The Development Of Political Thinking In School Students: An English Perspective

DON ROWE, The Citizenship Foundation

ABSTRACT This paper discusses the written responses to a political problem of 100 English students between 12 and 14 years of age. The responses showed a wide variation in the levels of understanding students brought to the issue. Findings are discussed in the light of previous research into the development of political knowledge and understanding and recent work on schema theory. These students are seen to think about political issues largely using ‘personalized’ and not societal schemas [1] but within these personal schemas there appear to be significant differences ranging from describing simple emotions to speculating on others’ states of mind. The problem-solving skills employed by students also range from the inability to identify opposing viewpoints, through a stage where opposing positions are held in crude opposition, to one in which opposing considerations are held in tension. More sophisticated thinking amongst these students is also marked by self-awareness with regard to the thinking processes and by principled, as opposed to consequential, reasoning - but examples are rare. Implications of the findings for teachers of citizenship and political literacy are discussed.

Introduction

The citizenship curriculum for secondary schools in England, which became statutory in 2002 (DfEE/QCA, 1999), provides the framework for a curriculum which includes learning about key elements and institutions of public life. This should be taught in the context of real and relevant issues in order to nurture the development of political understanding and thinking skills. Students’ progress must be assessed and reported to parents at the end of each year. At the end of Years 9 and 11 [2], so-called attainment targets provide ‘end of key stage descriptions’ the intention being to provide a standard against which to measure progress. Such attainment targets are set for all statutory National Curriculum subjects. However, because citizenship is a new subject, these targets are as yet only broadly defined and they give little indication of the actual levels of knowledge and understanding to be expected of students performing below, at, or beyond the average for the age group. For example, the attainment target for the end of Year 9 states that, by this age, pupils should have:

A broad knowledge and understanding of the topical events they study; the rights, responsibilities and duties of citizens; the role of the voluntary sector; forms of government; provision of public services; and the criminal and legal systems. (DfEE/QCA, 1999).
Such a statement raises many questions for teachers attempting to assess students’ progress against this description. For example, what can be said about the level of understanding young people of 13 or 14 might be expected to display of, for example, the role of local and national government? How do students of this age construe topical political issues, given their limited experience of the world of politics? Does the nature of their thinking change as they get older and, if so, what characteristics mark out this particular stage of development? Teachers need to know how political thinking develops not only to assess it appropriately but also to teach more effectively. This paper represents an attempt to develop an understanding of the level of political understanding which might be expected of Year 8 and 9 citizenship students, as they approach a point half way through the statutory citizenship curriculum.

Research into the development of political thinking

The accumulation of Political knowledge

A substantial body of research has accumulated around the development of political thinking in young people, though a search of the literature shows that most of this has not been undertaken in the UK. One major English study in the field is that of Robert Stradling (1977) who undertook a large-scale study of the level of political awareness in over 4,000 15 and 16 year-olds (Year 11 students) in England. He attempted to elicit not only levels of political knowledge but also the complexity of their political understanding. Stradling found that the vast majority of these students could recognize the leaders of the two main parties but their knowledge of other politicians was poor. Their knowledge of how Parliament works was limited to a broad understanding that laws emanate from Parliament but few (10%) understood the difference between the government and Parliament. Recognition of the different policies associated with different parties was also low. For example, only about one third of the sample correctly associated the Conservative Party with lower taxation policies. About half of the sample either could not think of the name of a single pressure group or did not understand the term. Ten years later, Furnham and Gunter (1987) were able to replicate many of Stradling’s earlier findings in UK students.

An earlier developmental study of interest is that of Connell (1971) who noted that the accumulation of political knowledge takes place from the early school years. He conducted in-depth interviews with 119 Australian young people from 5 to 16. According to Connell, the political understanding of his subjects went through four distinct phases in its development towards maturity. In the early years, Connell’s subjects displayed scant awareness of the political domain as distinct from the personal and there were often non-logical leaps in argument when they talked about political events. Elements of fantasy crept in where real social or political knowledge was lacking. Connell called this first stage intuitive thinking.

Connell noted that, with the growth of a more realistic understanding of the social world, after the age of 7 or 8, these fantasy elements began to disappear. There was evidence of a basic understanding that a distinct political world exists and most children could identify the country’s leading politician and head of state. They were also aware of symbols of statehood (see also Jackson, 1972) and had an outline concept of political power, as vested in the monarch, prime minister and police. However, political thinking at this age was naïve and non-problematic. Judgements were simplistic, ad hoc, and often internally inconsistent. Connell called this stage primitive realism.
Early adolescence, according to Connell, is marked by rapidly increasing understanding of the political world, growing awareness that relationships are complex and that political issues involve numbers of different players or agencies with different roles and perspectives. Connell concluded that this rapid development begins around the age of 10 or 11. At this stage a person’s stance on one issue might lack consistency with other stances on related issues. Politics comes to be seen as more problematic, involving competing interests and choices. Young people at this stage are more and more able to take personal stances on issues. This stage is called by Connell construction of political order.

Finally, political thinking becomes characterized by more direct reference to abstract concepts or theories. Societies and polities are now understood as entities in themselves. Stances on single issues are increasingly consistent and inter-connected by over-arching ideologies and values, which become progressively more explicit in the thinking. For Connell this stage is one of ideological thinking.

**The development of political thinking**

Adelson and O’Neil (1966) and Adelson, Green and O’Neil (1969), looked at the development of the understanding of key political concepts such as community, law and individual rights in American young people between the ages of 11 and 18. Subjects were posed a question about whether it was right for a community to insist on the building of a road across private property. A central finding of their research was a clear developmental shift towards more socio-centric thinking in mid-adolescence. Prior to this, younger students strongly favoured the rights of the individual against the claims of the community, which is understood at this stage as no more than a collection of individuals. The more developed understanding of society as a collective entity did not appear to be salient for most subjects until around the age of 14. This important shift is consistent with Connell’s (1971) findings and has also been noted by many others, e.g., Rest et al (2000), Colby and Kohlberg (1987), and Gibbs (1992). The same phenomenon was also observed by Stradling (1977), who replicated the findings of Adelson et al in his survey of English Year 11 students.

Developmental psychologists have also noted significant shifts in the way children and young people conceptualize law. Law is a critical concept for citizenship education, associated as it is, with concepts of fairness, justice, rights, duties and law-making (authoritarian or democratic). Adelson et al (1969) noted that his younger subjects tended to see the law as authoritarian, rigid, concrete and punitive. Older subjects were more likely to see that laws have a social purpose and that they can be criticized on moral grounds. As children’s legal and justice reasoning develops it goes through the same sequence from inter-personal to social contexts noted earlier, according to Gibbs (1992) and Colby and Kohlberg (1987). Stradling suggests about two-thirds of the students in his English Y11 sample employed some elements of socio-centric reasoning.

**Implicit versus explicit modes of reasoning**

Stradling (1977) observed that the young people in his study tended to employ different modes of reasoning. About half of his sample showed no explicit forms of reasoning in their answers. However, students’ logical processes became more visible as their direct experience of specific issues increased. According to Stradling, poorer reasoners addressed problems by reference to personal experience or the
perceived consequences of a situation, deciding on an issue in terms of its likely outcomes. Some of the more sophisticated reasoners made reference to some form of moral concept or principle. For example, in response to the problem of the road being routed over private land (originally used by Adelson), some respondents explicitly used concepts of welfare, individual rights, fairness and democracy.

**Development of social and political schemas**

How is new knowledge assimilated as young people become more socially and politically aware? Torney-Purta (1992) argues that the construction of political understanding takes place through the absorption of new knowledge into existing cognitive frameworks called ‘representations’ or ‘schemas’. Schemas are hypothesized mental structures which organize information into clusters around a given topic. For citizenship students such schemas would include clusters of knowledge about law, democracy, government, the environment, the family and so on. For example, mention of the word ‘police’ would call to mind a set of associated ideas and information which would differ from person to person, since no two people’s experiences are identical.

Torney-Purta suggests that schemas serve a number of functions. First, they mediate a person’s understanding of what they experience. The absence of appropriate schemas can explain why someone may misunderstand or misconstrue an issue. Second, they enable a person to learn new information. In learning, existing schemas are extended, or even rejected and replaced by new ones. Third, they have a function in problem solving. It is through their existing schemas that people come to identify issues as particular kinds of problem and select appropriate steps to address them. Schemas are not, therefore, one-dimensional structures. They comprise complex mixtures of socio-political knowledge and belief.

Torney-Purta asked a sample of young people attending political summer schools to think aloud about how they would respond to particular political issues before and after tuition. Pre- and post-course responses were analysed and these were also compared with those of adult professionals in the field. Torney-Purta was able to show that, as a result of tuition, respondents drew on larger numbers of schemas in analysing given situations and that the schemas themselves became more elaborated. In some cases, naïve schemas, marked by a lack of ‘real world’ knowledge, were replaced by more realistic ones. In addition, she notes that one of the major contrasts between the responses of the adolescents and the experts was the way that the problems were approached and solved. Some of the novices reacted as though they felt there was a straightforward, ‘right’ answer to each problem (i.e. the thinking was simplistic or non-problematic), whereas, in contrast, the more expert thinkers drew on more complex understandings which acknowledged tensions between competing interests and balanced different perspectives within the proposed solution.

In a study of English 17 year olds, Weinreich-Haste (1984) found positive correlations between levels of reasoning about social and political problems and levels of moral reasoning. She argues that the development of political understanding is dependent on schemas by means of which the interrelationship between individual action and the social system is understood. It is therefore, possible to speak of implicit social theories which individuals draw on to interpret any given issue, such as law breaking or conflict resolution. Weinreich-Haste identified four different levels of social reasoning within this group, the simplest being concrete/individual, the second level was interpersonal/dyadic, the third was community/collective and the fourth, systemic. 900 school students aged 17
responded to 84 items [3], which were designed to elicit the extent of individualism versus collectivism in their thinking: in other words, the attribution of social change or improvement to individual characteristics versus locating the causes in institutional or societal origins. On 58 out of these 84 items, there were significant correlations between political and moral reasoning:

*Almost without exception [author’s emphasis], the direction of these correlations indicates that the higher the moral stage preferred, the more likely it was that the respondents would endorse beliefs or values which reflected explanations in society or institutions. The lower the moral stage, the more likely was the endorsement of concrete explanations located in individual attributes or actions.*

**A pilot study in UK schools**

In order to understand the relevance of such findings to English students in key stage 3, my colleague Ted Huddleston and I conducted a pilot study which involved asking students to respond to a problem in which a local council has to decide whether or not to grant permission for an extension to the quarry on a hillside overlooking the town (see fig 1). Respondents were asked to put themselves in the position of the council and to write as much as they could about the problem as they saw it. The question was therefore designed to encourage students to discuss the problem in as much complexity as possible, not merely state what they thought the council should do. Although we recognized that written production measures of this kind are never as revealing of students’ knowledge and understanding as in-depth interviews, we only asked for written responses in order to replicate the kind of work a teacher would receive. The problem was read aloud by the teacher to each class, and the basic terms explained. Then students were asked to answer the question on their own, to the best of their ability. The scenario had not been studied beforehand and so students had not, in any sense, been coached to answer the question. Students were therefore more likely to give answers which reflected their own personal constructs of the scenario.

Responses were collected from 56 Year 8 students and 58 Year 9 students in non-selective secondary schools. Fourteen of these were incomplete or insufficiently coherent to be included in the study, leaving exactly 100 responses in the analysis.

Fig 1: The problem of the Standley Quarry

On the hillside above the town of Standley, there was a big quarry. For years the people of the town have dug stone out of this quarry. Bit by bit, the hillside is being eaten away. Two months ago, the people who own the quarry asked the council if they could be allowed to make it bigger still. The council can’t decide whether it should allow the quarry owners to make the quarry bigger or not.

Think about the council’s decision. Why might it be difficult for them to decide? Write as much as you can about the problem as you see it. Begin with the words…

The problem as I see it is …
Analysis of the data

Analysis of the transcripts was carried out first of all to determine the number and nature of schemas utilized by students in their answers. How would students interpret this problem? It was of more interest to see what level of sophistication they brought to the issue than which solution they favoured. Are there significant differences in the schemas students utilize to understand the situation? Is there a correlation between the number of schemas utilized and their nature – would students’ answers reflect Weinreich-Haste’s (1984) finding of a shift from a ‘personalized’ view of the world towards more societal perspectives?

Secondly, the transcripts were analysed in terms of the thought processes or problem-solving procedures employed by the students. Evidence has already been referred to which suggests that students’ thinking about political issues becomes more abstract and ideological as students reach the age of 16. Both Stradling (1977) and Connell (1971) noted that many students of this age made explicit references to moral and political ideas in their responses. To what extent would this be evidenced in the responses of these 14 year-olds? Also of interest here is the extent to which students still think intuitively or implicitly about such problems and whether there are developments in the way they resolve the tensions inherent in political issues of this kind.

Students’ responses

Number and Nature of Schemas employed by respondents

Responses varied widely in terms of the number of schemas students drew on to analyse the problem. Generally, speaking the very weak responses employed only two or three schemas. The following is a rare example of the use of just one schema [4], i.e. loss of land.

Respondent 1

The problem as I see it is I think that the quarry should not be allowed to make it bigger because it is just going to [take up more of the land] where it is and if they make it bigger the hillside is going to be eaten away more and it won’t stop getting smaller because the more that is taken away the less the land will be because there won’t be much land left.

In this second example, the student draws on just two schemas, one relating to the environment and another to traffic.

Respondent 2

The problem as I see it is that all of the [animals and the wild life] would be in great danger and also people who lived near by in a cottage they would not be happy because of all the [vehicles] driving by all the time.
In both of these answers, the schemas drawn on relate to concrete (physical or visible) aspects of the student’s world. None of these is wrong or irrelevant but in each case the elaboration of the schema (whether ‘environment’ or ‘land use’) is much less developed than in many other students’ answers. In the second answer, the reference to environmental concerns is put very simply and the nuisance from traffic is discussed in terms of people who live ‘near by in a cottage’ – almost the language of the fairy story.

Across the whole sample, the majority of respondents draw on between 2 and 4 schemas though, for the most part, these are relatively unelaborated. More adequate, sophisticated responses are associated with a higher number of schemas, the best ones containing 6 or 7, the schemas themselves tending to be more complex or sophisticated. However, there is not a straight correlation between the number of schemas and the length or sophistication of the answers. For example, the following answer draws on six schemas, and whilst it displays the beginnings of a societal perspective, it is still not amongst the most sophisticated because each schema is virtually unelaborated, factors on either side are listed almost in isolation from each other and the writer seems to have jumped to his or her conclusion without saying why.

Respondent 3

The problem as I see it is that this [town’s backbone is the quarry] if the land is created then the people of Standley [keep their jobs]. If the quarry is granted the land then the homes nearby will suffer [noise, dust] and the [price of their home will slump]. If the area is a beauty spot then things may lead to [demonstrations]. A good way would be that the quarry should have the land but slowly eat away at the hillside and over a time it will be less drastic on the area around the quarry.

This answer is relatively unusual because of its reference to three economic schemas – jobs, house prices (rarely mentioned in our sample) and town’s economic dependence on the quarry. Besides frequent references to ‘jobs’ and the idea that the quarry would ‘make money’ our sample was notable for very few references to economic factors – which is noteworthy given the nature of the problem. This is consistent with Furnham and Lewis’s (1986) findings about the general lack of economic awareness in this age group.

The most common schemas across the sample, were concrete and personal or inter-personal. In examples 1 and 2, the writers speak of people making the quarry bigger and people being unhappy about the traffic. In both of these cases, these personal references speak of isolated acts or feelings and make no reference to others. More elaborated examples of personal schemas speak of people in relation to others (what Weinreich-Haste calls ‘inter-personal’ or ‘dyadic’). For example, below I give one of the more extended responses, which whilst, drawing on six schemas, still interprets the situation in predominantly inter-personal terms. Negative public opinion is described in terms of people making ‘complaints’, ‘making a fuss at the council’ and ‘a lot of rows’. And tourists are spoken of as staying away because ‘there would be nothing to look at’. A more sophisticated response might have spoken of there being a slump in the tourist trade (a systemic description of the same phenomenon).
Respondent 4

The problem as I see it is that they have 2 choices.

1) They [need the stone] from the quarry to make roads and buildings. Also if they do not allow the quarry to be made bigger lots of people will be [out of a job] and will come and [complain] that they do not have jobs.

2) But if they do allow it to take place the land will be [unreadable], [the public will come and make a fuss at the council] about all the [noise and dust and pollution] that is taking place and [no tourist will come] because there would be nothing to look at. If they chose to ignore it there would probably be a lot of rows.

If I was the council I would let them take a little bit out.

Within these personalized schemas, there appear to be three different levels of response. Firstly, the weakest students tend to use an individualistic ‘happy/sad’ paradigm (see respondent 2) showing a basic understanding of people’s emotional responses to the situation. The majority of students demonstrate an ability to discuss the problem in terms of people’s actions, needs or wants. For example, one student suggests that a key point would be that ‘if they did make the quarry bigger the people of the town would not be able to play on the hill or have picnics and things’. See also respondents 3 and 4 who describe people complaining, tourists staying away and so on. Only a small minority of students show a more empathic ability to discuss the situation in terms of people’s thoughts or motives, as in the following example.

Respondent 5

The problem as I see it is I think that the people in the town would not mind, or have to put up with the [noise, dust and traffic] caused by the extension to the quarry because [when they bought the houses there] they knew about the quarry and anyway they would be in favour of an extension since a [lot of jobs] nearby would come from the quarry and they wouldn’t want to lose their jobs.

On the other hand the [environment is at risk] from the extension. But you might have thought that since they built a quarry on that hill people would have [chosen a hill that would contain stone and not contain rare wildlife].

I think they should extend the quarry but [set aside the older areas of the quarry for wildlife], planting trees there. But this is bias since I am human and human jobs are at stake. Morally they should not extend it.
and should replant all of the hill with trees and make it suitable for wildlife.

This is the most elaborated and thoughtful response in the whole sample in terms of the extent to which the respondent speculates on the states of mind of those affected by the proposal. This respondent interprets the situation through the eyes of those affected. He or she infers that people ‘would not mind’ the expansion and suggests that, because they would have already known about the quarry, they would probably understand the need to expand. He or she then infers that the site would probably not have been selected had ‘people’ (a collectivist perspective) considered it valuable in terms of wildlife. This respondent also shows an unusual level of self-awareness in the reference to possible bias in favouring the rights of humans over animals.

In contrast to the predominantly personalized schemas utilized by most of our respondents, only a few (thirteen in all) display an ability to discuss the problem from the perspective of the council, the town as a whole or in terms of social, political or economic forces. Bearing in mind that the Standley Quarry problem was actually presented in terms of the council’s dilemma, it is striking that so few students responded in like terms. It seems that most students did not have sufficiently elaborated schemas by which to understand the problem as stated and had therefore to utilize their own less developed, personalized constructions. The example below is one of the small number that tackles the problem from the council’s standpoint.

Respondent 6

‘The problem as I see it is if the Council want to stop the quarry getting bigger it means two things 1) locals out of a [job] 2) it stops the [damage to nature] and the countryside. But if they do let it get bigger, vice versa to the above statements. So either way, however you look at it, something bad comes out of it.

So I think the council should think hard about this. Personally, I think the Council should stop any more digging and these are my options I would take:

1) Find each person a new job that is local around the town.

2) They can keep digging until the Council find you a job.

3) Do a [survey] around the town who wants what and how do [they] get around it.

4) Find a [quarry somewhere else] where people do not mind.
My own thoughts I think is that no 3 is a good option and so is 2.

This answer includes an interesting reference to a democracy schema (‘Do a survey around the town…’). We have already seen references to this schema from a personalized standpoint (i.e. people will demonstrate or have rows) but this reference to the council’s need to make its decision in the light of people’s views is altogether more elaborated. There are, in fact, few references to public interactions with the council in the sample as a whole and what there are are almost entirely couched in terms either of people physically demonstrating (as in examples 3 and 4 above) or of the council gathering the opinions of individuals in surveys. There is, for example, no reference anywhere to public opinion which would be a more abstract and systemic level interpretation of this ‘democracy’ schema.

So, broadly speaking, our students’ political thinking is dominated by the actions and reactions of individuals, with only a limited awareness of the societal backdrop against which these actions play out. References to economic or social forces are largely absent from the way students have interpreted the problem of Standley Quarry. Having said this, most students appear to have understood the concept of ‘the council’ in making sense of the problem. Even though they selected personalized schemas, the majority of students clearly understood that it was the council which had the power to decide one way or another. This is compatible with, e.g. Connell’s (1977) findings that awareness of the main institutions of government is already well developed by this age. In a more recent large-scale survey of civic knowledge amongst English 14 year-olds, Kerr et al (2002) showed that almost all of them understood the role of government in relation to the provision of key services such as health and education. Nevertheless, the few references in our sample to the possible processes involved, such as the granting of planning permissions, suggest that students of this age know what the main political agents do but as yet know little about how they work.

Simple or complex reasoning

Three forms of problem solving can be observed in our sample. The first and weakest form is where students discuss or acknowledge only one side of the problem. In the first example, above, the reasoning is one-sided and non-problematic. There is no argument offered, merely several re-statements of the fact that the quarry will mean a loss of land. At this level, respondents fail to indicate why one side is favoured over the other. The thinking seems to be implicit and intuitive. A second, more adequate, type of problem solving is displayed by a significant number of students who are able to identify two sides of the problem, but do not (or cannot) reconcile these conflicting interests in any way. This is crude either/or thinking, as in the following example:

Respondent 7

The problem as I see it is if they make the quarry bigger than it is, the hillside [will disappear], but if they make it bigger they will dig up more stone. The decision is either to make it bigger and get more [stone], or leave it the size it is and then there won’t by any hillside to crumble away, so it will either be made bigger or leave the hill-side alone, so it doesn’t crumble away.
Less than one third of the sample show evidence of a third type of reasoning which I will call balancing. Here the students, aware of the tensions created by the opposing demands, demonstrate the ability to employ a form of thinking which holds conflicting interests in a creative kind of tension or compromise. An example of this is where students suggest that the council should allow quarrying to go ahead but within limits or with conditions (see respondents 4, 5 and 6 above for examples of balancing perspectives). Torney Purta (above) noted the same ability to balance competing claims in her more expert reasoners.

Implicit/explicit reasoning

It is a striking feature of the responses as a whole that only a few students make explicit reference to their own logical processes. The weakest form of reasoning, as we have noted, is intuitive – the conclusion is stated with no hint as to how it is arrived. Most of the students, while giving reasons on either side of the problem, make no reference to how they have approached the problem. In a small number of answers, however, there is an element of meta-cognition, as in responses 5 and 6 above. Instead of merely stating a solution, respondent 6 has set out a number of alternatives and then selected those he or she favoured (albeit without stating why). These data suggest that, as students progress in their thinking, they become aware, not only of greater complexities within issues, but also of alternative problem-solving procedures. They perhaps also learn that, to indicate why one procedure was considered more appropriate than others, can constitute a more persuasive answer.

Consequential versus principled reasoning

In Stradling’s (1977) study, he observes around a quarter of students employing some form of principled reasoning in their answers. Our students relied almost completely on consequential thinking (i.e. deciding on the balance of likely outcomes) rather than basing their reasoning on moral principles. There are only two answers in the whole of the sample which explicitly introduce a moral principle into the argument. One of these suggests that the quarry should not be extended because in principle the land belongs to the people:

...You have to look upon it as their land after all so why should they [the townspeople] be denied of that right?

And another student (respondent 5 above) states that it is a moral duty to care for the land and not destroy it:

...morally, they should not extend it and should replant all of the hill with trees and make it suitable for wildlife.

This particular response is interesting because the writer distinguishes between a consequential or pragmatic solution (the quarry should go ahead because of the economic benefits) whilst still holding the opinion that, in principle, the expansion is wrong. This answer is unique in our sample in this respect.
Conclusions

The main concern in this paper has been to map the spread of different types of political thinking represented in this sample of 12–14 year olds. Answers from both year groups were spread fairly evenly across the whole sample, which suggests that, between them, these two schools included most levels of ability to be found in this age group. And there is no reason to suppose that the levels of exposure to the political world, through schooling or the media, is not reasonably typical of the age group.

Compared with Connell’s (1971) findings that many of his Australian 16 year-olds, were regularly using societal perspectives as well as drawing on ideologies and principles in their thinking, it looks as if this is much less well-established in English 14 year-olds, though we have to allow that Connell’s in-depth interviews may have supported the production of higher level answers than our written responses. Most of Stradling’s Year 11 students also displayed some form of societal awareness, compared with 13% of our sample. The vast majority of our responses were found to employ what Weinreich-Haste termed ‘concrete/individual’ or ‘inter-personal’ modes of reasoning.

Furthermore, by comparison with Stradling’s English 15-16 year olds, principled thinking appears to be not well-established in the younger age group and most of the thinking is implicit, with little evidence of meta-thinking. One fruitful area for further research would be to probe the ability of students to say why they selected the schemas they did or favoured one alternative over another.

In summary, on the basis of the literature reviewed and the data in this study, it would seem that by the end of KS3 (Y9), we should expect to see most students demonstrating the ability to:

- discuss socio-political issues in terms of three or four different schemas,
- display an outline awareness of the roles of government bodies,
- see political issues as conflicts of interests; many (but not all) will be able to propose ways in which these interests can be reconciled or held in tension,
- discuss socio-political issues in terms of their effects on people’s lives, feelings and behaviour,
- draw on key citizenship concepts, such as fairness, law and rights, but generally as implicitly embedded in real situations,
- discuss moral aspects of situations in terms of outcomes or consequences.

At the same time, the data suggest that most 12-14 students seem to lack:

- a societal or collective perspective,
- awareness of social or organisational processes,
- the ability to reflect on their own logical processes or form of thought,
- the ability to discuss issues in terms of moral principles, values or ideologies.

Key Stage 3 (Years 7 - 9) appears to be a crucial link in the passage from childhood to adulthood as far as political awareness is concerned. It broadly coincides with the first stage of the growth of realistic socio-political knowledge such that, whilst weaker students in this age group are still largely child-like in their construction of the political world, there are those at the other end of the scale who have already developed a societal perspective. Not until students can take such a
perspective, understanding how individuals relate to the group or community as a whole, can they think politically in an adult sense. Furthermore, the emergence in this age group of the ability to hold competing interests in tension when solving political problems, is another important step in the development of mature political thinking. Having said that, the vast majority of these students are, as yet, still unable to discuss political problems in principled terms and are still naïve about the complex nature of the processes involved in political decision-making.

This study suggests that teachers should nurture the development of political thinking in a bottom-up direction, beginning with realities recognisable to young people, enabling them to access issues first at the level of personal and interpersonal experience, then showing how individual actions relate to the whole group, to institutions of government and the processes by which society regulates itself. Because students use their own personal schemas to interpret the social and political information they receive, a teacher working with a class of students cannot assume a common understanding of any issue; there will be many different versions of the same story under discussion. Furthermore, some students will be well on the way to mastering the appropriate vocabulary necessary to make their thinking more explicit, whilst others will not. In such situations, discussion approaches which are open-ended and exploratory, which encourage students to discuss all the factors they see as relevant and to say why, will expose other students to wider spheres of knowledge as well as new forms of reasoning, at least some of which they will be ready to absorb.

Correspondence: DON ROWE, The Citizenship Foundation, Ferroners House, Shaftesbury Place, Aldersgate Street, LONDON EC2Y 8AA

About the author: Don Rowe is currently Director of Curriculum Resources at the Citizenship Foundation (London, UK). He has also recently been seconded to lead the Department for Education and Skills’ national in-service training team for citizenship education.

NOTES

[1] In this paper, I use an anglicised form of the greek plural ‘schemata’, following Haste (1999, 186).
[2] The English national curriculum is divided into four key stages. The first two (primary) stages comprise Key Stage 1 (Years 1 and 2, 5 to 8 year-olds) and Key Stage 2 (Years 3 – 6, 8 to 11 year-olds). Secondary schooling begins in year 7 and Key Stage 3 comprises years 7 – 9 (11 to 14 year-olds). Key Stage 4 includes years 10 and 11 (14 to 16 year-olds).
[4] I have shaded the schemas used by students in each example. In every case I include the student’s complete response.

REFERENCES


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