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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The first big test: citizenship education in England and how it responded to the Second Gulf War

Jill Rutter

London Metropolitan University (UK)

On Thursday 20th March 2003 US and British troops invaded Iraq. At noon that day over 1500 school children gathered in Parliament Square, London, to voice their opposition to the war. School pupil demonstrations were held in other city centres and other children marched out of school and held local demonstrations. Such organised pupil protests are very rare in the UK. Teachers' reactions to the pupil protests were very mixed. While some schools allowed pupils to attend the demonstration, and encouraged their interest in politics, other did not. The response to the Gulf War among citizenship departments in schools was also very varied. This was felt to be an important issue to examine: arguably the Second Gulf War was the first big challenge to this new subject.

This paper presents research conducted in March 2003. The research aimed to analyse the responses of citizenship teachers and departments to the Second Gulf War. The paper argues that the varied and ambiguous responses of citizenship educators partly reflect contested ideas about citizenship education.

Citizenship education in England: a new subject

Citizenship education in England¹ became a compulsory programme of study for 11-16 year pupils of state secondary schools in September 2002. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, a non-departmental government body defined it as 'education for 'political literacy, social and moral responsibility and community participation' (QCA, 1999). The programme includes the study of human rights, the key characteristics of parliamentary and other forms of government and the importance of resolving conflict fairly. Pupils should also be able to 'negotiate, decide and take part responsibly in both school and community based activities' (DfEE, 1999).

Although a 'new' subject in many schools, citizenship education has a long history in England. The citizenship programme of study has grown out of education movements and the lobbying of individuals and organisations. These movements and the views of key actors within citizenship education mean that citizenship education itself is a contested term, and this is a major issue confronting those involved. Arguably, democracy is integral to the subject. In a complex and pluralist society many were involved in lobbying for citizenship education, but they would define citizenship education very differently, and with varied content and aims.

In 1997 a Labour Government was elected in the UK, at a time when many politicians were expressing concern about the fall in voter participation in local, general and European elections, as well as worries about a lack of political participation by young people. One of the first actions of the new Secretary of State for Education was to convene an Advisory Group on Citizenship. This reported in 1998, defining citizenship

¹ The education systems of the four nations of the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales) are now largely separate. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has central government responsibility for education in England.

education, recommending that it be compulsory for all 11-16 year olds in England and suggesting a curriculum. In 1999, the Department for Education confirmed most of these recommendations and a broad curriculum was published (DfEE, 1999). The curriculum itself attracted a small amount of criticism: race equality appears to have been an afterthought and issues of gender identity and gender equality are not mentioned. Environmental issues are subsumed under sustainable development, thus in some schools environmental issues are not local, but rather an issue for the developing world.

In order to assist the implementation of citizenship education in England, 22 teacher training institutions were funded to run one year post graduate (PGCE) teacher training courses in citizenship education. London Metropolitan University was one of the 22 institutes that successfully bid to train teachers of citizenship.

Implementing citizenship: first observations

Most schools have chosen to deliver citizenship education by merging it with Personal, Health and Social Education, or with PHSE and Religious Education. The author's own visits to schools to observe students have highlighted key issues in the delivery of this new subject, namely

- Citizenship is mostly a classroom-based subject, involving very little out of classroom activity – involving very little *participation* in the political process. Students are rarely encouraged to bring about real change in their schools or communities.
- Much of the teaching is knowledge and concept focussed. Students rarely choose an issue pertinent to them, and study citizenship through examining a issue.
- Many student teachers, and some of the experienced classroom teachers, lacked skills in teaching controversial issues. Local government, for example, was taught in a descriptive way, without real debate on controversial issues such as directly elected mayors or the privatisation of local services.
- In most schools citizenship was being taught by non-specialist teachers, usually without a background in politics (or philosophy or sociology).
- Student motivation towards citizenship is poor. In many schools citizenship and citizenship PHSE are perceived by students as being the 'doss' subject – the subject where you mess around.
- The merger of PHSE and citizenship was not always a happy marriage. Political issues tended to be pushed aside by the concerns of health education.

A major divergence has also appeared among those working to promote citizenship education – local authority advisors, DfES advisors, teacher trainers, NGOs and professional bodies. Crudely, the split is between those who believe that moral values are an end-point of citizenship education and those who believe that while values are integral to citizenship education, political participation is the aim. This is a depressing picture – watered down politics teaching, but without much real political participation. Then came the Gulf War.

The war and the research

By September 2002 war in the Gulf seemed likely. As the threat grew in the UK, so did opposition to it. An opinion poll for *The Observer* in January 2003 put 63 per cent of those polled in opposition to war. Opposition was greatest among the youngest, the over-60s and among women. On 13 February 2003 between one and two million people gathered in London to march against the war, the biggest demonstration ever seen in the UK.

The Second Gulf War began on 20 March 2003. At noon over 1,500 school children gathered in Parliament Square, London, to voice their opposition to the war. School pupil demonstrations were held in other city centres and other children marched out of school and held local demonstrations. The demonstrations were met with a mixed response. There was obvious media coverage, with anti-war newspapers stating that the demonstrations were evidence of political engagement among the young and the more pro-war newspapers claiming political indoctrination of the young. The Metropolitan Police (responsible for policing in Greater London) issued a press statement on 21st March 2003 urging young people to stay in school. The National Union of Teachers (the largest teaching union in England) issued two statements on the Gulf War. In February 2003 it issued a guidance note on its website, emphasising the need for teachers to prevent attacks on Muslim and Iraqi students on the outbreak of war. On 21st March 2003 the union issued a statement from its General Secretary stating that school teachers must not express partisan views about the war and that school students attending demonstrations should be punished as truants.

My research was conducted during the period 17-28 March. The research comprised

- interviews with 50 young people who gathered in Parliament Square on 20th March;
- semi-structured interviews with 17 students on the PGCE Citizenship Course at London Metropolitan University.

The pupil interviews aimed to discover how their schools and their citizenship teachers had responded to the Gulf War and whether there was a link between the teaching of citizenship and pupils' participation in demonstrations. The sample interviewed comprised 25 girls and 25 boys (although many more girls than boys were present). Those interviewed were asked their age (to establish that they were between 11 and 16 years and had had some teaching of citizenship). They were also asked the name of the school from which they had come. The school students were then asked

- What made you come to Parliament Square?
- How did you find out about the demonstration?
- Have you had the opportunity to discuss the war in citizenship lessons in your school? Have you discussed the war in other lessons?
- Have your teachers discussed the war in assemblies?
- Have done anything else to show your opposition to the war, for example, written to your MP? Are you going to the members' lobby (in the Houses of Parliament) to meet your MP?

The PGCE student interviews were to find out how 16 individual schools had responded to the Gulf War and student protests. Some 12 of the schools were located in Greater London, one in Greater Manchester, two in Hertfordshire and one in Essex. All of the schools in Greater London and the one in Hertfordshire had more than 30 per cent of the pupil intake in receipt of free school meals. Some 13 of the schools had Iraqi or Iraqi Kurdish pupils enrolled (Iraqi nationals were the largest group of asylum applicants in the UK in 2002). In one of the schools Iraqi pupils comprised about 15 per cent of the total school population. One school had a small number of British forces children in attendance.

Thirteen of the schools delivered citizenship by merging it with PHSE or PHSE and RE. Two taught citizenship during the tutor period with 'lessons' prepared by the citizenship coordinator and delivered by various form tutors. One school delivered citizenship through an integrated humanities programme of study, combining the subject with geography, history, RE and sociology.

Students were asked questions and then given the opportunity to raise other issues. They were asked

- Was there a strong consensus for or against the war in your school? If so, which way?
- How did your school respond to the war in Iraq? For example were there assemblies, or guidance issued to teachers?
- Did pupils walk out of school on the day war was declared? If so, how did your school respond?
- Did the citizenship programme of study in your school address the war?
- Did your school use the war as an opportunity to teach about pressure groups and parliamentary lobbying?
- Did the war cause tensions in your school - for example between Muslim pupils and non-Muslims, or for refugee pupils.

The findings

The pupils who demonstrated in Parliament Square had come from schools in Greater London and the South East: some (16 per cent) had travelled more than 25 kms to attend the demonstration. All those interviewed were from state schools. Although 25 girls and 25 boys were interviewed, there were many more girls than boys present in Parliament Square. Many of the children had made placards which they left in the square.

The children were well able to articulate their opposite to the war. Dominant themes were the death of innocent civilians and that the war was about oil and not about the possession of weapons of mass destruction. Some 42 per cent of those interviewed expressed their anxieties about the war

one thing that I feel scared about is that there might be shootings or terrorism here.

Most pupils had found out about the demonstration from their friends (74 per cent). Another 6 per cent had found out about it from their parents, 14 per cent from older

siblings and six per cent from leafleteers. A majority of pupils - 82 per cent - said that they had been able to discuss the war with in lessons.

the school said we should not talk about the war, but our German teacher made us read something from a German newspaper (that he downloaded from the internet) about Germany and the war.

some of us had been to the demonstration (the national demonstration on 13th February). Our teacher made us tell the class about the speeches. I said that I thought that Jesse Jackson was the best one.

Some 68 per cent of pupils said that the war had been discussed in assemblies. But only 24 per cent of pupils reported that they had examined the war in citizenship lessons. Indeed, 8 per cent of respondents reported that they did not study citizenship in their school. More encouragingly, some 14 per cent of the respondents had written to their Member of Parliament. However, none were intending to use their presence in Parliament Square to visit the House of Commons and meet their MP in the Members' Lobby.

The PGCE students reported that there was an anti-war consensus in eight of the schools, no real consensus in seven schools and in one school pro-war views formed the majority opinion. Students reported that pupils left the school to attend demonstrations in nine of the schools; pupils from four schools attended city-centre demonstrations (and travelled considerable distances). In two schools pupils were locked into school on 20th and 21st March to try and prevent them attending demonstrations – albeit unsuccessfully. Another three schools threatened punishment to those who walked out. One school made a point of branding the demonstrators 'silly'.

The responses within the citizenship education programme of study were more revealing. Only three departments (out of 16) had made a policy decision to teach about the war through the citizenship programme of study. None of the departments, however, had used the opportunity to teach about the UK issues raised by the war, such as the parliamentary democracy and the decision to declare war, the will of the people, pressure groups and political lobbying. There were attempts by individual teachers in another four schools to discuss the war, for example

It is very disappointing that for the main part the school has not dealt with this issue of the war in any form. Individual teachers, including myself, have discussed the war with students in class and told them to come to me at any time if they have any questions, and I would try to answer them. One English teacher spent a lesson looking at how different newspapers had reported the war. Other than this, no whole school action has been taken.

The war was addressed in school assemblies in five schools, the message in all of the schools being that the war should not affect relationships within the school. Two schools produced guidance for teachers on how to deal with the war, both notes were produced by citizenship teachers.

Three schools gave explicit instructions to teachers not to address the war (in all three schools there was a majority of Muslim pupils).

I think there was a fear (understandably) among teachers to tackle the issue, there having been a good deal of conflict in the school after 9/11. But pupils really wanted to discuss the issue.

In all of these schools, the respondents noted high levels of pupil anxiety about the war, fearing that the conflict may come to London or cause terrorist activity. Pupil anxiety in one of these schools reached such a point that the school changed its policy and pupils were asked to write about (but not discuss) the war. Pupils' writings were then made into a display. No student reported that the war had led to increased Islamophobia or anti-Iraqi sentiments, with a number of respondents stating that the prevailing anti-war sentiments had brought Muslim and non-Muslim students together.

Students reported other issues. Five reported that the student protests had been used by some pupils as an excuse to get out of school or challenge authority

students went on the rampage in the school, running down the corridors shouting 'down with the war' but my sense was that the students were using this an excuse and did not have strong feelings about the war.

Another issue raised by the respondents was conflicting views among staff. In six schools there was conflict among staff about how the school should respond to the protests. These conflicts were ideological – between the left and right - but they were also between staff who saw the protests as evidence as political engagement among young people and those who felt that the protests should be discouraged. The respondents also reported the discomfort of senior teachers in being forced to deal with issues that were controversial or might cause negative publicity for the schools.

one teacher of citizenship said that they (the children) don't know what they are demonstrating about, look at the people who went on the march, all long hair and facial piercings.

citizenship education is alright as long as children follow our agenda. But as soon as they want to do something we don't like, they get stopped.

In one school, the protests prompted heated and acrimonious debate about the aims of citizenship education and whether it should give students the skills to engage in political activity or not. A similar theme surfaced at a meeting of citizenship teacher educators in April 2003. The debate here was between those who saw political participation as the aim of citizenship education and those who saw moral values as being the aim.

Conclusions

The student protests against the war raised many issues for citizenship educators. The responses to the war and pupil protests show just how contested citizenship education is, despite a curriculum and a list of key skills and values that children need. The responses show, too, just how uncomfortable some schools are in approaching controversial, and political, issues. Yet if we do not, we are doing children a disservice, given their real anxieties about war.

The responses to the pupil protest also raise questions about children's rights to free expression and the teaching of citizenship. A number of schools in London and elsewhere have received positive coverage of their citizenship provision, but took punitive action

against pupils who wanted to attend local and national demonstrations during school time, with the children in these schools being required to follow a school agenda on political engagement.

Perhaps the most important issue raised by the pupil interviews is the failure by many citizenship teachers to engage with probably the most important and most controversial political issue of the year. That less than a quarter of all pupils were able to recall discussing the war in Citizenship lessons is worrying, as is the failure of citizenship departments in the 16 schools (as opposed to individuals) to make a planned response to the war.

The war offered many opportunities for imparting knowledge and skills central to citizenship – lobbying and the work of pressure groups being one such example. That none of the 16 schools used the war to examine such issues suggests that citizenship is all too often watered-down politics teaching. Above all, the responses show how much work is needed by teachers, teacher advisors, academics and NGOs – all those who lobbied and worked for citizenship education.

Perhaps the last words should be left to Bernard Crick, the ‘father’ of the citizenship education programme of study. In his book *In Defence of Politics*, nearly forty years old, he makes the case for political participation: ‘political activity is a type of moral activity. It is a free activity and it is inventive, flexible, enjoyable and human’ (Crick, 1964).

Bernard Crick has since championed citizenship education, stating that it should make a real change to the political culture of this country². But these responses to the Second Gulf War and to the children’s anti-war protests show how much more work is needed if citizenship education is to achieve these ends.

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² Speech at DfES Citizenship Conference for PGCE students, June 2002.