

<CT>Social action in the classroom and beyond

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In March 2020 the world changed and for no one more so than our young people, who experienced an unprecedented interruption to their education. While their schools worked hard to provide them with an education online, they missed out on some wider experiences as well as the social element of learning. In addition, the pandemic has made young people hyper-aware of the social issues within their communities.

It is more important than ever that we provide opportunities for young people to make a difference to the causes they care about. When young people have the opportunity to make a real, tangible difference to their communities through social action, they also gain all of the benefits that such work may bring (Kirkman et al, 2016): for example a feeling of agency and usefulness, teamwork and collaborative skills, public speaking, project planning, leadership, empathy, and improved self-esteem and self-efficacy as a result.

While the benefits of social action for young people and their communities are clear, the secondary school system can sometimes be seen to be an uneasy participant in this supporting it, even when teachers and school leaders are enthusiastic about the concept. We all want our young people to be socially engaged, as we recognise the benefits that this brings for them as productive, compassionate, skilled citizens, and for the wider community. However, where in an already crowded curriculum and timetable is there space for something that will potentially take up a lot of time and effort?

<A>Didcot Girls' School's approach

At Didcot Girls' School (DGS) in Oxfordshire, we have taken the approach of engaging in the First Give programme as part of our personal development curriculum.

First Give seeks to bridge the gap between the classroom and youth-led social action in wider school life and the local community beyond the school gates. Through a fully resourced and highly structured eight-lesson scheme of work to be delivered in curriculum time, the programme prompts an entire year group of secondary school students to consider the issues facing their community, engage with local charities and then support them in their classes through social action. This could be fundraising, awareness-raising, campaigning and advocacy. The programme in each school culminates in a celebratory event bringing together the wider community. Each class reports on their social action project in the hope of winning a charitable grant from First Give of £1,000, which is given to the 'winning' charity. However, the key message here is that all the students in the year group have given back tangibly to their communities.

The First Give programme makes up part of our school's wider strategy and ethos of providing quality learning experiences for all, and learning that pupils engage in challenges, widens horizons and deepens understanding of ourselves, the community and the wider world. Over the last five years, approximately 1,300 pupils at the school have participated in the First Give programme.

We have observed a wide range of skills being developed through our pupils' involvement in the programme, including teamwork, planning, communication, research, creativity, organisation, innovation and resilience. These moments are not ones that as day-to-day teaching practitioners we are able to recreate ourselves, yet the insight, knowledge and empathy that result are immense and unforgettable.

On a practical level, the social action that students undertake provides a great opportunity that students can use and elaborate on in CVs and interviews in the future, and when applying for work experience placements. In addition, one unforeseen benefit that we have become aware of is a new source of work experience opportunities for some of our students.

There are no doubt lots of other positive benefits of participating in First Give that we, as a school, never get to hear about or are very difficult to measure. Gaining positive feedback from both the charities and students is then the icing on the cake: we have happy charities, a school with a higher and very positive community profile and enriched students.

<A>First Give and citizenship pedagogy

Since 2002, citizenship education has been part of the National Curriculum. The current programmes of study for Key stage 3 and 4 students require the delivery of active citizenship (Department for Education, 2013). In 2018, the House of Lords Citizenship and Civic Select Committee called for the improvement of citizenship teaching and action in schools (2018). Ofsted, as part of the common inspection framework for the inspection of all schools and further education institutions, requires providers under students' personal development (among other things) to be 'equipping them to be responsible, respectful, active citizens who contribute positively to society' (2019a, p. 11). Ofsted now requires all children to learn citizenship education (2019b). So some form of citizenship education is both desirable and required – the question is how to do this given the restrictions around time and resources in school.

UCL Institute of Education provides citizenship student teachers with opportunities to learn from experts and others about the delivery of the subject. As part of this, the student teachers have learned about the First Give programme and developed ideas about how to include this within their own teaching in their placements and in the future. The House of Lords report encourages the development of expert citizenship specialists to be able to provide opportunities for community citizenship, learning to build political cohesion, which relates to the original aims of the Crick report – to think about the political knowledge and empowerment of young people (Citizenship Advisory Group, 1998).

<A>First Give and the COVID-19 crisis

As stated at the beginning of this article, it's clear that opportunities for young people to engage in social action are more needed than ever. Young people need to be given opportunities to come together and to feel like they can make a difference. Many of them will themselves have been affected by the social issues that the crisis has either caused or exacerbated in our communities: mental health issues, poverty, family breakdown, addiction. There must be opportunities for them to both explore those experiences and to try to do something positive and proactive to address them.

In response to school closures, First Give developed and released a free mini-programme, 'Helping from Home'. It asked students to explore social issues and think about what they can do to help safely, from home and while observing rules around social distancing. The programme was downloaded hundreds of times over the course of the summer, and the entries made by young were

creative and inspiring. One example was a student in Wales who made bird boxes out of a wooden pallet for isolated neighbours – he included bird-watching crib sheets and his telephone number. He said that he wants ‘to divert people’s minds from loneliness; more towards observing and learning’ through this work. Young people are keen to help – we just need to give them the opportunity to do it.

Please note: One of the authors of this article works for First Give, a charity running social action programmes in schools. The programme is subsidised by the charity’s funders but the schools involved also make a financial contribution.

<A>References

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