

## Feature

Lee Jerome is Associate Professor of Education at Middlesex University. He is also a member of ACT Council and co-edits Teaching Citizenship. He can be contacted at [l.jerome@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:l.jerome@mdx.ac.uk).



# Developing Conceptual Knowledge in Citizenship Education (I): Thinking About Power

Lee Jerome

In this article **Lee Jerome** considers what counts as progression in knowledge and understanding. Taking the concept of 'power' as a starting point he analyses students' responses to a problem to consider what counts as a more sophisticated answer and what seems to constitute that judgement of quality. This provides some insights into how we might plan for deep subject knowledge development

## Introduction

Some commentators have observed that 'Citizenship is a subject and more than a subject' but, without an adequate account of the knowledge at the core of citizenship education, it appears as somewhat less than a subject in a school curriculum full of other subjects which have longer traditions and clearer boundaries. In comparable curriculum areas researchers have established ways of describing the conceptual knowledge at the heart of their subject and the complex ways in which children engage with that content and build their own knowledge base, but this is relatively undeveloped in citizenship education. This research aims to address this gap and to contribute to the development of a richer professional conversation about the nature of Citizenship learning in schools. By identifying core concepts and analysing children's work from primary through to tertiary education, the research aims to provide an insight into how children learn that is currently lacking.

## Thinking about knowledge

One of the distinguishing features of modern citizenship education (compared to the older tradition of civics) is our focus on engaging with the real world to develop the skills for political action. This has led to the development of a distinctive citizenship pedagogy, which features investigation, debate and real-world experience of active citizenship. However, the overall ambition

“  
**Citizenship is a subject and more than a subject' but, without an adequate account of the knowledge at the core of citizenship education, it appears as somewhat less than a subject in a school curriculum full of other subjects which have longer traditions and clearer boundaries.**

”

to develop critical thinkers capable of informed action also requires that young people have some foundational ideas which can be used to build a critique, and have some knowledge to ensure their plans for action are informed by an understanding of how politics works and how one might decide on one course of action over another. In short, I worry that we have tended to marginalise the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, either assuming it will somehow emerge from participating in exciting experiences, or that it can be delivered in small bite-sized chunks at the moment when it is needed. I think something like this emerged from Crick's older model of 'political literacy' which seems to adopt a 'just in time' model of knowledge, in which knowledge of institutions and processes can be learned as one needs it. My concern is that knowledge does not really work like this – in many ways, we need a level of political understanding to even see a problem as a political issue, and ideas for citizen action may well emerge from our political knowledge, rather than from immediate circumstances. I have observed classes in which children brainstorm an array of possible actions they could take to tackle a problem, but the lack of knowledge makes it very difficult for them to think realistically about what causes the problem (and therefore what might constitute a reasonable remedy) and how this area is affected by legislation and government institutions (and they therefore

# Feature

## Developing Conceptual Knowledge in Citizenship Education (I): Thinking About Power

struggle to identify an action that might work). This has led me recently to re-focus on what knowledge is required for effective citizenship, and what we know about how to teach that knowledge to children and young people.

There are at least two ways to promote knowledge. Firstly, E.D. Hirsch (1987) lists thousands of essential facts which he feels are necessary for 'cultural literacy' and these lists form the basis of a 'Core Knowledge Curriculum'. This reasoning influenced the recent revisions to the national curriculum in England. But a second approach, reflected in the work of Shulman (1986), attempts to think a bit more deeply about what we mean by 'subject knowledge' and helps us to explain that there are different levels of content. On the surface, there are the facts and ideas that fill our lessons, for example, who is the local MP? What do they do? How are laws passed? At a deeper level, there are core concepts that we re-visit over time and which provide a valuable bank of ideas through which we can understand the world, examples of concepts in citizenship include power, government, the rule of law, rights etc. The difference between these levels is important – the facts can be learned easily, committed to memory and tested, but those deeper concepts take time and are more difficult to assess. However, those concepts are ultimately much more flexible and useful. And finally, Shulman argues, there is an even deeper level of understanding which enables us to understand what is distinctive about different disciplinary lenses on the world. This means we can distinguish between knowledge of global warming in science, RE or citizenship. That is to say, we can understand global warming scientifically, spiritually or politically. This level of understanding helps students to understand what makes a good citizenship question and what kind of answer one might expect.

When Citizenship was introduced into the curriculum, Davies (2003) set out to establish procedural concepts for Citizenship, which tackle that third level of subject knowledge (how does one 'do' citizenship?) but he has not pursued this work and it remains more of a suggestion than a fully developed model. Rowe's (2005) research comes closest to the concerns of this project. He asked children to respond to a political problem and then analysed their answers to describe the ways in which their thinking could be said to be more or less developed. This work is interesting but it does not engage with conceptual knowledge

per se, remaining instead at a more general level of defining different levels of 'political literacy'. In this small research project I was interested in how children understood and used the concept of power (and therefore how knowledge about power might enrich their engagement with this concept) in the context of an activity about their own possible power to affect a situation. In the rest of this article I share some of the findings.

### Methods

The data for this article were collected from Ireland (40 students) and Northern Ireland (80 students) and focused on the concept of power as a key issue in any Citizenship programme. A series of accessible tasks was developed which could be completed by children at the end of primary school (10-11 years of age) and older children (up to 18 years of age). The tasks were designed as a stimulus to enable the participants to demonstrate their understanding of the concept. All the activities were completed in class time (generally during an hour lesson) and each respondent had their own hard copy of the activity pack to complete.

The activities started by asking students to think about who has power in their school, and then moved on to consider a specific scenario: Imagine your school has been invited to sell half of the playground or playing fields to a company that wants to build a block of flats on the land. Students were asked who they felt would have the power to decide what happens, who should have power, and then what actions they could take to pursue their preferred outcome.



**I worry that we have tended to marginalise the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, either assuming it will somehow emerge from participating in exciting experiences, or that it can be delivered in small bite-sized chunks at the moment when it is needed.**



### Findings

In presenting the following analysis I have ordered the categories of response in a broadly progressive order, starting with the simpler and more basic responses and building towards increasingly sophisticated types of response. As the data does not track the same children over time, I cannot suggest that this series of steps describes individuals' development. Rather it is offered as a tool that might help teachers to think about the different ways in which children engage with the concept of power and in particular with the idea of citizens' power to undertake action and influence decisions. The purpose of these definitions is therefore to encourage teachers to reflect on the nature of their students' understanding and to think about what other aspects might be helpfully addressed to further develop this.

### 1. Pre-political thinking

Many of the younger children's responses re-defined the problem of other actors' motivations as simply a lack of knowledge about the situation. This enabled them to side-step the political nature of the problem by failing to acknowledge the situation as one in which there is a confrontation between people with different interests. Typically children responding in this category tended to assume that simply by vocalising their own preferences, this problem could be resolved. This was exemplified in comments such as "surely they can't [proceed with the building] once they know" (Secondary student) and it follows from this stance that action can be restricted to simply expressing one's view clearly, for example "tell them what we use it for, maybe it will change their minds" (Primary student).

For some older students, the pre-political nature of their reasoning could sometimes be masked by a superficial veneer of citizenship knowledge, for example one student suggested an organised student occupation of the field, but his reasoning was "to show the builders how good we are (at) sport" (Secondary student). Whilst this student's motivation might require some further investigation, I think this kind of response assumes that if the builders knew the fields had been put to good use, they would withdraw their attempt to develop the land. This continues to avoid acknowledging that others have different interests.

Other responses in this category assume the whole problem can be avoided by some alternative means, for example one student suggested the solution was to "find them a nice piece of land that nobody owns so they don't buy our land" (Primary student). This acknowledges the developers have different interests, but it is nevertheless pre-political in the sense that it continues to sidestep the conflict of interests.

### 2. Vicarious action

Some students preferred to defer to others who might represent their interests and take the appropriate action, for example "Talk to the teachers about this, they could help you with stuff" (Primary student) and "Beg the governor to tell them to go away" (Primary student). Similar thinking is also evident among some of the older students' responses, for example one argued that students should "write a letter to the Principal / Board of Governors on behalf of pupils" in order to ensure "the senior staff will be alerted to the students' opposition" (FE student). These examples are still essentially pre-political because they tend to assume the mere act of talking or requesting will result in the desired actions or outcomes, although they recognise that there are powerful people who have more influence.

### 3a Direct actions (politically naïve)

In the third category answers acknowledge the reality of different perceptions of the situation and different motivations, and therefore engage politically with the problem as a clash of interest. Some of the responses drew on children's direct experiences of getting their own way: "Shout and scream;" "Do cutesy eyes;" "I would pretend to cry;" and the ominous "Annoy them till they crack" (Primary students). There is no doubt that for a ten year old, these direct actions may well be tried and tested methods for securing the desired outcome from adults who ostensibly have more power. These children also exercise a more purposeful agency than we have seen in the first two categories. They know how to achieve change in a direct interpersonal exchange, although they do not draw on any established knowledge about citizenship and politics in order to do so. They are also limited by demonstrating thinking which only makes sense in the context of direct one to one relationships. Unlike parents, building developers can simply walk away!

# Feature

## Developing Conceptual Knowledge in Citizenship Education (I): Thinking About Power

### 3b Direct actions (politically literate)

Many of the respondents, especially in secondary school, were able to make more overtly political recommendations for action which were more grounded in an understanding of the context. Some

of these represented a more direct form of action to disrupt the plans of others, for example one student suggested “Chain myself to the fence” (Primary student), whilst another argued they could “Camp on the fields to block the builders” (Secondary student). These are building on traditions of direct action, and what distinguishes them from the politically naïve action is that they are indeed likely to have some effect. Blocking access by putting oneself at risk is likely to stop the builders, at least temporarily.

Other types of response that might be classified as politically literate action include petitions and letter writing that move beyond the simple assertion that these will clear up misunderstandings (category 1) or that others will automatically do as requested (category 2). One student proposed writing letters to governors, because “if enough people wrote... in a sense they would have to listen” (Secondary student). This indicates that students’ power is represented by their numbers, rather than their individual voices, and this reflects a significant advance in understanding power in a democracy. Simply put, whilst a governor may officially have more power than a student, all the students standing together may have more effective power than the governors in a specific situation, despite the power officially invested in their role.

### 4. Chains of influence

Responses in the final category more completely acknowledge that others have their own reasons for pursuing courses of action; therefore action can be taken to change other actors’ calculation of the benefits to accrue from a situation. One of the most sophisticated answers was: “Protest – start petitions, rallies and public outcry... that would gain media attention. Negative media attention could affect the school’s image negatively and may cause them to cancel the decision so as not to harm it further. Also it would encourage others who are not connected to school to protest and there is power in numbers” (FE student). Similarly another student suggested they could “Complain to governors and threaten to strike... there would be a lot of negative attention from the media and this would be bad for the board and the school reputation and so the governors do not want this to happen” (Secondary student). These responses demonstrate an even more sophisticated understanding of what I refer to as chains of influence. This can be demonstrated by laying out the indirect chain of influence proposed in these answers:

- **Identify the powerful decision-makers e.g. the school governors.**
- **Identify the key interests of those decision-makers e.g. the governors’ primary interest will be to protect the reputation of the school.**
- **Identify a factor that would affect those key interests e.g. negative media attention would threaten the school’s reputation.**
- **Identify an action that would affect this factor in your favour e.g. a strike or public protest would be likely to gain media coverage.**

Many older students continued to offer answers which, whilst more extended and better written, essentially avoided the political nature of conflict or simply passed the buck to other more 'powerful' people. Similarly, some of the younger students hinted at a more sophisticated understanding of why an action might be useful. This reflects Lee and Ashby's work (1987) in history, where they saw some children in primary school exhibiting conceptual understanding typical of much older students, and a few older students who still exhibited levels of understanding more typical of primary pupils. In other words, a child's level of understanding is not merely a reflection of their age.

### **Conclusion - teaching about power and agency**

Ultimately I would suggest a citizen undertaking any form of protest or direct action will need some viable model of how and why this is likely to result in the desired outcome, in the given context. This is what I think constitutes a politically literate response, and it is the reasoning revealed in such judgements that demonstrates the depth of understanding of their Citizenship learning. And that demands a developed and nuanced understanding of power and its application. Two of the key issues which seem to help here are an awareness of the different bases of power and the specific motivations and interests of actors in a particular context. In relation to the former, a relatively small number of our respondents noted that power could derive from (i) one's role in an organisation (bureaucratic power), (ii) from an individual's qualities (charismatic power), (iii) through control of resources (economic power), or (iv) through a number of people coming together (democratic power). Understanding the various bases of power enabled students to suggest and explain a richer range of strategies which explored extended chains of influence and coalition building. This is subject knowledge that can be taught in lessons. In addition, this knowledge also enabled some students to start to think about influencing people in this particular context, rather than simply asserting generic one size fits all types of response (such as asking someone to do what you want, or having a vote). This demonstrates that having a better understanding of the concept of power can also help students make more sense of a concrete problem and devise a more informed suggestion for action.

It seems to me that operating with some definition of power and some sense of what progression might look like, would enable teachers to plan for increasing sophistication in children's understanding of such core concepts. This initial small project is offered in the hope that it might provide a useful tool to inform such planning and teaching. In the next edition I will share some of the results relating to the concept of rights. If any

readers would like to pursue similar work to explore the nature of conceptual learning, I would be happy to talk about ways in which this approach could be developed.

### **Acknowledgements**

This is the first of two reports on a research project funded by the Five Nations Network and SCOTENS. This research was undertaken with John Lalor from Dublin City University. The author would like to thank these organisations for their support and the teachers who gave us access to their classrooms and the young people who gave up their time to complete the tasks.

### **References**

- Davies, I. (2003) What subject knowledge is needed to teach citizenship education? How can we work with student teachers in order to monitor and promote their subject knowledge? Available on-line at: [http://www.citized.info/pdf/commarticles/Ian\\_Davies2.pdf](http://www.citized.info/pdf/commarticles/Ian_Davies2.pdf)
- Hirsch, E.D (1987) Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Lee, P. J. and Ashby, R. (1987) Children's concepts of empathy and understanding in history, in C. Portal (ed.) The History Curriculum for Teachers. Lewes: Falmer.
- Rowe, D, (2005) The Development of Political Thinking in School Students: an English Perspective, International Journal of Citizenship and Teacher Education, 1 (1), 97-110.
- Shulman, L. (1986) 'Those Who Understand': Knowledge Growth in Teaching. Educational Researcher, 15 (2): 4-14.