This paper is taken from

Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2012

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Jerome, L. & Bhargava, M. (2012) 'Power, politics and pedagogy: Community organising and citizenship education', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 277 - 285.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Power, politics and pedagogy: Community organising and citizenship education

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Abstract

In this paper we explore how student teachers' participation in grassroots community organising groups may help to enhance teacher education programmes for Citizenship. In order to do this, we draw from the experiences and research projects of seven student teachers who participated in a community organising group and produced assignments related to critical analysis of their participation. In order to address the central question, we analyse the students' assignments, identifying key assumptions that underpin their accounts of their work, and examine the insights they gained into the nature of facilitating active citizenship through school-based citizenship education programmes. We conclude by identifying an agenda for us as teacher educators to ensure such experiences can be used most effectively.

Keywords: *citizenship education, initial teacher education, community education, active citizenship*

1. Alinsky, Shoreditch Citizens and public policy in the UK

1.1 Alinsky's Model of Democratic Participation

Saul Alinsky (1902-1972) developed his model of community organising primarily in Chicago during the 1930s. Alinksy's model has been influential in the development of community organising in the United States, with his training institute the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) becoming one of the key organising networks in the US (Warren & Mapp, 2011; p.16). Alinsky's model of community organisation is based on attempting to empower working-class people, through developing their collective capacity to effect change. This is achieved through the building of 'People's Organisations'; essentially networks of local and faith based groups that respond to common issues through varying forms of action.

Alinsky's model can be seen to embody some key principles, broadly summarised as:

- Developing, over time, a more direct form of democracy, that facilitates the participation of the masses in decision making and real power
- Requiring groups to identify issues, solutions and possible changes in an on-going process of dialogue, cross-community participation in endeavours to bring about change
- Requiring 'native leadership', drawn from across the different groups represented, but guided by the will of the people

- Requiring effective (and somewhat professional) community organisers that could support and guide communities in establishing 'People's Organisations' that could mobilise a mass of people and encourage ever growing participation by people. Effective power would flow from strength in numbers.

Through community organising, Alinsky saw benefits for the poor and wider society alike. Community organising would develop the skills of democratic participation that Alinsky saw as an important end in itself, irrespective of the issues that may affect communities in different ways:

> *After all, the real democratic program is a democratically minded people* – a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and interest, become informed, educated and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men and the future.
> (Alinsky, 1969; p.55. Author's italics)

Developing political literacy through mass participation could be motivating and intellectually, socially and economically rewarding. Alinsky argued that People's Organisations should become a 'medium' of what could be seen as a political education, but this situation could only be achieved if people could see the relevance of learning about the issues in the context of their own lives (Alinsky, 1969; p.165). Political literacy should be achieved through doing and would develop a cycle of knowledge, skills and dispositional development that would help communities to achieve power and change.

1.2 Shoreditch Citizens

Shoreditch is a small area in north London, which has high rates of unemployment, poor housing, child poverty and crime, and low rates of educational achievement. In recent years the cheap housing stock and commercial space, coupled with the area's proximity to the City of London, has led to a rapid growth in bars, restaurants and boutique shops. This has not solved the social problems for local families, and although the influx of new money has led to a degree of gentrification and business investment, this often seems to have happened around the established community rather than with them or for them.

Shoreditch Citizens was founded in 2010 and is part of Citizens UK; a national network of community organisations based upon the Alinskyite model. Shoreditch Citizens have trained community leaders from each of its member organisations to organise a series of campaigns to improve the local area in areas such as poor housing, crime and unemployment. The Teacher Education Department at London Metropolitan University joined as a member organisation and has participated in the following activities:

- Staff attended local organisation meetings and public assembly meetings
- Members of staff and students were trained as community leaders
- Staff and students joined actions / meetings to work on specific campaigns
- Staff worked alongside local schools to develop related programmes
- Student teachers were placed in Shoreditch schools to work with pupils

- Teachers from Shoreditch Citizens schools have made contributions to the teacher education lecture programme at the university.

This strand of activity connects with the university's broader commitment to develop a 'Rights Respecting' teacher education programme, with partners including Amnesty and UNICEF.

1.3 Community organising and national policy

The Alinskyite model of organising has attracted recent attention in the UK as a result of the Conservative-led government's 'Big Society' project, in which the Conservatives committed themselves to the development of neighbourhood based community organising (Conservative Party, 2010). Consequently, the government have funded the training of 5000 community organisers; founded the 'Big Society Bank' for funding specific community projects and established an optional 'National Citizens Service' for 16-19 year olds.

A positive interpretation of the 'Big Society' is that it is designed to reinvigorate civic participation and community building by people. More negative interpretations suggest that the policy is simply being used as a cover for cuts and for a major scaling back of the state, with voluntary groups taking over responsibility for formerly publically funded provision

2. Student Teacher Research Outline

As part of their Initial Teacher Education programme at London Metropolitan University, student teachers complete an academic assignment focusing on contemporary educational issues. This assignment requires students to engage with literature around policy, to conduct primary field research into the policy and to use that to draw insightful conclusions relating to practice.

A small number of student teachers on the Citizenship initial teacher education (PGCE) course joined Shoreditch Citizens, along with their tutors, and received training in community leadership. Having interrogated and analysed relevant pedagogical and policy literature around community organising, the group then engaged in primary research through a case study based on planning and delivering workshops in student leadership, advocacy and campaigning in two Shoreditch Citizens member schools. The schools were located in different parts of the Shoreditch area and were of a different structure. The first, school A, was a girls' 11-18 school that delivered a wider 'life skills' programme once a fortnight, with no Citizenship teachers. The second, school B, was a mixed-gender 11-16 school, with elements of provision integrated with Humanities at 11-13 and discrete Citizenship lessons from 13-16. The school has one recently trained Citizenship teacher.

3. Discussion of Findings

We were struck by how the student teachers' assignments exemplified the variety of ways in which a deep understanding of politics and political literacy informed their reflections on their professional practice. In England there has been an emphasis in secondary teacher education on subject knowledge. This has been defined by official agencies as subject knowledge per se (i.e. the history teacher's knowledge of history, the chemistry teacher's chemistry knowledge) and subject knowledge for teaching (i.e. the key concepts in the curriculum and the pedagogic traditions within subject communities). In our analysis of the assignments we noted how the student teachers drew on their own political literacy in several ways:

1. To enable them to understand their role in relation to policy, and thus to articulate their curriculum expertise in relation to fluid contemporary policy initiatives;
2. To enable them to articulate their commitment to the subject of Citizenship within a broader commitment to promoting democracy;
3. To reflect on the institutional and structural dimension to promoting effective citizenship education.

Our discussion below illustrates the ways in which student teachers discussed these themes, and exemplifies the impact of deep subject expertise.

3.1 Using their political literacy to understand citizenship policy and the position of citizenship teachers as policy actors

The student teachers were able to discuss their subject immediately in relation to the policy of the 'Big Society', relating it to existing ideas for renewing citizenship in the UK:

It could be said that for the Big Society to succeed at a local level, then Citizenship Education would be vital. Not only does the Big Society have links with Active Citizenship, but it can also be said to have links to the concept of community cohesion, which is part of one of the key concepts on the Citizenship Programme of Study (David).

However, the students' responses were not entirely opportunistic, seizing the policy as a justification for their subject. They were also able to engage critically, identifying the possibility that the Big Society could be '...merely a tokenistic promotion of communitarian visions... [which] may fall short of its ambitious aims to transform people to change their society' (Charlotte).

Charlotte pointed out that the government's advocacy of the Big Society in the place of Big Government, may be a cover for cuts. However, these critical engagements with the policy context went beyond mere scepticism that a centre-right party would genuinely embrace communitarian ideas, and students explored the ideas embodied in the notion of the Big Society in further detail. Charlotte discussed a recent book by a Conservative MP Jesse Norman (Norman, 2010) which attempted to identify a Conservative philosophical tradition in which the Big Society could be rooted. She cited Edmund

Burke's description of the "little platoons" in society, who maintain an ordered civil society, and related this idea to the community and faith groups she had encountered through Shoreditch Citizens. This was valuable in that it showed how confidently she was able to use competing philosophical accounts of her experiences to explore the complementary dimensions within what are often seen as contrasting philosophical traditions (in this case contrasting Burke and Alinsky and finding common ground).

Such comparisons were also useful to the students in helping them to articulate the tensions in such free and easy borrowing across political beliefs, and this exploration of tensions led the students to discuss the difference between conceptions of the 'good' citizen and the 'active' citizen. This reflects a distinction introduced by Crick (2000), who was influential in establishing citizenship education in England. Echoing his analysis, the students frequently argued that the Conservative interpretation tended towards notions of the 'good' citizen, with an expectation of social conformity, personal responsibility, philanthropy and charity in one's local community. There was an understanding that the Alinsky tradition embraced a much more radical model of 'active' citizenship, in which the more overt focus on power and leadership could "potentially create a powerful political movement that could challenge the state" (Charlotte). This was a recurrent theme in the assignments, as the student teachers advocated a "transformational" (Bhargava, 2005) approach to citizenship education in which it is not enough for young people to participate – they should also be "aware of the political significance of their engagement with their local communities" (Charlotte). In clarifying this distinction David argued for a transformational model of genuine active citizenship, informed by Freire (arguing against the banking model of education), Alinsky (arguing for community action rooted in real-life problem solving) and Hart (arguing against tokenistic forms of participation) and contrasted this with Cameron's Big Society where "simply giving people the chance to volunteer and 'do good' is not sufficient" (David).

We believe the assignments produced by these student teachers illustrate how they are engaging seriously with contemporary Citizenship policy, and trying to find interpretations which are compatible with their developing sense of identity as subject specialists. One has the distinct impression that being a Citizenship teacher, committed to a transformational and maximal notion of Citizenship, provides them with a lens through which to interpret policy. The student teachers are arguably engaging in critical reinterpretations and re-representations of policy to maintain a coherent sense of themselves as Citizenship education professionals.

3.2 Using their political literacy to articulate their commitment to the subject of citizenship within a broader commitment to promoting democracy

The critical discussion of the policy context within which these student teachers were working demonstrates that they were able to relate the policy to their chosen profession. It also demonstrates their ability to ground their subject and their own identity as teachers within a broader understanding of the nature of democratic politics. Rachel, for example, picks up the argument about the nature of the Big Society amounting to little more than de-politicised volunteerism, and links this back to the role of the Citizenship educator, which, she argues must amount to more than this. Charlotte explores this a

little more by reflecting on how Citizenship can be learned through 'civic engagement based on the principle of experiential learning, where learning is focused not just on the experience of volunteering, but structured around the reflections on this service learning'.

Here one can see how these student teachers are beginning to clarify their thinking about the relationship between the ends (enhanced democracy) and the means (experiential learning) and seeking a model in which the two are aligned. The relationship between experience and learning is also illustrated in David's work, where he wrote at length about involvement in a direct form of action with Shoreditch Citizens' action. David reflected on this as a positive example of Shoreditch Citizens setting manageable and achievable goals which enabled participants to achieve some short term success, and he also reflected on how that contributed to a "feeling of power and community cohesion." This exemplifies for us how valuable the experiential dimension to this project was for the student teachers. David had already spoken about community cohesion as a curriculum concept, but here he was able to say what it *felt* like to experience it, and later to discuss how he could transfer this learning to his own teaching. In his conclusions he returned to the discussion about feelings, and asserted how important it was that his students "*feel* they had some ownership over the project."

These practical experiences also enabled the student teachers to reflect on the kinds of strategies that might form part of an education programme for active citizenship. David argued for an appropriation of the London Citizens training model by Citizenship teachers when developing active citizenship with students, while Charlotte identified some of the processes to be taught, reflecting on Alinsky as a source. This included the use of small 'stunts' to maintain pressure; using a variety of tactics to keep attention; fighting local, winnable battles and finding small achievable goals to help increase the motivation of communities.

Here the students are borrowing across from the practices of community organising to the different context of school-based citizenship education. The assumption which allowed them to do so is that the underlying notion of both is that they are intended to promote 'transformational' and active citizenship.

Dean explored the methods advocated by Alinsky in a little more detail, to investigate the implications of his focus on power, and by implication, his focus on those who hold power. He quotes Alinsky in the following extract:

The organiser is to develop skills in the manipulative technique of asking 'loaded questions' designed to elicit particular responses and to steer the organization's decision-making process in the direction which the organizer prefers (Alinsky, 1971)

This highlights a perennial issue in all forms of democratic education, namely the problematic issue of classroom control, and the risk that well-intentioned teachers create the illusion of student control, which results in manipulation and tokenism. Whilst David saw his experiences in school as confirming that those children who 'chose' a project to work on, felt empowered and subsequently were more motivated, Charlotte investigated this a little more and discovered that whilst many children apparently chose a topic for

their project, it was actually within quite tightly defined parameters, which effectively reduced the positive impact associated with choice and motivation. David and Charlotte saw the participants' free choice of issues for attention as a positive dimension to community organisation, which teachers should strive to replicate in their teaching. However, Dean identified this as a problematic area within Alinsky's methodology, and thus argued that this is a clear area where the teacher must reject Alinsky's model, in favour of more genuinely democratic models.

In these assignments, we see signs that these student teachers are engaging in a reflexive process, in which they are willing to reflect critically on the balance between teacher authority and student autonomy in the pursuit of active citizenship education. This is further reinforced by Charlotte's reflection that:

Cameron will have to consider the possibility that people will not desire involvement with their community, and that motivation may have to be cultivated, and competency enhanced to encourage further participation in society. Transformative active projects, where students are politically motivated and empowered, can begin to support a society which fosters this process.

This highlights issues around finding the right balance between the teacher's authority and the learner's autonomy. It also reflects McCowan's (2009) discussion of citizenship education as 'prefigurative' in the sense that it does not create democratic practices in society at large, but it acts as an induction into forms of democratic participation which are better than those generally available in society, and which prefigure a more democratic future (McCowan, 2009). In this sense the teacher is helping to ensure young people feel what it is like to participate in active citizenship projects, in the hope that it will encourage them to seek further opportunities, and enable them to engage with those opportunities when they do arise. This is subtler than simply assuming a direct causal relationship between citizenship education and citizenship as a social practice.

Whilst the thoughts outlined above cover a range of issues, they illustrate our second conclusion that the project provided our student teachers with an opportunity to use their subject knowledge (political literacy) to articulate a clear view of the nature of Citizenship as a school subject. They are able to engage with the complicated and contentious debate about the objectives of citizenship education in a democracy, and to develop constructive approaches towards outlining an appropriate pedagogy.

3.3 Using their political literacy to reflect on the institutional and structural dimension to promoting effective citizenship education.

A final, brief theme to note relates to the student teachers' sense of their practice within schools as complex institutions. We feel that it is important for student teachers, especially those qualifying to teach Citizenship, to understand the broader picture of how schools do and do not promote citizenship education in its broadest sense. A mantra that has accompanied the development of Citizenship in English schools is that it is a "subject and more than a subject" (Hayward & Jerome, 2010) and several authors have addressed the ways in which school processes often undermine the very objectives

promoted in Citizenship classes, for example by marginalising student voice, or promoting tokenistic forms of participation, and especially using young people as 'decoration' during public events. In addition, a large scale evaluation of Citizenship in England's schools has concluded that issues such as timetable time, decisions about the use of high stakes summative exams, and the employment of subject specialists are the biggest determining factors of the success of the subject (Keating et al., 2010). This implies that new teachers need to understand the whole school dimension if they are going to genuinely promote high quality citizenship education.

In fact they appear to add a political dimension to this awareness by using the language of current policy in order to add weight to their demands. David argues that if the Prime Minister wants to promote the Big Society then he should become an advocate of specialist Citizenship teachers and timetabled lessons in Citizenship – not an issue one would imagine the Prime Minister grappling with. We conclude therefore that, whilst this does not emerge as a major preoccupation in any of the assignments, there is some evidence that the students are aware of this third political dimension to understanding citizenship education.

The assignments indicated critical awareness of the intrinsic link between managerial decisions over curriculum provision and the impact on pedagogy and outcomes. Rachel highlighted the impact that the lack of curriculum time and subject expertise at School A had on high quality outcomes, suggesting that 'it is difficult to develop and maintain a strategy when they have little interaction and guidance from their teacher'. However, there was also recognition that discrete time for Citizenship did not automatically improve student engagement and outcomes, particularly when pedagogic decisions may lead to students being confused about the link between actively participating in society and Citizenship. In this regard the student teachers all highlighted and critiqued the use of the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative as a key mechanism for delivering active citizenship in School B:

My fellow researchers shared concerns that the majority of pupils in both workshops were not engaged in YPI and failed to see how it could help them contribute to their community. This could be in part due to the fact that YPI focuses on charity and raising awareness of its importance rather then considering how the skills they are developing could be extended to tackling issues in their community (Rachel).

The student teachers are recognising that effective citizenship education can only be achieved when teachers are able to maximise the links between the practices of actively engaging and the development of essential conceptual and contextual knowledge. This also highlights their understanding that grand policy and curriculum objectives rely ultimately on interpretation by the classroom teacher; itself a process fraught with difficulties.

4. Conclusions

We believe that our student teachers' initial teacher education programme was enhanced by their participation in Shoreditch Citizens in three ways. First, it allowed the student

teachers the opportunity to engage with and explore policy in practice and, crucially, to identify some of the complexities for schools working with community organisations to effect real change for citizens in a locality. Second, it allowed the student teachers to develop their own wider Citizenship subject and pedagogic knowledge, crucially in the area of active citizenship, which we have found to be an on-going challenge. Third, and in an echo of Alinsky's understanding of the empowering and educative role of active participation in society, our student teachers developed their competencies as active citizens; learning both through democracy and their own professional practice.

In looking for an agenda for our future practice, we see three key areas to work on that are interconnected. The first of these is based on the need to ensure all our student teachers are able to participate in the work of Shoreditch Citizens and for us to highlight the significant benefits that might flow for them both as citizens and as professionals. The second area relates to the first, in that we need to work on supporting the development of their critical reflexive practice, so that their experiential learning has an on going impact on their pedagogy. This is a challenging area, particularly when student teachers may find institutional barriers make this development difficult. So, the third area relates to the need for us to work with schools to support them in developing links with community organisations – to establish them where such links are not yet realised or to build on them in a more focussed way, to further develop the skills of democratic participation in both teachers and students alike.

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