

Why I give a Cit[izenship]

Earlier this week, I was facilitating a debate with my year 10 GCSE class on whether the UK should hold a second referendum on leaving the EU and it hit me once again. These are 14- and 15-year olds. Children. Informed, educated and opinionated children, but children all the same.

This got me thinking about my own secondary education. I loved school and have vague memories of exploring social inequality in English, I also have fond memories of debating ethical issues in RE. But never was I given the opportunity to learn about and discuss political issues, I wasn't aware of Human Rights and law was still quite an abstract concept. None of these concepts had any relation to my life, or so I thought.

Even so, throughout school, college and then university I had a real desire to fight for what I perceived as 'the right thing'. I had a strong moral compass (that has naturally spun and repositioned as I've got older and gained more life experience) and that's the thing, children and young people have an innate ability to make perceptions about the world in which they live. This desire should be harnessed and practiced so that they too can make sense of the world around them and become active citizens within their communities.

I was first eligible to vote in the 2001 election, I can remember seeing Tony Blair on the cover of newspapers and can remember a few years further back, singing to D-Ream 'Things Can Only Get Better' but that's about it. I wasn't aware of my Prime Minister's political stance, I had no idea about his opposition and what they stood for. I didn't read any manifestos, watch any party-political broadcasts and as a result, didn't vote. Did not vote. The not quite, but almost, 40-year-old in me wants to travel back to 2001 and drag the 20 something me to the polling station, but honestly, it would have been in vain. The thing was, politics felt so far removed to the life I was living. It wasn't something that was discussed in my household, debated in my friendship group or referred to at school. What a missed opportunity!

This is why developing political literacy in children and young people is so important, they need time to become practiced in listening to opposing views, asking difficult questions, identifying bias and picking apart manifestos. So that they have the skills needed to fully take part in the democratic process of their country to whatever extent they wish.

Democracy is so much more than simply being able to vote. It's about freedom of information, to express an opinion, to have access to the news and debate freely without fear of ridicule and discrimination. Yes, we have an electoral system whereby most adults can vote, but we also have low voting turnouts and high levels of apathy. We are a country that floods our media channels with party political hyperbole, but still has huge inconsistencies in how we equip children and young people with political knowledge and understanding.

A sound citizenship curriculum in every school, taught by passionate and informed staff, is what is needed to ensure that every student has access to up to date, non-

biased political education. School is not just a place where students learn to read and write, it's where they learn about their place in the world, develop opinions and form the building blocks of the adult they will later become. If we want our young people to be informed and politically minded, we need to nurture and support this, just as we would with any other skill.

I am open with my classes about my complete lack of political knowledge as a young person/adult. They are truly shocked by this. I take great pleasure in telling them that they have more political awareness now, as children, than I did as a 20-year-old. I hope to make them see that their fundamental political rights are a privilege to be respected and honoured and I am hugely confident that they will not only vote as soon as they can legally do so but will also try to be globally aware and speak out against inequality.

I have worked hard to remain impartial with my political beliefs in front of my students; I never tell them the way I vote or the party I support, as I want them to form their own opinions using the resources and information available to them. When listening to them debate I can spot some students that have very similar political views to myself, I can also see that others have very different views that certainly lean towards an opposing political stance and will potentially lead them to vote in a different way to myself. But honestly, both groups of students make me feel equally proud, happy and excited about the future of this country, because they hold a view. They understand politics. They care.

Citizenship education, when utilised and respected in the context in which it was created is a hugely valuable tool. It's something I wish I had had access to as a teenager and something that I feel tremendously lucky to teach to my remarkable, opinionated and mature students every day.