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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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Citizenship Education for children of the elite in England

Ralph Leighton

Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University (UK)

Abstract

This paper has been developed from initial observations regarding the state and status of Citizenship Education in a small sample of independent schools in England, the main purpose of which was to gain some understanding of how pupils in that sector – who are typically from socially, politically and economically privileged backgrounds – are prepared by schools for their roles as citizens, and how they perceive that preparation. The context and significance of independent schools in general in England is outlined, followed by a more detailed description of the schools in which the research took place and of the social origins and aspirations of the pupil sample. Some data are presented, discussed and interpreted, followed by conclusions which relate to the research focus schools and similarities and differences between the findings of this research and those of the much larger CELSI study (Kerr et al 2007; Keating et al 2009, 2010) into school provision of Citizenship Education in England. While nothing specific can be extrapolated from the findings to be applied with certainty to any other schools – whether independent or state-funded – this study is valuable in that it constitutes what is thought to be the first attempt to map and understand the place of citizenship education in England's independent schools, given the dearth of published research in this area. One tentative conclusion is that there is a complex 'something' about the essence of independent schooling which contributes to the development of effective citizenship education. That 'something' is unlikely to be the residential aspect of boarding, as there is no indication in this study that boarders are more socially committed and aware than their day-pupil peers, so that eight possible aspects of that 'something' are identified and briefly considered.

Introduction

This paper arises from some initial observations regarding the state, status and nature of citizenship education in a small sample of independent schools in England. The young people who study within that sector – and, in many cases, who also live within it for substantial periods of time – are typically from socially, politically and economically privileged backgrounds and it was considered to be of interest to scrutinise how they are prepared for their roles as citizens, and how they perceive that preparation.

Once the concept of elite adopted here has been explained the context and significance of independent schools in general in England is outlined, followed by a more detailed description of two contrasting schools. Data gathered from staff and pupil interviews and from publicly available documentation are discussed and interpreted in the context of Sutton Trust (2009, 2010, 2012) social mobility findings and CELSI (Kerr et al, 2007;

Keating et al 2009, 2010) findings of a large-scale, England-wide longitudinal study of citizenship education in state schools.

‘Children of the Elite’

Before examining and discussing data we wish to clarify the concept of ‘elite’ used throughout this paper. While it is certainly open to criticism, not least in the inaccuracy of some of Mills’ predictions and that he was concerned with a particular stage of capitalism in a particular country, C. Wright Mills’ (1956) notion of ‘The Power Elite’ is useful to the purpose in hand as it details, examines and critiques the organisation of power by drawing our attention to the three apparently disparate but in fact interconnected groups which exercise it: those who run the economy, those who run the military, and those who run the political. The power elite is described by Mills as those who are

in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centred the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they now enjoy.
(Mills 1956, P4)

Those parents and carers who send children to such schools are almost exclusively from such backgrounds. School fees can exceed £40,000 annually, with the cost of ‘extras’ such as examination fees equipment, books, uniform, trips, music and sports tuition to also be considered. The average gross salary in the UK (2012) was £32,779, approximately £25,108 net of taxation but before deductions for food, clothing, housing and other essentials or luxuries. For a family to have in the region of £45,000 wholly disposable – more if there is more than one child being educated in this way, although there are usually reductions available in those cases – the pre-tax income is likely to have to be in the region of £167,000, given the probability of costly other standard of living expectations. This is the average cost of a home in the UK. (Office of National Statistics)

The Independent sector

The ‘independent sector’ of education in England is becoming almost daily more complex and cluttered. The advent of academies and free schools has created a much more diverse range of schools than previously existed outside of the direct control of the Department for Education. As many of these schools are new and their development unclear, this paper has concentrated on the traditional independent sector – it is, after all, more illuminating and informative to examine the nature and impact of institutions established in the thirteenth century of the Christian era than it is to scrutinise those with a history of a matter of weeks.

Despite the perceptions often put forward by politicians and political commentators that England specifically or the UK in general is meritocratic, it clearly is not unless we apply the term as explained by Young (1961). There are those in the UK who have been surprised that the current Secretary of State for Education, notoriously conservative within an already conservative government claiming that ‘we are all in this together’, has been one of the few politicians to openly reject the image that England is a land of equal opportunity:

the sheer scale, the breadth and the depth, of (independent) school dominance of our society points to a deep problem in our country . . . Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable county.

Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, May 2012

20.2% of secondary schools (n=790) are in the independent sector, but only 7% of the pupils in that age-range (18% of 16+ pupils). This has an inevitable effect on class sizes and, by extension, teacher/pupil ratios, class sizes and other factors which can impact on teaching and learning. The schools are not bound to employ qualified teachers nor to teach the National Curriculum and, as seen above, they charge fees for tuition, accommodation and sundry other expenses. One in four of the schools (n=196), primarily boys’ or co-educational schools, has a combined cadet force (CCF), where – at Eton College, for example,

The aim of the corps is to provide boys with a wide range of military skills, adventurous pursuits, leadership experience . . . The corps is commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Michael Wilcockson (a master at the school) . . . assisted by an Adjutant and two permanent CCF staff, both of whom have been regular soldiers. (Eton College website)

Some schools have reserved places for the children of service personnel, often with reduced fees¹.

While independent schools comprise a relatively small number of schools, their connection to the power elite is significant. Data from the Sutton Trust (2009, 2010, 2012) and Hansard (the verbatim reports of proceedings of the House of Commons and the House of Lords) (2013) indicates that 38% of MPs and 60% of the Cabinet, 46.5% of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst Officer Cadets, 47% of Oxford University undergraduates, 54% of UK Chief Executive Officers, 68% of barristers and 70% of judges were educated in the independent sector. That the majority under each of these categories are also white and male adds another dimension to the elite which will be discussed in relation to two schools later in the paper.

One case study pupil, by no means typical even within this small group but certainly illustrative, is Prince Charles, heir to the throne of the UK. He attended Gordonstoun

¹ There are 49 similar CCFs attached to schools in the state sector (1.25%). These do not charge fees, but there can be a charge for uniforms etc. They are not equally distributed across the country nor across types of school.

School (2013 fees £29,000), an independent school in Scotland, followed by entrance to Cambridge University where the typical entry requirement is three top grades at Advanced level; while the prince is rumoured to have only B (history) and C (French) – not enough for entry to a leading university then or now – this cannot be verified as his results are subject to the Official Secrets Act. He then served in the military as an air lieutenant then as a naval lieutenant.

Currently Prince Charles owns and is effectively CEO of the Duchy of Cornwall, which has an annual turnover of £28million. He is a Field Marshall, an Air Marshall, and an Admiral of the Fleet. If /when Charles becomes king, he will inherit £300million, be granted the Monarch's annual stipend of £13million, and enjoy the benefits (including an income of £15billion) of the Crown Estates.

It is not the role or purpose of this paper to argue for or against inherited wealth or privilege, but it is clear from that case study that members of the royal family – the third element of the UK's parliamentary process – are deeply embroiled with the military and business. They will have spent boarding school days together, undergraduate time together, possibly time of military service together. This is when life-long bonds are formed (Hartup and Stephens, 1999; when social groups are established and family ties extended.

Eton College – one independent school

Eton College (properly 'The Kynges' College Of Our Ladye Of Eton Besyde Windesore') is one of the longest established and best known of England's independent schools. Founded in 1440, it has educated 19 of the United Kingdom's 55 Prime Ministers as well as political leaders in other countries and many more who have achieved high office. Overall costs vary dependent upon a range of activities and other factors, but the basic annual fee for 2012/3 was £32,067; other activities can include, for example, one hour a week extra music tuition for £1400 for the year. Music Scholars and King's Scholars can achieve a fee waiver of up to 90% if they demonstrate particular aptitude; with 1300 pupils, the income for the school, without consideration of 'extras', donations, foundations etc, is therefore in the region of £42million. As schools in the independent sector are exempt from paying tax, Eton is also one of the top 100 charities by income in the UK.

Citizenship Education does not feature in the Eton curriculum, nor on its website. There is, however, a claimed longstanding commitment to community service.

The school organises a large and flourishing programme of community service activities, both independently and in partnership with local organisations and initiatives. These voluntary activities form an integral part of the extra-curricular timetable of many sixth-formers at Eton, with about 180 boys currently involved. Each boy will normally perform his community service once or twice a week, in any one of a number of very different activities.

(School website)

Those 180 ‘boys’ – 17-19 year old young men – represent roughly 50% of the cohort. There is no indication of community involvement by younger pupils, as might be expected in state schools, nor a clear indication of what constitutes community involvement. These activities could relate directly to active citizenship but, as Peterson and Knowles (2009) have shown, that is not a safe assumption to make.

Focus School

The second school considered for this paper is a girls’ school established in the 17th century and which is discussed in more depth in Leighton (2013). The school is not identified here or in the original article in order to adhere to research ethics. Unlike Eton College, this school cannot claim a long list of politicians and celebrities amongst its former pupils. Those traced include one former MP, a glamour model, a cartoonist, and several who have been identified by their relationship to a famous (e.g. as ‘muse to’, ‘wife of’). The school has 400 pupils, 148 of whom are boarders and 20% of whom come from outside the UK (16 countries), with boarding fees of just under £27,000pa.

Pupils enjoy considerable academic success with 100% entry into higher education, slightly better than Eton pupils’ achievements. Like Eton, class sizes are small and there is a detailed and far-reaching pastoral system supporting all pupils irrespective of nationality and whether boarding or day pupils. As well as a range of academic subjects to be studied, the school offers 68 other activities ranging from public speaking and Duke of Edinburgh Scheme to lacrosse and horse-riding; there are further charges for many of these.

Unlike at Eton, citizenship education forms a significant part of the curriculum at this school. Prior research (Leighton 2004a) has indicated at least six possible approaches to the delivery of citizenship in England:

1. As a discrete subject;
2. As part of PSHE;
3. Integrated into other curricular subjects;
4. Special focus days;
5. Combination of 1 or 2 with 3 and/or 4;
6. Ignoring statutory requirements.

This school fits model 5 above in that it is taught as a separate subject to all pupils aged 11 to 15 as well as being integrated into a number of other subjects and the school occasionally suspending the formal timetable to focus whole days on citizenship-related topics. In common with Eton there is also a tradition of community service, although here such activities are not restricted to older pupils.

Keating et al (2010)

The CELSI study (Keating et al 2010 and earlier reports) was conducted in the state sector in England with a sample of 43,410 young people and 3,212 teachers from 690 schools over a nine year period. Neither of the schools outlined in this paper has been scrutinised as closely or for such a long period as those in Keating et al, which is considered here to be a benchmark against which the much smaller scale snap-shot findings can be compared.

Keating et al (2010) identified that citizenship learning takes place in various forms and setting, and can develop at times irrespective of school provision. The sites of citizenship learning which they identified are shown as Figure 1 below, and reflects the responses

Figure 1



Keating et al (2010) p10

given by staff and pupils during interviews at the focus school. The pupils in particular considered that most of their political education came from home, irrespective of whether they were day pupils (who would see family members on a daily basis) or boarders (who would see their families only at week-ends, or less often). Pupils and teachers were insistent that young people spend much more time with family and peers than within the confines of a school, and that their association with faith or youth movements would also be more influential than the school on pupils' perception and conduct of themselves as citizens. While there is considerable truth in their awareness of the amount of time spent in various environment, both staff and pupils seem here to ignore – perhaps inevitably, given the nature of the concepts – the role and influence of

the hidden curriculum (particularly as interpreted by Willis 1977) and the agenda management of those in power (Lukes 1974).

Shared findings

There is a significant degree of commonality between the findings between these studies.

- Young people expect to continue to participate as adult citizens;
- Age and life-stage are significant factors in determining levels of political and social engagement;
- There is a tendency to associate being a good citizen with being law-abiding and with taking part in the community;
- Pupils are supportive of human rights in general and women's rights in particular;
- High levels of Citizenship Education in the school have a direct influence on civic attitudes and sense of efficacy.

As the focus school has discrete citizenship education provision, a significant and consistent ethos emphasising helping others and making one's way in society, these areas of common ground are perhaps no great surprise. What does come as a surprise, however, is that these main findings are corroborated but the nature of provision is very different to that which Keating et al's data would predict.

The CELSI study also found that state pupils were largely motivated towards civic engagement 'by the prospect of personal benefit' (Keating et al 2010, p vi) and that there was a 'hardening of attitudes towards equality and society . . . a weakening of attachment to communities' (Keating et al 2010, p iii). In the focus independent school, there was no evidence of such a hardening of attitudes and pupils were motivated more by a sense of duty and of personal well-being. Where pupil links with communities tended to get weaker with age in the CELSI study, there was no comparable evidence of this at the focus school. This suggests that there might be a stronger sense of citizenship in the independent school than in a 'typical' school, that the independent school is closer to better practise as it appears to develop better outcomes in pupils.

Scrutiny of approaches to the teaching of citizenship do not, however, bear this out. Keating et al (2010 p vi) are clear that citizenship education is at its most successful when developed by the teachers who are delivering the curriculum and where it is formally examined as one of the certificate (GCSE) subjects at 16. This school has no formal examination entries in citizenship, and most work is designed by a non-specialist working to a curriculum dictated as much by available resources as by any educational rationale. The Keating et al finding that pupils benefit most from discrete 45 minute weekly lessons throughout their time at school did find support at this school, but there has since been a change in timetable provision and course duration. It is too early to tell what – if any – have been the results of these changes. What makes this more intriguing is that Eton College, the school previously identified as producing the majority of UK prime ministers – including the current one – as well as many other social, political, economic and military leaders, has no formal citizenship education provision at all.

Conclusions

It remains the case, as identified above, that 38% of MPs and 60% of the Cabinet, 46.5% of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst Officer Cadets, 47% of Oxford University undergraduates, 54% of UK Chief Executive Officers, 68% of barristers and 70% of judges were educated in the independent sector, although that sector only educates 7% of England's population. Few people would argue that the role of CEOs is largely in the service of the public good, while undergraduates from any university are not an homogenous group. This data is merely indicative of the existence of the power elite, with shared experiences, education, and perceptions.

None the less, given those shared experiences etc, we must consider why it is that such a high proportion of independently educated pupils enter public services such as politics and law, particularly when the evidence indicates they receive very little – if any – citizenship education in school. The occupations identified above tend to be white male dominated and are among the better paid in the UK, issues which merit further scrutiny but are not within the focus of this paper. The forgoing discussion leads one to consider whether there is something about independent schooling which contributes to the development of effective citizenship education and thence to the development of effective and active citizens.

There is not enough information within or behind the current study to support a secure conclusion. Rather, a number of possible further hypotheses can be offered (not in any significant order) which, when tested, might bring us closer to a secure answer.

1. Independent schools as total institutions – it might be that, as Goffman (1961) identified in other circumstances, to experience the effects and ethos of the school all day every day for week after week has much more deep-seated effects than most state pupils' seven hours a day experience of school will have;
2. Pupils' social class background – if these are the children of judges, cabinet ministers, etc, they might be doing no more than following a family tradition just as miners followed miners and farmers followed farmers through generations; or, like stevedores in the old dockland areas, it might be that such occupations are reserved for future family members ;
3. Pupils' gender – if girls' schools are more likely to provide citizenship education but boys' schools more likely to provide leading citizens – and the evidence to support that conclusion is very limited – the reasons for this might be uncovered and investigated;
4. Pupils' ethnicity – while gender separation in schools in England is commonplace, division by ethnicity is less systemically common. Hypothesis 2 above might explain this to some extent, as might the notion that England remains institutionally racist (Gillborn 2006)
5. The values of those who send their children to these schools – less the possibility of inherited roles than one of inherited attitudes. Not all who send their children to these schools are particularly wealthy people, while there are independent schools which cost more in fees than Eton but which produce fewer prime ministers. It could be that a particular type of parent can be matched to a particular type of independent school;

6. Independent schools' attitude of what and how pupils will achieve, rather than whether or why, and that pupils see role models for success whereas many state educated pupils see role models for failure. Staff and pupils interviewed were consistent in their expectations of success and achievement, and the school regularly had motivational speakers with distinctive backgrounds and notable achievements. For example, where they had an eminent Oxbridge scientist who is a member of the House of Lords in her own right and a television personality at the school prize-giving (similar to school graduation), the school closest to this researcher's home had its own head teacher (again).
7. A fairly standard explanation for the greater success of public school pupils is that there is a network which supports former pupils of independent schools at the expense of those from state school (Gathorn-Handy, 1978). While there may well be substance to this, and it ties in with Hypothesis 2 above to some extent, it does not immediately address success in the electoral field, unless it is to say that selection meetings for candidates are packed with public school former pupils; it is possibly more complex than that;
8. Real and potential access to cultural, social and /or economic capital is structurally unequal – this brings together all seven preceding hypotheses in offering support for Michels' proposal of the Iron Law of Oligarchy: that those who run any organisation (in this case, a country) ensure that structures and relationships operate in such a way as to ensure that they always will run that organisation.

If it is that the final hypothesis is the most convincing, we again will have evidence in support of Mills' (1956) concept of the Power Elite and in support of Young's (1961) attack on the notion of a meritocratic England. As Bourdieu put it more recently, it will become

necessary to bury the myth of the "school as a liberating force", guarantor of the triumph of "achievement" over "ascription", of . . . merit and talent over heredity and nepotism, in order to perceive the educational institution in the true light of its social uses, that is, as one of the foundations of dominance and the legitimation of dominance. Bourdieu, P. (1996, P5)

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