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Teachers as frontline defenders of democracy

Lee Jerome

*Professor of Citizenship &
Children's Rights Education*

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Teachers as frontline defenders of democracy

Lee Jerome

Introduction

I have been thinking about, and working for, citizenship education in one way or another since my first assignment during my PGCE year (1993-94), when I chose to discuss the relationship between Citizenship and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Since then, in England at least, Citizenship has gone through a remarkable curriculum journey from a vague cross-curricular theme to a fully-fledged national curriculum subject. It was introduced as a new subject in 2002 and, at its peak in 2009, almost 100,000 students per year took a full or half GCSE in Citizenship Studies (Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, 2018). But, with the change of government in 2010, the fortunes of the subject started to decline, and so Citizenship has been pushed to the margins again, awaiting a possible revival in the next curriculum review. Being part of that change has been interesting for a number of practical and academic reasons. Personally, the innovation opened up an entire new career path for me and I was able to pull together my rather diffuse academic CV into some form of coherent framework for thinking about citizenship, combining insights from my A levels in Business Studies and Statistics, my BSc in Politics and Sociology, my teaching experience as Head of History, and my MA in Post Colonial History. Academically, it provided a brand-new field of study and gave me a close-up view of how a curriculum subject works in practice. In this lecture I want to take the opportunity to reflect on some of the main lessons I have learned from being a participant in, and close observer of, that curriculum journey, and outline a rather hopeful case that Citizenship may still have its best days ahead.

I am going to proceed by exploring the topic in four parts. In the first part of the lecture, I want to remind us of the necessity of action and will consider whether our democracy needs defending, and if so, what is the nature of the challenge that we confront? In part two, I want to ask a general question about why teachers might have a role in defending democracy and what reasonable expectations we might have of them? In the third section, which is where I get to the meat of my argument, I want to explore head on the question of whether education can defend democracy by considering what teachers might reasonably do in the name of defending democracy and what evidence we have that it would have an impact. And finally, I will end with some case studies about current teaching practices from which we might derive some inspiration. In that final section I simply want to make the point that the kind of practices I am calling for, so that education can contribute to defending our democracy, are already being implemented in

schools. Rather than dream up innovative pedagogic practices, we simply need to find and amplify those examples of good practice.

(1) Does democracy need defending and, if so, from what kinds of threats?

One way we might think about this question is to think about the particular challenge of young people today. There is a clichéd view of Gen Z that they are increasingly obsessed with new technology, spend increasing amounts of time online and, because of the way the online world works, that renders them essentially passive, individualized, prone to anxiety but incapable of the hard graft that is traditionally associated with grassroots and electoral politics. So, they might be willing to engage in clicktivism but are less willing to do the day-to-day work that sustains political communities. On this rather caricatured view (although this list is pretty much a summary of a McKinsey (2024) briefing) the challenge comes from within. But, I am sceptical of all arguments that attempt to draw a hard and fast distinction between generations, especially distinctions like this and in thinking about whether young people today pose a unique challenge to sustaining democracy, it is useful to remind ourselves that almost all of those concerns have been routinely expressed through the ages, albeit in relation to other forms of ‘new’ technology (Gillard, 2018). So, the idea that young people pay too little attention to the wisdom of their elders was a complaint of Aristotle in the 4th century BCE. The idea that they are too easily beguiled by new forms of entertainment was a complaint made in the 18th century about the impact of the new-fangled literary development – the novel. The idea that young people have become essentially passive was expressed by Granville Stanley Hall in 1904, worrying about the temptations of urban life and sedentary occupations. And, in relation to the suggestion that young people are no longer interested in real life politics, we might consider a complaint made in the 1930s that new technology, such as the development of motorcars and cinemas, were responsible for providing too many diversions for young people and leading them away from established modes of politics. This is just to say that I do not support the contention that it is young people themselves who pose a threat to sustaining a healthy democracy. Rather, fears about the next generation proving inadequate to the task of sustaining our civilization are a routine part of the discourse promoted by cultural commentators. It seems every generation feels threatened by the one that follows them.

But that is not to say we do not confront some unique challenges, as has every generation before us. Twenty years ago, if we had gathered to

think about citizenship education, we might have been very exercised by the external threats of terrorist organisations and the associated risk that our governments would overreact to those threats and diminish our freedom as a consequence. Twenty years before that, when I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, the main threat seemed to come from the risk that the Cold War would explode into a hot war and that we might succumb to a nuclear holocaust. Twenty years before that, there was a fear that waves of modernization would undermine the norms that had been established in Western liberal democracies. It certainly seemed to many that there was an existential threat to western liberal democracies through the combined effect of the decline of deference, the rise of new forms of radical liberationist philosophy among young people, and among the global South that was shaking off colonial controls to find new forms of independence. And twenty years before that, we were in the middle of an all-consuming war in which there was a genuinely existential threat to the survival of democracies.

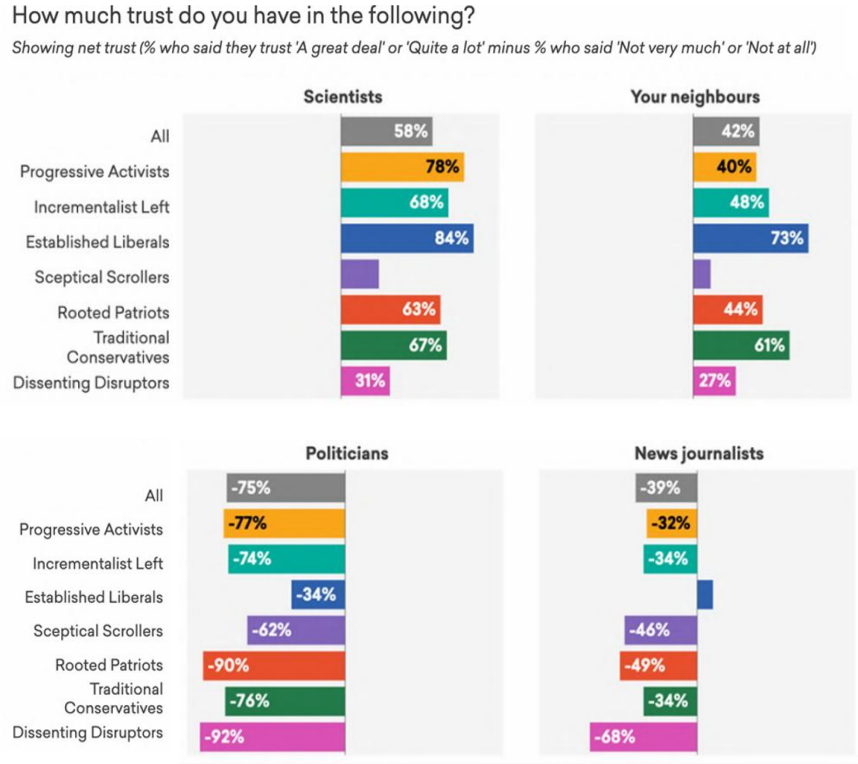
Unlike the observation that every generation fears the one that comes after it, this list of threats to society does seem to be real. Democracy has to respond to different challenges in each generation, and it has to develop in new ways to be ready for future challenges. In this opening section of the lecture, I just want to draw attention to some of the concerns that our democracy is confronting now. This will not be a comprehensive list but will include some of the most obvious red flags scattered across the political terrain.

The first challenge is in relation to trust. Putnam (2000) and others writing about social capital have drawn our attention to the importance of trust as a foundation stone for social solidarity and for democratic political participation. In essence, we need to trust one another to generate some form of social cohesion and mutual social obligation, and we need to trust our institutions and representatives in order to justify investing the time and effort it takes to participate in an informed way. In a 2025 opinion poll from More in Common (figure 1), we can see that levels of trust differ between groups within society, but very definitely differ in relation to the groups and institutions that we are being asked to trust. There are high levels of trust in scientists and even for our neighbours, but very low levels of trust in politicians and journalists. That represents a threat to the bedrock of a democratic community.

A second challenge relates to our collective sense of optimism and the feeling that we can make a difference. The same opinion poll showed that nearly three quarters of people felt the government does not have things

under control and just over half of people felt that their children's generation would have a worse life than their parents' generation. That represents a second threat to democracy, because the feeling that things are getting slowly worse and that no one is really in control also threatens to undermine our commitment to participation.

Figure 1: Levels of trust among British population



Source: More In Common (2025)

A third challenge is reflected in a public attitude survey from the Electoral Commission in 2025, which suggests that there is a significant proportion of people in the UK who think that Britain needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules. In one sense this is not surprising – if people feel that things are getting worse and they do not really trust that the current political institutions and processes will regain control of the situation and make it better, it seems at least feasible to think that the time has come for

someone who will break through those institutional constraints and affect a dramatic change of course. But, as Lord Bingham (2010) codified in his definition of the rule of law, leaders who follow the rules are an essential part of a liberal democratic system, they cannot somehow sit outside of it without directly undermining it. One of the tenets of liberal democracy, as it has developed in most democracies, is that even people in the highest political offices are constrained by the law because their power must be limited by the legal and constitutional system in which they operate. So, it seems particularly worrying that between 60% and 73% of Conservative and Reform voters are willing to suggest that Britain needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules and that a substantial minority of people on the left share a similar sentiment.

We live in a society where large numbers of people lack trust in politicians and political institutions and also lack trust in the journalists who are supposed to report on them and help us hold them to account. But that does not mean people function with an absence of information or knowledge. It simply means that other forms of information, which are less reliable and less truthful, move in to fill the gaps. In a society where we have lost faith in journalists and political institutions to explain the world to us, there is a proliferation of conspiracy theories and a growth in the number of people who are willing to engage with and potentially support them. In a recent survey of 7,691 teachers, over 40% of secondary school teachers had heard students discussing variations of the Illuminati or the New World Order conspiracy theories. And over 20% of teachers reported hearing students talking about the conspiracy theory that climate change is not happening (Jerome, Kisby & McKay, 2024). It is difficult to imagine how we sustain a healthy democracy when basic standards of truth are being compromised away – on what basis will citizens engage in debate, formulate political views or make justifiable political judgements?

Now those are just four challenges that spring to mind when we think about the changing nature of our political culture, but there are a number of other challenges that are frequently discussed:

- For a number of years we have got used to the idea that more and more countries are becoming democracies. But in the last few years we have witnessed a decline in the number of democracies in the world for the first time in several decades (Freedom House, 2024).
- This has coincided with increasingly high-profile challenges to international institutions such as the United Nations and to the norms around international law. And here again it is important to remind ourselves that there was never a global consensus around upholding

international law, but some of the strongest voices who spoke up for it now seem to be actively undermining those norms and institutions (Kinstler, 2025).

- This is not unconnected to the fact that Europe is once again involved in physical conflict in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- And, at the same time, we are witnessing the polarization of political debates and new forms of radicalization. This manifests itself in the resurgence of new forms of misogyny, racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. In short, a resurgence of intolerance and the rise of the new right (Lowles, 2026).
- Partly, this reflects our increasing turn to the digital realm. This means people are engaging with one another increasingly in the online world and making themselves susceptible to the information silos, echo chambers and trends of online information that overwhelm us and distort our worldview (Sunstein, 2026). We are also investing more of our time in forums which are owned and controlled by a relatively small number of powerful corporations, which are themselves owned and controlled by a relatively small number of powerful tech bros (Doctorow, 2025; Dumbrava, 2021).
- This is more recently linked to the rise of artificial intelligence, and we're only just at the beginning of thinking through the implications of AI for society, for our economy and, at an individual level, for our psychological well-being and, potentially, even our individual levels of intelligence (Kosmyrna et al., 2025).
- All of this is happening in a context of climate change in which, although great strides are being taken forward in finding alternatives to carbon producing fossil fuels, nevertheless there is no clear trajectory for avoiding potentially catastrophic temperature rises. There is clear evidence that our societies are being confronted now, and will continue to be confronted, with increasingly dramatic weather patterns and rising levels of disruption and migration stemming from climate change and the conflicts that will be associated with it (Watson, Lenton & deCampos, 2023).
- And in our own small part of the world, we are preparing to extend the franchise to 16-year-olds and there is a very urgent need to ensure that they have the information and the confidence they need to use that freedom wisely (Kisby & Jerome, 2025).

No doubt all of these factors are open to discussion and all of them can be debated and qualified in different ways. Some of them will turn out to be more important than others and in another twenty years we might look back

and be surprised by some of them and probably shocked by issues that are missing. But here I just want to start with the point that each generation has to confront its own challenges, and we need to build our collective capacity for reflecting on how we might respond to them in ways that sustain the principles of democracy. The rest of the lecture is about the role of education in that response.

(2) What role might teachers have in responding to these challenges?

I have already mentioned a decline in trust in some institutions, but it is useful to remind ourselves that, whilst government ministers, politicians and journalists are fairly low down in surveys of public trust, teachers and professors are relatively high. A recent opinion poll (IPSOS, 2025), which asked members of the public whether they trust various professions to tell the truth, found that only 9% of the British population say they trust politicians, 14% say they trust government ministers, but 82% trust professors and teachers. So, one pragmatic reason why we might think teachers could play some part in helping to prepare society for these challenges is that they are widely trusted to be truthful. In addition, it is widely accepted in policy that teachers should have some part to play in this process. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) states that an important goal of education is ‘the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society’ and, closer to home, the Department for Education’s (2011/2021) statement of Teachers’ Standards makes it clear that teachers have an important role in upholding the ‘fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance...’

So, we have to consider what kind of role we want to assign teachers. In this part of the lecture, I want to argue that we need to embrace a significant degree of teacher autonomy if we are going to maximise their chances of pursuing this role as defenders of democracy. That is to say, we cannot simply instruct teachers about exactly what they can and cannot do or say. We cannot treat them simply as agents of the state who will neutrally ‘deliver’ approved messages from politicians, and this requires us to build on that foundation of trust.

One reason for asserting teachers’ autonomy is that centralised education policy will never do a sufficient job of promoting change on its own. There is generally a gap between political vision and the practical requirements that would be required to implement that vision on the ground (Jerome & Fretwell, forthcoming). In education, we have often witnessed what has been called a ‘declarationist’ approach to Citizenship and human

rights education, where governments are bold on vision statements and objectives, but relatively weak on the practical steps to achieve those ends (Jerome, 2018a). The Welsh curriculum provides a good recent example of this. It states that the entire curriculum has four overarching aims, one of which is to produce ‘ethical informed citizens of Wales and the world’, but there is no requirement to teach citizenship or politics within the curriculum (Jerome et al., 2022). This leaves teachers to step in to some extent, to fill the interpretive gap between what politicians would like to achieve and what is mandated to happen on the ground.

A second problem teachers have to solve is that even when there is a clear statement of what should be happening in the curriculum, it often takes place in small corners of the school which are relatively marginalised. In 2010, Jeremy Hayward and I reflected on this challenge in relation to citizenship education and noted that in many regards, although Citizenship exists in the English National Curriculum, it lacks the hallmarks of a real school subject (Hayward & Jerome, 2010). It generally is not taught by qualified staff in each school, it often does not have specialist rooms or a specialist department, and it often lacks dedicated time and status. Faced with this challenge, we need teachers to undertake micro-political negotiations to find and protect some space to develop serious Citizenship provision (Bhargava & Jerome, 2020).

A third problem that requires a degree of teacher autonomy is that because Citizenship is so marginal and often taught by non-specialists, it can be attached to other agendas in a process which has been referred to as ‘decoupling’ and ‘recoupling’ (Bajaj, 2012). This means that Citizenship can become aligned with other agendas such as character education; the promotion of the fundamental British values; human rights education; the pastoral curriculum; personal social and health education; personal development; or religious education. In such cases, the nature of citizenship education may change to fit into the curricular context with which it has been aligned.

And so there are three problems in education which would indicate that policymakers in Westminster cannot solve this problem for us and that we should be relying more on teachers to take the initiative. That means seeing teachers as active curriculum agents, not just as staff who will implement instructions given to them, but as professionals who will exercise their own agency in creating a curriculum. There is an enormous difference between the curriculum as codified in documents from the DfE and the real-life experience that is enacted in the classroom over hundreds of hours, through thousands of interactions. It is this teacher-created curriculum,

conjured up with ingenuity, inspiration and a few meagre resources that is experienced by students.

Another perspective on this is simply to recognise that for students, who teaches them a subject or a topic often emerges as important in determining their experience of the curriculum. Therefore, we need to pay attention to who we are asking to teach that content. I would argue that these are important reasons to train a specialist cadre of Citizenship teachers who might reasonably be expected to support the subject for its own value, and to inspire students with their interest in the subject. I am reminded of an interview with a secondary student during my PhD research who, when asked to say what came to mind when he thought about the Citizenship provision in his school, simply said 'I think of Mrs C and world peace for some reason' (Jerome, 2012: 155).

Whilst we need to remain alert to the risk of political indoctrination, we also need to be aware that there is no such thing as neutrality and schools are not obliged by law to be neutral on all issues. Freire (1970) pointed out a long time ago that in an unequal society, in which schools are complicit in perpetuating inequality, neutrality simply means silently playing our part in reproducing oppression. And, in a forthcoming chapter, Amit Puni argues that attempting to inhabit a position of neutrality, for example, by adopting a race-blind perspective, will not promote anti-racism. To do that, we need teachers to promote forms of racial literacy so that people can take informed action to combat those sources of inequality.

A second reason for questioning a simplistic commitment to neutrality is that it can mask teachers' ignorance, conservatism or hypocrisy (Jerome, 2018b). Elevating neutrality can give people the option to simply sidestep politically contentious topics but, by contrast, it is perfectly possible to remain non-partisan whilst encouraging young people to be critical, to challenge inequalities, to think about the nature of social justice and to facilitate critical reflection and inquiry. And in that vein, some guidance I helped to write for the Welsh Government in 2021 champions the idea that teachers should not see their classrooms as a neutral space for competing interpretations or positions to be promoted by external political actors but instead should dedicate their classroom to be spaces of critical informed inquiry so that weak arguments can be unveiled and dismissed.

And finally in thinking about the role of teachers, I want to draw attention to work I have been conducting to explore the professional knowledge base of Citizenship teachers (Jerome, Shortland, Starkey & Svennevig, forthcoming). In this project we asked teachers to share examples of their classroom practice and our analysis of those examples has enabled us to

explore what they bring to the table in terms of their own professional knowledge. This includes:

- Substantive knowledge of the issues related to citizenship.
- Epistemic knowledge of how we can reasonably frame and make sense of these contemporary political issues and arguments.
- Pedagogic knowledge about how to enact all of this in the classroom in ways that are meaningful and engaging for young people.
- Contextual knowledge to make sure that all of this makes sense in relation to the particular students and the particular issues that they're encountering in their lives.
- Policy knowledge to engineer and maintain the space to achieve effective citizenship education.

Spending the last few years in conversation with these teachers has reinforced my belief that this is an area that really benefits from specialist provision.

In part 2, I have argued is that there is a reasonable role for teachers because they are relatively trusted by society at large and because they have funds of specialist knowledge and understanding that they can bring to the challenge of defending democracy. I have also suggested that we need to embrace (and defend) teachers exercising a significant degree of professional autonomy in enacting Citizenship in their contexts. Central policy cannot devise a curriculum that will be up to date, relevant and engaging because that requires skilled and knowledgeable teachers who, as Freire argued, must become students of their students, their families and communities, in order to devise a curriculum that makes sense in their context.

(3) What can teachers do to defend democracy, and will it work?

In the third section I want to explore what teachers should do through combining normative and evaluative perspectives. The normative dimension will focus on outlining some of the elements I consider essential for an effective education for democratic citizenship, and the evaluative dimension will consider how we know they would be effective. I will consider both the issues of definition and evidence in relation to three essential components: knowledge, deliberation and active citizenship. There is a line of argument which asserts a specific educational solution for every specific societal problem, for example, recently I have seen social media posts suggesting that schools must teach about the risks of wild water swimming, how to create 'art' using AI, and the green cross code to overcome dangerous cycling. If we devise a curriculum to respond to every individual

risk it will be a very long list of lessons which, I suggest, would have a limited effect. My basic contention is that a citizenship education which does a thorough job of developing my three core elements will provide young people with the capability to engage in effective democratic citizenship, that is to say, they will have sufficient knowledge and understanding to comprehend the nature of democracy, the challenges confronting it, and the options available. They will be able to engage in rational, sustained discussion with diverse people, to deepen their understanding and explore pragmatic responses. And they will have the capacity to find a range of individual and collective actions that will contribute to solutions.

In a recent review of the empirical evidence of the impact of citizenship education, I and a team of researchers found and reviewed 109 studies from around the world (Jerome, Hyder, Hilal & Kisby, 2024). That showed overwhelming evidence that citizenship education generally leads to increases in citizenship knowledge, increased intentions to participate (through voting and other forms of volunteering and community action), and an increased level of support for democracy. There was also plenty of evidence to suggest that citizenship education, when done well, can reduce the civic gap through providing some form of universal compensatory input. In other words, if you grow up in a middle class, politically informed and highly participative family, then you are likely to be socialised into engaging in debate about political issues and grow into the expectation that you will be involved in civic action and voting. But, if you do not have that form of political socialisation through your family and local neighbourhood, then you need someone else to provide that input. When schools give everyone the opportunity, then there is evidence to suggest that the civic gap can be narrowed, because that input has a larger impact on young people who have not experienced political socialisation elsewhere. But there is also evidence to suggest that, where schools provide people with unequal educational experiences, such as routing working-class children into vocational tracks where they get a different kind of curriculum experience, then the gap can persist or even widen through adolescence.

The studies we reviewed show that Citizenship in the curriculum makes a positive difference, but they also emphasise that there are other factors that can be significant. One factor is the nature of pedagogy, and so adopting what is often called in the literature an 'open classroom climate' is a very powerful predictor of citizenship outcomes. A second factor relates to the opportunities for participation, which can include active projects and simulations in the classroom, extra-curricular involvement through student voice and student parliaments, or community-based projects mediated

through the school. Those kinds of activities also lead to positive citizenship outcomes. And finally, the literature suggests that there is an independent effect of the school ethos (including student relationships with their peers and their teachers).

We are currently in the middle of a national curriculum review in England, and it seems that Citizenship is likely to emerge with an enhanced status. Our reading of the research strongly suggests that such a curriculum can make a positive difference, but also that it will not be sufficient on its own. We must also pay attention to the way in which we enact that curriculum in the classroom through our pedagogic strategies, we need to think about how the curriculum is enhanced by wider opportunities for participation in a range of projects within and beyond the school, and we have to commit to nurture a positive school ethos, with positive relationships and a sense that students are listened to.

Thinking about citizenship knowledge

The first of the three components I want to consider is knowledge. Niemi and Junn's 1998 classic study in America showed that civics education is associated with higher civics knowledge scores. And in a recent survey of 3,874 students in England, my research team and I found that citizenship knowledge did increase year on year in our sample of schools (figure 2). We also found that citizenship knowledge was higher in schools that had discrete citizenship provision and in schools where the GCSE Citizenship Studies was taught (figure 3).

Figure 2: Year on year improvements in citizenship knowledge

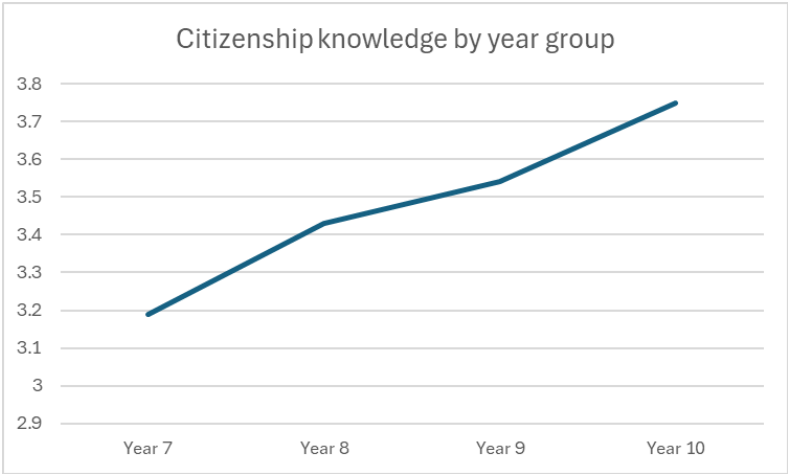
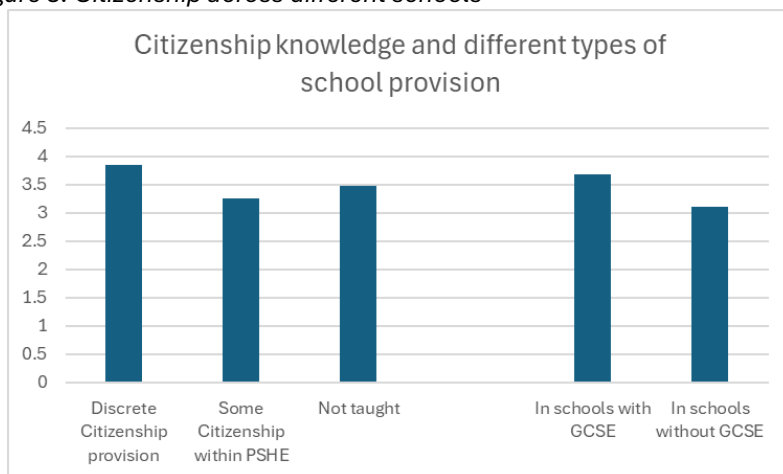


Figure 3: Citizenship across different schools

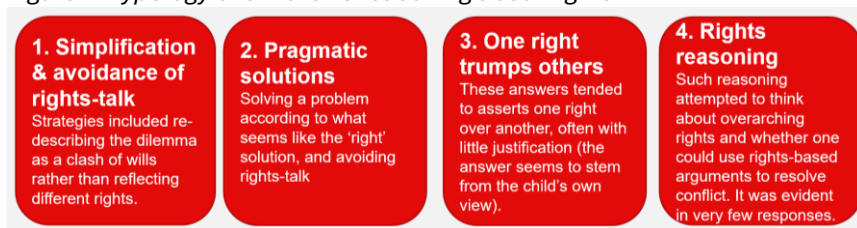


This suggests two things: first, that schools really can make an impact in the level of citizenship knowledge and second, that impact is greater in schools that have some specialist staff or at least have staff who are able to dedicate some specialist time to their Citizenship provision. That makes a powerful case that what we do in schools in England can secure improvements in citizenship knowledge. However, before we are too self-congratulatory, I should point out that figure 2 shows progress from year 7 to year 10 (11-year-olds to 15-year-olds) on a scale of 1 to 7, and this improvement takes us from just above 3 to just below 4. There is still plenty of scope for further improvement on the battery of true or false questions that we used in our survey.

There is relatively little written about citizenship knowledge and international surveys often rely on relatively simple multiple-choice / true-false questions to generate measures which can be used to track progress or compare groups of students. This gap in thinking more deeply about knowledge is something I have tried to address in my own research in two different ways. One approach is to think about what this looks like from a student's perspective, and, with my collaborator John Lalor, we developed a small project to explore this (Jerome & Lalor, 2015). We provided young people with a scenario involving a clash of rights and asked them to consider how they would resolve this particular scenario. We incorporated the task in a lesson that was taught to students from the top end of primary school, the bottom end of secondary, the top end of secondary and in post-compulsory

education. The task was based on a real-life case study in which a child required a blood transfusion but their parents, who were Jehovah's Witnesses, did not agree to the transfusion because it was against their religious beliefs. The doctors were unable to resolve this clash of rights in the hospital and they referred the case to the court. The students were given the facts of the case and were also told that they would be assuming the role of the judge. They were given a list of human rights articles that related to: (i) the best interests of the child, (ii) the right to life, and (iii) the right to religious freedom. They were asked first of all to make some comments on why this case study was difficult to resolve and then to make some suggestions about how it could be resolved. What we found by looking at this problem from the student's perspective was that they provided a number of distinctive kinds of responses (figure 4). In the first few responses students simply ignored the invitation to frame this as a human rights issue and just rushed to provide a pragmatic solution. In the third type of response they simply picked whether they supported the right to the life or the right to religion and said which one they thought was more important. And only in the final category did they really rise to the challenge of thinking about the nature of human rights and try to apply some kind of rights reasoning argument to work through the problem. This latter kind of reasoning was evident in very few responses.

Figure 4: Typology of children's reasoning about rights



Source: Jerome & Lalor (2015)

What we found here, in an area that' is probably quite widely taught, is that simply teaching students that children have human rights and what those human rights are, may not be effective because there was a kind of resistance to embracing this knowledge. This study reinforced for me the idea that we need teachers to make knowledge relevant, not just 'deliver' slabs of information that we deem to be important or valuable.

A second methodological approach to thinking about the challenge of knowledge in citizenship education is to investigate what teachers are

doing. In a project I have just completed with Hans Svennevig, Sera Shortland and Hugh Starkey, we've explored what teachers do in the classroom and have devised an account of Citizenship teachers' knowledge based on a series of case studies. Those teachers are doing several things in relation to developing young people's substantive knowledge of what constitutes citizenship and political understanding:

1. They are teaching them about foundational concepts such as democracy, freedom, power, and justice.
2. They are engaging them in a wide range of contemporary issues, all of which require background knowledge, so they can understand debates about topics as diverse as climate change, migration, party politics, or extremism.
3. They are also trying to build up a fairly robust sense of institutional knowledge and how the different components of a democratic society work together to sustain democracy. That includes the various institutions of the government and civil service, but also the justice system and the role of the media.
4. And they are teaching people about active citizenship, including the variety of methods of action, case studies in which actions have worked, and how to evaluate a theory of change to judge why certain actions might be expected to deliver certain outcomes in specific conditions.

On its own this seems like a fairly daunting agenda but alongside that is a broader project to develop students' epistemic knowledge, i.e. creating a meaningful framework for thinking about political problems in political ways. That involves:

1. Promoting a form of pluralism in which young people are dissuaded from relying on simplistic, single narratives and encouraged to engage with the reality that the world is a complex place and that our explanations of that complexity will always be partial and tentative. That means each political phenomenon we seek to understand can be seen from multiple perspectives and will be experienced in multiple ways by different people. And this means we have to take that variety of lived experience seriously and develop empathy for how other people see and experience the world.
2. Teachers are also helping young people to understand how the same phenomenon change in significance and meaning over time and how we can understand the same phenomenon and events at different systemic levels from personal through to institutional, collective, societal and the global. So we can ask ourselves questions about the impact of climate

change at a personal level (how does this affect us emotionally and in terms of our living standards?) at an inter-personal level (how does it affect other people at home and abroad?) and what can we do as individuals or collectively to affect change locally or globally?

3. Teachers are also introducing students to different ideological lenses, e.g. thinking about the different ideological and value positions adopted by liberals, socialists, fascists etc. And they have to consider how these worldviews affect how we frame and interpret the contemporary challenges, for example, is climate change something we should act on, or ignore? Even if we act, should we have faith in market-led solutions, or seek to impose alternative solutions through state or inter-governmental action?
4. And finally, teachers are encouraging people to ask political questions and understand how to judge and evaluate the variety of political answers they might hear in response to those questions.

Overall, the challenge of helping to create knowledgeable and informed citizens is something that teachers can rise to, but when we pay attention to those teaching practices it reveals to us that this is quite a profound challenge – one that justifies investing in specialist teacher training.

Thinking about citizenship and deliberation

A second element to what schools could be doing to defend our democracy arises from the observation that democracy is both an ends and a means. McKenna (2001) has described this as a form of process utopianism, which is to say that we bring democracy into being by living democratically, we cannot achieve some abstract ideal of democracy by non-democratic methods. McCowan (2009) has similarly argued that the most impactful forms of citizenship education arise when we align the processes of citizenship education with the ultimate ends or aims of citizenship education.

One of the interesting developments in political theory since my undergraduate study of politics in the early 1990s has been the emergence of an entire field of theory and practice around the notion of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2002). What has been called the ‘deliberative turn’ is often rooted in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1999), who draws attention to the capacity for honest and rational discussion between seriously engaged and well-intentioned actors to open up new possibilities for finding political solutions to complex problems. In political science, this is often operationalised through a set of principles describing the ‘ideal speech act’ (see for example Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli & Steenbergen, 2004) and in a

project that I developed in 2017 called The Deliberative Classroom, we developed a lesson observation tool that put these principles into action in the classroom. We devised a set of teaching resources to encourage students to engage in deliberative discussions and we also produced a lesson observation pro-forma that encouraged teachers to observe one another and to provide peer feedback. Here, the innovation we were aiming for was to break away from judging individual students' contributions to a discussion and to focus on the extent to which the teacher had managed to establish the classroom as a deliberative space (Jerome, 2025). The criteria we chose to focus on were:

1. The degree to which everyone in the classroom participated.
2. The degree to which those participants were developing informed views, moving away from simply trading their initial gut feelings on a topic.
3. The degree to which participants showed respect towards each other in the classroom,
4. and respect towards the people who were affected by the issue being discussed.
5. The extent to which participants engaged in constructive responses to people in the classroom and built on one another's contributions.
6. And finally, and in slightly more vague terms, the degree to which it appeared that there was a genuine search for knowledge and understanding as opposed to an instrumentalist commitment to win the debate.

Anna Liddle, Helen Young, and I recorded and listened back to the conversations the students were having in those classrooms. We certainly heard lots of evidence to suggest that students were using those opportunities to discuss dilemmas, explore conceptual depth, think through multiple perspectives and demonstrate empathy for others (Jerome, Liddle & Young, 2021a).

But these things did not always happen automatically just because teachers created a space in the classroom. These teachers had to be actively involved in helping students move from what we call cumulative talk to exploratory talk, and to move them from single to multiple accounts and then subject those alternative accounts to critical evaluation. Sometimes the young people made connections between the individual case studies they were discussing and the underlying citizenship concepts and dilemmas and sometimes they needed a little help to make this leap. And the teachers were also making decisions about when to leave the conversation running, when to intervene and what roles they should adopt - sometimes they were providing information, sometimes they were simply monitoring the

conversation between students, at other times they became an active questioner in those groups, sometimes they would throw in a provocation, and at other times they just intervened as a facilitator helping students to articulate their engagement with one another (Jerome, Liddle & Young, 2021b).

In addition to this promising qualitative data, there are some important insights from my more recent survey research. In our study of secondary students, we found a very strong relationship between most of our citizenship outcomes and our measure of ‘open classroom climate’ (OCC). OCC is as close as we come at the moment to a reliable measure of the kind of principles that I have outlined in relation to deliberation. It means students experience the classroom as a place where they are encouraged to explore different opinions, where differences of opinion are tolerated by teachers and where people feel able to express themselves. When students say they experience an open classroom climate, figure 5 shows that they have higher levels of trust, personal and political toleration, higher levels of support for democracy, higher levels of knowledge, a more positive sense of general efficacy and of internal and external political efficacy, higher levels of optimism and ultimately higher intentions to participate in a range of citizenship activities in adulthood.

Figure 5: The positive associations with open classroom climate

	Adult Intentions to participate	Trust	Personal Toleration	Political Toleration	Support For Democracy	Knowledge	General Efficacy	Internal Political Efficacy	External Political Efficacy	Optimism
Open classroom climate	0.10***	0.19***	0.19***	0.23***	0.26***	0.19**	0.20***	0.11***	0.17***	0.25***

Statistical probability: * 0.1, ** 0.05, ***0.01

So, that's the big picture – classrooms full of tolerant, diverse exchanges of opinions tend to be associated with those positive outcomes. I would argue that is a reflection of enacting deliberative principles and it proves the value of aligning our processes and outcomes. This commitment to teach *for* deliberative democracy *through* deliberative democracy produces an alignment between the process of learning and the vision of citizenship that we want to promote. It also provides people with a workable model in which they can practice democratic skills of engagement. Tristan McCowan (2009) has referred to this as a prefigurative form of education, which is just to say

that, even though our society has not yet achieved a model of generalising deliberative principles to our political decision-making structures as a whole, education can provide young people with lived experiences which provide effective insight into what deliberation looks and feels like. This provides them with a foundation from which they can make their own decisions about how to engage with others in a diverse society, as and when the opportunities arise.

Thinking about active citizenship

The third aspect of citizenship education I want to address is active citizenship. In our survey we found this was an area where there were no dramatic changes in student intentions to vote or to participate in a broader range of citizenship activities as adults – the students’ answers remained relatively stable over time. However, there were some important associations between those intentions and certain aspects of school provision (figure 6). Although there is not a gentle incline as there is for the graph of knowledge acquisition over time, where students perceive the school ethos to be very strong, then there is a higher level of intention to vote. This is also positively related to students’ perception of open classroom climate and students reporting they experienced some form of specialist Citizenship provision. The changes for general intentions to participate as citizens are still positive but slightly smaller than the impact on voting intentions. This establishes that the nature of school provision, or at least the student's positive perception of school provision, is associated with increased intentions to participate in democracy.

Figure 6: Factors associated with active citizenship outcomes

	Intention to vote in national elections	Adult Intentions to participate
Student perceived ethos	0.30***	0.03
Curriculum coverage	0.18*	0.04
Open classroom climate	0.44***	0.10***
Citizenship activities	-0.01	0.16***
Citizenship / PSHE	0.66***	0.10***

Statistical probability: * 0.1, ** 0.05, ***0.01

The literature review we conducted also gave us some ideas for thinking about what teachers can do to promote forms of active citizenship in the school rather than just aspiring to have an impact on adult intentions. On the one hand, there is what we call the full cycle of active citizenship, which in English schools might be seen in the GCSE Citizenship Studies curriculum where students identify and research an issue, discuss the options to affect change, develop an action plan to say what they would do in relation to that issue, and then implement their action and reflect on their experience. The literature review showed there was certainly evidence that such projects can improve citizenship outcomes. But, on the other hand, we also found evidence that suggested you can cut this cycle at various points, for example, you can undertake the first four stages (from identifying an issue to justifying a plan) and it can still have a positive measurable impact on students, or you can even just undertake the last two stages by joining an existing action and reflecting on the nature of your experience and the impact of your collective action.

This insight was also reinforced by the work I undertook with a group of twenty teachers to co-construct an active citizenship handbook during a four-day residential (Jerome, 2024). There, teachers also talked about different types of active citizenship projects, including the full active citizenship project (the kind they would do for GCSE classes), but there were also short-term responsive projects (something that you could pick up quickly at the end of a lesson or at the end of a sequence of lessons on a topical issue), there were short partial projects (joining an existing activity that was being promoted by a charity or a campaigning organisation that the students were interested in), and there were long-term school projects (where community partners and ongoing activity would outlast individual students and would be joined by subsequent generations of young people). This has helped us think about how schools can champion different forms of active citizenship and give students different kinds of experience, with a reasonable expectation that each of those can be impactful in its own way.

In another project undertaken with Faiza Hyder and Yaqub Hilal, we worked with one of the exam boards to review 582 pages of exam scripts from students sitting the GCSE Citizenship Studies. We found students were using their citizenship courses to undertake a whole range of types of action (figure 7), so it was operating very effectively as an opportunity for young people to individualise their active citizenship to their own needs and interests.

But we also found a very mixed account of what we are calling a theory of change, with many of the responses failing to justify the method

selected as a way to tackle the particular problem identified. For example, anyone might talk about climate change, but why would using a petition, or going on a march, or raising money be particularly useful in relation to climate change and why would one of those actions be more useful than another? Every one of those 582 students was doing some kind of action, but not everyone was equally clear about the value of the action they had undertaken.

Figure 7: Types of action undertaken for GCSE project

Project Action	Number	%
Advocacy	193	33.2
Direct action	77	13.2
Lobbying others	131	22.5
Fundraising	46	7.9
Research only	56	9.6
Other or unclear	79	13.6
Total	582	100

In this section I have argued that citizenship education does generally achieve a range of positive outcomes. First, it builds factual knowledge, but I have also suggested that we need to go beyond that to attend to how students learn, what constitutes a greater depth of understanding, and we need to work with a broader picture about the epistemic change that we are promoting. Those changes are important because they provide the foundation stones for thinking about the world politically, but also, I believe they provide us with the framework for developing resilience to misinformation, disinformation and online polarization and manipulation. To commit to those epistemic principles is to question the simple exaggerated narratives that are aligned with online polarization, hatred, intolerance and conspiracy theories. I have also suggested that deliberation is a reasonable object of study and a valuable process for the productive study of citizenship issues. And I have suggested that this can secure some important positive citizenship outcomes and help students develop a more sophisticated epistemic framework for thinking about the world politically – one in which differences of perception and political preferences are seen as productive elements to gain deeper understanding. And finally, I have argued that citizenship education can lead to a greater intention to act politically in the world, and that it can provide a powerful experience within school. The evidence tells us that almost any form of project can work, but equally it may fail, and that we need teachers who can pay attention to the underlying political rationale associated with

adopting a certain action in a particular context for a particular purpose. Therefore teaching young people about political literacy and a theory of change is important to understand the role of action and the purpose of political action in a democratic society.

By this stage of the lecture it should be evident that citizenship education can play an important part in shoring up the foundations of democratic citizenship by building knowledge and understanding, by building the skills and capacities for engaging with others to discuss differences of opinion and experiences, to work towards finding resolutions to those conflicts and to explore the meaning of political action. That might sound like it would represent a fairly big challenge to the education system, but in the final part of the lecture, I want to turn for inspiration to some of the teachers whose work I have documented in the last few years.

(4) Learning from experienced teachers

In this final section I want to say something about current practices in relation to the 3Cs of Citizenship - the curriculum, the role of the school culture, and the broader role of community activity and participation. My main point is to indicate that we already know what we need to do and there are already expert teachers who we should be looking to for inspiration. Embracing our role as defenders of democracy does not require the profession to devise entirely new models of pedagogy, it simply means finding ways to record, disseminate, and amplify existing practices to ensure all students get access to impactful experiences.

In relation to the curriculum, I want to draw attention to a case study my research team published about the work of Addy and Stanhope School in Deptford in London.¹ Ryan Mason, who is the lead teacher there, pursues what he calls a knowledge-rich curriculum, but, whilst that phrase is often associated with a return to teacher-led direct instruction, he achieves this through discussion, debate, role-play games and creative tasks, as well as more traditional questions and essay writing. He has devised a spiral curriculum in which he revisits core concepts repeatedly through different topics and case studies; and he is committed to the idea that you need to give students more than one experience of a particular idea or a concept to help them acquire the capability to use those ideas to understand the world politically. In year 7 he teaches about local political issues and asks the children to think about how local residents can resolve problems in Deptford, then in year 8 they move on to think about how to run a country

¹ <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/case-study-addey-and-stanhope-school/>

and the impact Westminster has on their lives, and in year 9 they move on to think about the UN and world problems at an international level. Within this shift of scale from local to global there are some consistent themes around power and authority, social change, and the nature of political discussion that feature in every year.

In our case study, Ryan gave some very plain-speaking advice, which I will paraphrase as ‘it’s not easy to run elaborate whole or multi-lesson simulations with groups of 25 to 30 young people at a time, but how do you do it? You plan thoroughly, you prepare the students, you assign them clear roles, you make sure you are ready to live with mistakes and roll with the experience, and finally you reflect on what worked, be honest about what didn’t, talk to the children about it and note the areas that they simply failed to understand and reteach them’. What I find so inspiring about his approach is the pragmatism with which he engages with some fairly sophisticated knowledge and understanding.

In thinking about culture, I want to share some details from the case study we published about Leeds City Academy.² Kelly Allchin, who was the Citizenship lead and has sadly now moved on, focused on building a participative ethos to boost participation and belonging in the school. This stands out for me because obviously this was not suddenly devised and implemented in one academic year, rather she decided the school was not going to rest on its laurels but expand its work year on year until it all started to cohere into a sophisticated, holistic programme of student voice. Their formal provision looks like this:

- The school has a school parliament instead of a school council, which is divided into five departments, each of which has three members of staff associated with it. The departments cover education, health, conduct, economics and community. Two characteristics stand out, first, whilst traditional school councils often have just one or two link teachers, this arrangements involves many more staff, making it more likely that the parliament will have status and recognition; and second, the structure ensures that students will engage with teaching and learning, behaviour, and potentially the budget, all of which are often reserved for adult decision-making, whilst the traditional student council is left to deal with ‘lockers, loos and lunches’ (Whitty & Wisby, 2007).
- Community impact leaders work externally with people from the two local deprived wards. This programme builds a rapport with local

² <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/case-study-leeds-city-academy/>

organisations and undertakes work focused on promoting community cohesion and adopting different forms of social action to tackle the problems of local deprivation.

- Culture and curriculum coaches from key stage 4 work with younger students to help them fit in at the school, regulate their behaviour, and flourish in their subjects.
- Raising aspiration leaders work with staff on career programmes and raising aspirations as young people think about what they're going to do when they leave school at 16.
- They also have a pride group and a women's empowerment group, working on liberatory politics and empowering young LGBT+ and female students to adopt community leadership positions.

What is particularly powerful about this example is that young people find themselves in a school which is saturated with opportunities for participation, where the philosophy of participation is embedded in the fabric of the school. And even students who do not participate will know people who do and will be affected by those opportunities for participation.

The third example I want to mention is Hendon School in London, just around the corner from Middlesex University. There the work is coordinated by Noel Doona (2020), who leads the community organising activities at the school. Students have been trained in the principles of community organising (Alinsky, 1969), such as undertaking listening campaigns, which ensures that when they do embark on a new form of campaigning or direct action, they are informed by the views and needs of people beyond their own small group. They work on school-based initiatives, local community-based action and London-wide and national campaigns. Over the years they have sustained a consistent focus on mental health, including the Stamp Out Stigma (SOS) programme to encourage everyone to reflect on and talk about their mental health. But their work in this area reaches beyond the school and young people have also embarked on work with the local health authority and partnered with local universities, including Middlesex, to run conferences to explore both the nature of mental health and, importantly, mental health as a public policy issue that needs to be funded adequately. At the same time, the school is registering as a school of sanctuary to give a high profile to their commitment to look after the mental health and wellbeing of migrant and refugee children.

Each of these three schools is doing one aspect of citizenship education very well. One is doing a great job of the curriculum, one is developing ground-breaking work in building a democratic culture, and the third is adapting community organising principles to affect policy and

provision. In thinking about how we pull these efforts together, I was struck by another case study we published of the Oakham School, where Viv Lamb leads both on Citizenship in the curriculum and on pastoral provision.³ Here, the school has developed what they call their 'connected curriculum'. All students are encouraged to aspire to achieve high levels in communication, research skills, thinking skills, self-management and social skills and every child has an individual tutorial each year when they review their performance in relation to those five outcomes and then think about what the school offers them in terms of the academic curriculum, extra and co-curricular experiences and the pastoral provision. Children are encouraged to think which one of those outcomes might be a priority for them to work on, and to find some experiences throughout the school that will help them make progress. This is a powerful example of tying together the different aspects of what schools are doing into a simple holistic model that makes it accessible for young people. It presents a way to make personalisation realistic through connecting all of the efforts that are going on in school, and it recognises the educational value of the full breadth of activities undertaken within and through school.

Conclusion

In this lecture I have argued that it is legitimate for teachers to help to defend democracy against our current challenges. And I have sought to show that, if they do so, there are plenty of things they can do that could be reasonably expected to have a positive impact. Further, I have argued that there is no need to reinvent the wheel, because there are plenty of examples that we have already started to document which could inspire others to think about how they could develop their own local practices to promote democracy. I have also suggested that in this effort it is useful to grant teachers a degree of autonomy. National policy alone cannot provide a sufficient solution, because we need teachers to translate these general principles into specific lessons, activities and projects that reflect the experiences and needs of their students and families. I would sooner place my trust in teachers than politicians, and the opinion polling I referred to at the beginning seems to suggest that the vast majority of the population would agree. The next challenge is to continue to support teachers to develop their practice, to build collaborative projects to record and share their work, and to do this in ways which embody the democratic principles we seek to promote.

³ <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/case-study-oakham-school/>

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