



Changing Communities: recognising schools as sites of transformation

Briefing note for Five Nations Conference 2019, Lee Jerome l.jerome@mdx.ac.uk

The ambition of this conference is not only to re-visit some of the practical issues related to ‘active citizenship’ pedagogy, but rather to think more broadly about schools as social institutions, and teachers as members of those institutions, and thus to conceive of teachers as civic actors in their own right. On this view, our teaching should be perceived as part of our own political activity – our engagement with colleagues, students and parents is part of the civic life of our communities. We often speak of the 3Cs of citizenship education, and this approach takes the *culture* of the school and its *community* links as the starting points, rather than the *curriculum*, which is often prioritised.

1. Schools, change and the status quo

Schools do not simply prepare students for the future, they are sites for real experiences in the present. Education policy is not neutral, it constructs us (as teachers), our students, their parents and the learning process in particular ways. These policy constructions reflect particular political perspectives, some of which may be at odds with our own values and beliefs about citizenship, and some of which may be at odds with the generally held beliefs and values of the profession. It is not the role of a responsible teacher simply to implement policy without question. Policy needs to be engaged with critically, interpreted, prioritised, and enacted in ways which align with our broader sense of purpose about politics and political education. No education policy has an impact independent of the mediating effects of teachers. Therefore, we need to consider our potential agency in nurturing educational values and practices we believe in ([Fullan, 1993](#)). If policy is increasingly about test scores, employability and individual accountability, how can we re-imagine those policies within the broader context of holistic, humanistic and collectivist education? [Barnes and Prior \(2009\)](#) have argued that public service workers have a duty to be ‘subversive citizens’.

2. Schools as institutions within communities

Schools employ a lot of people and therefore have a direct impact on the local economy. Schools also enable a lot more people to go to work, knowing their children are well-looked after, therefore having an even greater impact on the local economy. Schools also use resources, source food, use local services, provide accommodation for local community groups and respond to local needs. In many local areas schools may well be the biggest single institution having an impact on the local environment, community safety, and civic life. This is not what schools are primarily *for* but it is an inevitable consequence of schools existing. Therefore, teachers, as members of the school institution, play a part in this civic life of the institution, including choices the school makes about employing local people on fair wages, sourcing local food, setting up local partnerships to tackle social problems (parenting support; healthy eating; re-training opportunities; adult literacy; community cohesion), using green energy, reducing waste and recycling, sharing resources such as school facilities with the wider community etc. If schools take seriously the decisions they make about their own processes and their impact on individuals, they can model responsible corporate citizenship, and involve students and community members in those decisions.

3. Learning and activism

All good activism includes processes for learning. Activists have to learn about the problems they want to address, the causes, and possible solutions, and the various actors and institutions that will be involved. They also have to learn about their contexts, partners and fellow activists – their motivations, experiences and capacity for engagement. They also have to be able to reflect on experiences and learn lessons about how to improve and continue their struggle ([Choudry \(2015\)](#)). This means that schools should be justified in embracing community activism as valuable opportunities for political education. It also means schools and politically engaged teachers have a potential role to play in sustaining local activism. Why, for example, do students often have to invent their own campaigns to undertake, when there are interesting and real campaigns already running in the community, and how can teachers work with those activists to bring their insights and expertise into the classroom? The traditional Amnesty School Group is an example of using student interest and time to undertake tasks that only make sense in the broader context of on-going international activist networks. [Jamie Kelsey-Fry \(2012\)](#) addresses this in relation to how students can learn from the Occupy Movement.

4. Community organising and schools

The tradition of community organising, promoted by organisations such as [Citizens UK](#), provides a valuable example of how political action and learning can be embedded in local communities. Community organising is based on a model of community members coming together to pool resources and knowledge to address local problems. Members receive training in politics and power, the principles and processes of political organisation, and the practicalities of engaging with other members of the community. Citizens UK operates by recruiting organisations to sign up to [local chapters](#). Such organisations typically include churches and other religious institutions, residents' associations, local businesses, and a range of community groups. Many chapters also include local schools, colleges and universities which have exactly the same status as other community members within these networks. This means teachers and students have access to the training programmes offered by community organising groups, and it also means that teachers and students sign up to engage in those collaborative political activities which are undertaken in the local neighbourhood. In these schools, students and staff learn alongside each other as citizens and as citizen leaders.

5. Community organising and schools as objects of action

On occasion the school may find itself the object of attention by community organising partners where they feel the school needs to address problems or provide better services. For example [Warren and Mapp \(2011\)](#) describe examples of parents in poor American communities setting up schemes to ensure local schools nurture and recruit teachers from the local community, in response to recruitment crises in urban schools. In the UK there are examples of local environmental groups raising funds to install solar panels on the roofs of schools, to promote sustainable energy and help with school budgets (see [EN10ERGY](#)).

6. Teachers as organic intellectuals

[Gramsci](#) argued that, whilst teachers might like to imagine they are independent of government, in reality they often serve to perpetuate 'common sense' assumptions about how the world works, which tend to reflect the interests of those who benefit from social inequality. He argued that genuinely aligning our work with local communities and organisations can enable the teacher to become a more organic element of the struggle for social justice. On this reading, fulfilling our professional ambitions cannot be fully understood outside of the community context in which we are working.

7. Real-world engagement, real-world learning, real-world impact

One of the purposes of this conference is therefore to revisit the notion that citizenship education is not just about preparing for future citizenship, rather it can be achieved through citizenship experiences in the here and now both within the curriculum and as part of school culture and life in the community. It seems at least to be inefficient if we aim to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they may call upon later in life whilst ignoring their (and our) actual lived experience as citizens in the community. Young people are increasingly aware of the environmental challenge we face and they play an active role as consumers, recyclers, polluters and also as activists ([Grover, 2018](#)). Young people also experience the social and economic inequality that persists in our society – some lead affluent comfortable lives, whilst others experience poverty and hardship directly. As such, young people are citizens who are directly influenced by these broader political and social factors and who have agency to address these problems. It seems strange therefore to bypass these real lived experiences in order to teach some abstract, textbook, or simulated version of citizenship. We hope this conference will provide participants with an opportunity to revisit their assumptions about how citizenship education connects with their own experience as citizen-teachers and with their students' experiences as citizen-students.