar theme in relation to community involvement in deprived areas is that tokenistic forms of participation are often implemented that never really engage with the issue of power differentials between the various participants (Hoggett 1997). This issue is especially pertinent in relation to working with young people in the sense that the large power differential between them and adults can vitiate even relatively well-meaning regeneration and participation programmes (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000). At the same time, as Fitzpatrick and colleagues rightly point out, young people living in disadvantaged areas represent a key group if wider governmental agendas regarding the promotion of social cohesion and the fostering of ‘democratic renewal’ are to have any realistic chance of success.

Active citizenship in a stratified local context

In examining the various tensions identified above within citizenship education, this paper refers to the implementation of an active citizenship module (Teaching Citizenship) on an undergraduate sociology degree programme at a HEI in the South East of England. This module involved students going into two local secondary schools and contributing to the delivery of their citizenship curriculum, in one case with the members of a school council (years 7-11) and in the other with sixth form pupils (years 12 and 13).

The local education authority in which the schools are situated operates a selective system in which children are assessed at age 11. **Those who obtain high marks in the 11-plus examination gain entry to the prestigious grammar schools that routinely feature near the top of the national league tables. In contrast, those children who ‘fail’ attend secondary modern schools, such as the two schools involved in the project, which are seen as less desirable by many local parents and have lower levels of academic achievement as measured by the league tables.**ⁱⁱ

The local education authority area covers one of the most affluent parts of the U.K. characterised by up-market commuter villages, high levels of home and car ownership, and a strong middle-class presence. Despite this general affluence, there are also pockets of deprivation found in certain urban neighbourhoods including those feeding the two schools (Watt and Stenson, 1996). The wards from which the majority of the pupils are drawn have above average levels of rental housing and a multi-ethnic population made up of Pakistani and black minority ethnic groups and lower income white families. One of the schools was located near a neighbourhood which had been the subject of a Single Regeneration Budget programme during the late 1990s that had attempted to alleviate social exclusion, especially in relation to young people (Stenson and Watt, 1999). Each school draws the majority of its pupils from non-white ethnic backgrounds. Recent OFSTED reports have highlighted the social disadvantages faced by the pupils at each school, as indicated by above national average levels of free school meals. The Teaching Citizenship module was seen as contributing to the widening access agenda, a policy promoted along partnership lines between the HEI and the two schools themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

Teaching Citizenship: an undergraduate sociology module

The Teaching Citizenship module had two main aims. Firstly, to provide students with an experience of active citizenship based on local community involvement. Secondly to provide insights into the applicability of social scientific knowledge outside of the seminar context and thereby contribute to the students' personal and educational development. **The module was delivered in the second semester of level 3 and was optional for students on sociology and sociology/criminology degree programmes. It was an opportunity for a more experiential form of learning than the students had been used to. However, at the same time the Teaching Citizenship module can also be regarded as the culmination of learning forms that the students had experienced earlier in their degree programmes, notably group work and reflexive learning. Group work was introduced at level 1 in a variety of modules in which students were expected to collaborate in groups for the purposes of assessed presentations. This collaborative element was built upon at level 2, for example in a research methods module in which students had to work together in groups of two to four people in designing and undertaking a small piece of empirical research. During their degree, students were also encouraged to take a reflexive approach to their own learning process, reflecting on 'how' they learn as well as 'what' they learn. For example, in the first year 'Transforming Identities' module, students had to complete a learning journal in which they were expected to reflect on how they learn as both individuals and as part of a group. Reflexivity is also an important part of the third level dissertation process where students are expected to acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses and to use this knowledge to shape their topic and research, and also to be able to respond positively to supervisor comments/criticisms.**

In terms of content, the majority of the students on Teaching Citizenship had undertaken another level three module called 'Power and Political Process'. This module explored classical and contemporary theories of power and politics such as elitism, pluralism, feminism and theories of citizenship. The students therefore came to the Teaching Citizenship module with a relatively sophisticated grasp of relevant concepts, debates and ideas that would be expected of level three social science students.

The Teaching Citizenship module was developed and first delivered during 2003-04 with ten students, seven of who were female; only one student was from a non-white ethnic background. Student experiences on the module were the subject of a piece of evaluation research based on group and individual interviews undertaken at the end of the module. It is this qualitative data that forms the main

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empirical basis for this paper, plus material drawn from student diaries that formed part of the module assessment and also contributed to the evaluation of the module.^{iv} The pedagogical results from the evaluation are analyzed in detail elsewhere in relation to experiential learning (Gifford 2004b, 2005). In summary, it was evident from the evaluation and assessment work that the project had enabled the sociology students to develop a unique understanding of citizenship education. They were able to experiment with political concepts such as rights and responsibilities and democracy. This provided insights and understanding of ideas that otherwise can remain abstract and alien, as one student commented:

I really do think citizenship isn't about facts and figures, it's what's going on in a person, and what involves a person. I found that really interesting, especially when looking at citizenship the way we looked at it. Basically, we didn't go in there to try and teach them something, but we wanted them to look at how they could change something, so it was really about social and political methods of change.

The project proved to be a positive experience for all those involved, including school and undergraduate students and teaching staff at the various institutions (*ibid.*). The module delivered a more total learning experience than is the norm in higher education fostering both logical reasoning skills and creative and intuitive thinking. However, this paper will emphasise that the pedagogical benefits were intrinsically linked to the students' engagement with what has been highlighted above, i.e. 'social and political methods of change' vis-à-vis the implementation of citizenship education.

From the seminar to the classroom

The module began with two weeks of lectures and seminars. Students were provided with a range of materials on citizenship education and introductory lectures. They were encouraged to develop a critical approach to citizenship education and to evaluate and assess the application of different strategies for teaching citizenship within schools. There was considerable seminar debate over the possibilities and limitations of citizenship education **and the Crick proposals**. At this stage, some students were noticeably pessimistic about what they thought citizenship education could achieve, as one student later commented:

I really came into it thinking 'this is just another way to [legitimize] oppression by the government', you know, 'we're legitimizing our control by giving you citizenship classes, so you can go out there and be good little robots'.

In this comment the student was articulating the critical view, discussed above, that citizenship education is primarily a top-down programme of social regulation. Here the students were being encouraged to apply social scientific theories and concepts in order to evaluate policy proposals on citizenship education. **In particular, they were encouraged by the module leader to consider how institutional spaces for democratic practice can open up in modern societies and to think of citizenship as a process rather than as a fixed state-centred concept.** In two groups of five, the students were then asked to develop their own citizenship activities that they could take into the schools. The students were asked to think of ways in which pupils could be motivated and encouraged to engage with the idea of citizenship. The students had a considerable amount of freedom in terms of what they could do although their ideas were presented to head teachers from the schools before they

went into the classroom. Through working in the schools it was hoped that the students would develop their own perspective on citizenship education.

Faced with the task of delivering citizenship to school pupils, the students were immediately engaging with citizenship education at an intuitive and emotional level. Both groups had to think creatively about what would work in the classroom. **In so doing the groups had to negotiate with one another, make decisions and organize themselves. This was not always straightforward and one group in particular was characterised by quite intense power struggles between group members. The students committed to the project in different ways with some engaging with the more theoretical aspects while others saw it more in terms of practicalities and relationships. However, these different perspectives on the project enabled the students to learn from each other during the group work. There was a satisfactory working out of roles and a thoughtful appreciation of each other's strengths and weaknesses. This was encouraged through guidance and exercises in the workshops. For example, on one occasion students were asked in their groups to evaluate each other's performance in the project and provide positive reinforcement as well as supportive advice and feedback. This particularly helped validate the contribution of students who felt they were taking on extra organisational responsibilities.**

One group worked with a school council (years 7-11) and focused on moving the pupils towards an action plan with the emphasis on narrowing down an area of concern through debates. A group member described how they went about this:

So we split them into smaller groups, so that they were mixed ages and they weren't in friendship groups, and we worked with them all in groups for a couple of sessions, and at the end of the second session we got them all together and debating ... and sort of presented their ideas ... and they had to think of criticisms of their own ideas and they had to do ideas that they didn't pick as a group. They had to fight for something that was important for other people and that's what makes a good citizen, not just about representing things you believe in yourself, it's about what other people want to.

The other group worked with sixth formers and focused on developing thinking and debating skills. They designed and delivered sessions aimed to challenge the pupils' perspectives on the world but also to give them a sense of their social worth. They called their sessions 'tooling for citizenship' and used games and activities to open up the pupils to some of the complexities of social rules and identities:

I mean we played noughts and crosses with them, which doesn't sound like anything to do with citizenship but it was to teach them rules, the concept of rules, because we broke the rules and our resident champion beat me and there was an absolute uproar [by the pupils] because she cheated, but we said 'no we make the rules'. So we managed to get into the idea of rules through that game and there was an awful lot more like this that we did.

Through this simple exercise the students demonstrated the constructed nature of social rules as well as issues of power. In general, the group described their approach as follows:

Ours was less about what a citizen is. There are techniques that you can actually use to get involved in citizenship, so it's really techniques ... listening, different ways and different logics. The thing it was based on was the article, wasn't it, on discursive democracy and different ideas

within there like Bourdieu and fuzzy logic and things like that. So we actually called ours 'tooling for citizenship'. We were giving them tools so they could actually be a better citizen in the future such as looking at things from different perspectives, accepting other people's point of view.

Both of the student groups conducted three sessions at the schools. Workshops were held at the HEI after each school session to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion that could then inform the next session. **They also provided a crucial opportunity for the group to plan and organise for their forthcoming sessions. The module leader facilitated the sessions but the content was determined by the students' own experiences. During these sessions, the students gained feedback and support from one another and the module leader. Students were encouraged to transform their experience into knowledge by reflecting upon and evaluating the project they had undertaken. The role of the module leader was to highlight significant learning experiences and to help make explicit some of the key themes and issues raised by the project. In particular, the students were expected to write up their diaries during the course of the project and these subsequently formed 50% of the overall module assessment while the remainder consisted of an essay on citizenship education. The diary helped to facilitate the assimilation of the students' experiences of community involvement and active citizenship while the essay assessed the students' knowledge and understanding of the research and debates on citizenship education. What became increasingly evident during the workshops and in the assessment was the extent to which the groups had to negotiate and engage with significant institutional power relations. Such negotiation and engagement formed an important part of the module evaluation and constitutes a central theme of this paper.**

Negotiating active citizenship in practice

The senior and classroom staff at each school were strongly supportive of the project and facilitated the undergraduate students' integration within the school curriculum. In doing so, they passed on elements of practical classroom knowledge to the undergraduates, for example the recommendation to keep pupils' attention via a number of short, interactive activities. At the same time, according to the undergraduates' accounts, tensions emerged in relation to agenda setting, the maintenance of control, as well as negative teacher expectations. The students managed to negotiate these tensions in a creative manner by maintaining a clear social space for themselves in-between that of the formal educational institution, as represented by the teachers, and the pupils. **In workshops students were encouraged to reflect upon the distinctiveness of their role and how it differed from that of teachers as they were outside of the institutionalised school hierarchy. They began to appreciate how this provided them with certain advantages in terms of delivering a citizenship class. The fact that the students were able to translate this into classroom practice demonstrates the level of reflexivity that the students had developed throughout their degree and within this module.** In doing so, they also managed to broker a subtle, but nevertheless potentially significant shift in power relations towards the pupils. This was achieved in a number of ways including the genuinely participative and open-ended discursive approach adopted by the students, by their refusal to stigmatize pupils, and also by their infractions of minor school rules.

Several students admitted to being nervous about going into the schools, a journey into the relative unknown. Prior to them entering one of the schools, a teacher had given the students advice that they

found useful, but he also painted a somewhat negative picture of the school and its pupils. A member of the group who worked with the sixth formers gives an indication of this:

When the teacher from the school came in and spoke to us first of all saying what we gonna expect he was like 'you're gonna turn up and there's probably gonna be police cars outside the school, the school looks like it needs to be knocked down, the kids are gonna be rowdy but we can't help it', you know, and we went there. ... And there was a police car! [group laughter].

Another student confirmed that the teacher's account gelled with local 'common sense' knowledge:

It didn't help that living in [X area] I know the reputation of the school. He's backed up everything I've heard about it.

Nevertheless, despite their own nervousness, the teacher's negative prognostications and the presence of the police car on their first day at school, the students persisted in trying to gain the trust and confidence of the pupils via implementing a series of games which facilitated pupil involvement. They did so in a manner that did not attempt to censor what the students had to say:

... at the beginning I think they [pupils] weren't very confident. It was really difficult to get them to join in, but when they realised that whatever they said, we never said 'oh no, that's wrong', just to encourage them, no criticism because through school they've had a lot of... We just wanted them to know they could have a view, it needn't be the same as everyone else, that didn't matter.

They started off really shy, but as soon as we started talking and saying to them 'just say what you like, we really just want to hear what you think', and they were brilliant.

It's like ... 'what do you want to talk about' and they all shout 'sex' thinking that we're not going to want to talk about it. So we say 'alright we'll write it on the board', and they're like 'oh no, not really, we don't really want to talk about that', and so that was a turning point I think.

The students drew upon discussions of active and democratic citizenships from the seminars and workshops. They were aware of the criticisms of citizenship education as a top-down form of social control and consciously within their groups developed ideas and strategies that emphasised openness and were encouraged to pursue this by the module leader. This openness informed the quality of the relationships between the students and pupils in a manner that rapidly confounded the teacher's expectations:

But he [the teacher] came in half way through our first session and he just looked stunned because they were just all sitting there listening to what we had to say and looked really gob smacked by that, and he sort of shuffled out because he saw that everything was under control and that they weren't a bunch of hooligans.

The other group that worked with the school council also adopted this open-ended non-censorious approach demonstrating their own commitment to democratic participation and allowing the pupils to 'have their say'. A senior teacher sat in intermittently on all the three sessions. At first the teacher

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wanted the council to focus on road safety because there had been accidents outside the school. However, the students found that this was not what the pupils wanted to discuss and they tried to move the agenda towards the pupils' concerns:

No, well the thing was we decided not to listen to her [teacher] anyway because she wanted us to do the road safety thing and they [pupils] decided they weren't interested in doing it.

Instead the pupils wanted to debate the school uniform, but this was something the teacher preferred to keep off the agenda. However, the undergraduate students persisted in allowing the pupils the space to consider this issue. The point for them was not attempting to censor or pre-direct what the pupils should discuss via the adoption of an open-ended framework, a form of participation that came into conflict with the teacher's own approach that attempted to set boundaries to the discussion:

Male student: ... she [teacher] was still trying to gain some sort of control in the sessions, so we kind of felt at some points that we were trying to allow the students to come up with whatever they thought were issues and focus on one and then she definitely tried to manipulate what those issues should be and she tried to keep a hand in.

Interviewer: Did you see that as a problem?

Female student: It was a problem, wasn't it? We were trying to get her to see that whatever the idea was, it was OK, you know, there was no limit to what they could do, and they came up with the idea of changing their uniform, but she was straightaway, you know, 'no, you've just had a new uniform; you look smart, and you've got to make sure you stay that way'. And we wanted to say that whatever they wanted to change, these were issues...

Both groups can be seen as experimenting with concepts of openness and democratic participation in a manner that allowed the pupils a 'voice'. The undergraduates could only do this by subtly challenging the pre-imposed limits set by the teaching staff and thereby shifting a certain degree of agenda-setting power towards the pupils. As one student commented:

Our aim really was to try and open them up to talking to try to sort of let them see that they could have a voice, and I think our overall aim was to give them the knowledge that they could have a place in society, to give them the citizenship tools to go out there.

As well as allowing the pupils a genuinely open debating space, the students were also able to gain the pupils' trust and attention because they engaged in minor infractions of school rules that benefited the pupils. This occurred in relation to incorporating a break into the second and third sessions that involved taking in refreshments for the pupils, as one of the female students explained:

Well, the deputy head had said that they either need some sort of visual break or just a break and most of the kids said they were never allowed biscuits in class. So I thought 'well they'll probably be more attentive after the break if we took something that they're not allowed' and the deputy head didn't tell us not to, so we obviously asked before if anyone had any allergies, so we did make sure it wasn't any problem.

This student consulted her mother, who was a primary school teacher, regarding health and safety aspects before actually including the refreshments. The student thought that the pupils' attention and commitment increased as a result of the break and refreshments.

Students' social identities and the structural conditions of curriculum innovation

So far we have highlighted the way that the undergraduate students were able to negotiate creatively within the space between the school and the pupils in a manner that facilitated participation on the part of the latter. The students also demonstrated considerable reflexivity within the interview groups about their own social identities and also in relation to the wider structural conditions that the active citizenship initiative operated within. This reflexivity emerged in relation to racism, a 'controversial topic' that many school teachers do not feel well prepared to discuss (Oulton et al. 2004). In the school council group, it was the pupils who brought up the topic of racism, a fact which challenged some of the undergraduates' conceptions, as one female student indicated:

I think it changed what some of us thought, that the children would not have much knowledge of what citizenship was, and when they came up with the racism things it showed that they had a better understanding than what we thought.

The discussion about racism in the interview groups prompted the undergraduates to reflect on their own social identities:

We were a group of five white, you know, educated people at university doing a degree, coming to a deprived school where probably the majority of the students wouldn't make it to university, and we were trying to break down any kind of social ... blocks against them, barriers. We were there trying to facilitate them helping their school reduce racism, but in the session the ideas about racism, class, ideas of status and that kind of thing ... I found it difficult for us to be there and kind of help them, because we might have some understanding, but we don't have any personal reference to it and I didn't really feel comfortable...

Although this student felt that his own ethnic identity hindered his ability to discuss racism, others thought that the opening up of a discursive space on what they recognised as a complex issue was itself highly valuable:

I think that, for us, because it was such a difficult area to discuss and we still had people discussing it, it showed we were actually getting inter-action even on something that can be such a difficult topic. [...] I felt it didn't have too much of a negative side to it. I felt it could have gone bad, you know, if there was absolutely no interaction, if you felt you weren't getting any kind of contribution, but I thought, 'yeah, today we got a bunch of people caught up in this issue...'

The issue of racism also came up in relation to the group working with the sixth formers. The sole black student wrote in her diary that although none of the pupils had as yet experienced discrimination, they expressed anxiety that this may occur in future either on the basis of their ethnic background or Muslim religion, for example in relation to career choice. However, the student wrote, 'I was able to express through my own experiences that it's possible to challenge ethnic marginality', and therefore assisted the largely female Asian group in not seeing themselves as 'second class citizens'.

The debate between the undergraduate students about the value of citizenship education and whether or not it could challenge structural inequalities also surfaced in relation to the question of how far citizenship could be taught within a selective education system. Some students queried whether or not this was possible: 'is citizenship valid in an area where it's selected education?' They felt that facilitating active citizenship exposed the contradictions within a stratified educational system:

... once you've already done that at age 11, you've grouped them into almost a vertical strategy, you're saying to someone in comprehensive [secondary modern], 'this is as far as you go, as far as you can attain or manage, but if you go to grammar school you can be the prime minister, you can be at the top level', and then they want us to go in there and basically teach them that they can have political choices, they can make choices in life and be an active part of the community. But they've [pupils] got this underlying feeling, and I'm guessing that it's rife around [X area] that they're not the best of, you know, they're not considered any good really in some sense...

At the same time that the students recognised what are genuine tensions within citizenship education as it comes up against entrenched structural inequalities, some also thought that the exercise was worthwhile in the sense that it enabled them to challenge the potential stigma facing those pupils who went to the secondary modern schools:

I mean, we only had three weeks, but perhaps that's the point, that children in the secondary modern schools could be lifted and told they're just as important and their ideas count just as much as anyone else.

In alluding to time, this student has also illustrated a theme that several students referred to, that they would have liked to spend more time in the schools. The imposition of institutional time constraints potentially creates a barrier to effective participation by limiting the scope of ongoing, open-ended discursive activity amongst pupils.

Conclusion

In the Teaching Citizenship module, the undergraduate students did not attempt to 'teach' citizenship, but instead created situations based on mutual respect and democratic participation that allowed an experience of citizenship to emerge both for themselves as well as for the pupils. This attempt to facilitate the development of an environment within which an empowering form of citizenship can emerge stands contrary to the imposition of a more 'top down' form of citizenship teaching.

The school sessions allowed the students to experiment with concepts and ideas that they had previously mainly explored in abstraction. They responded with considerable creativity to the challenge of delivering citizenship and developed an emotional commitment to what they were doing and to the pupils they were working with. In the evaluation, the students consistently commented on how enjoyable they had found the module. This reflected the extent to which they were allowed to express a range of skills and qualities that are not normally a central part of the undergraduate experience.

In a number of respects the project is illustrative of active citizenship. It has been socially inclusive, building new relationships between undergraduate students with children and young people from

deprived and marginalised communities. For the undergraduate students, their understanding of the role of citizenship education in a democratic society was certainly enriched through a very 'hands on' experience of active citizenship. There is evidence that the pupils in the schools learnt specific 'citizenship skills' such as debating and critical thinking. The sessions allowed a space for forms of pupil participation to take place that may not have been possible or even desirable within other areas of the curriculum. Nevertheless, this participation on the part of pupils was not guaranteed but only emerged out of the undergraduates' sustained and imaginative efforts to shift the boundaries of power within the sessions away from the teachers towards the pupils. The creation of this relatively open dialogic space entailed critical reflection by the undergraduate students on institutional power relations and social inequalities as embedded both within individual schools and within the wider educational system. In view of the range of tensions outlined in this article, the fostering of citizenship teaching based on ideals of empowerment undoubtedly remains a challenging goal within schools and HEIs. Nonetheless, this project has indicated that there is substantial scope for the development of forms of citizenship teaching in which genuinely participative models of community involvement are prioritised over the imposition of more traditional models of citizenship based on social control.

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Notes

- i. This module was developed with the support of a grant ('Embedding Citizenship in the Undergraduate Sociology Curriculum') from the **Subject** Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics.
- ii. The local education authority and schools do not officially use the terms 'pass' and 'fail', but these terms are common currency amongst parents and children in the area.**
- iii. The wider policy context of this project is threefold (see DfES 2003). Firstly the government target of 50% participation rates in higher education with a particular emphasis on promoting the access of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Secondly, the establishment of a 'third mission' for HEIs to reach out to communities and industries in their regions. Thirdly, there has been a stress on graduate employability that has shifted the social science curriculum in the direction of transferable skills and practical and work-based learning.
- iv. Two members of HEI staff other than the module tutor undertook the evaluation research with the undergraduates. The main method used was two group interviews, while one student was also interviewed individually; all the interviews were

tape recorded and fully transcribed. Diaries formed part of the module assessment, but they were also used in the evaluation based upon students' prior consent.