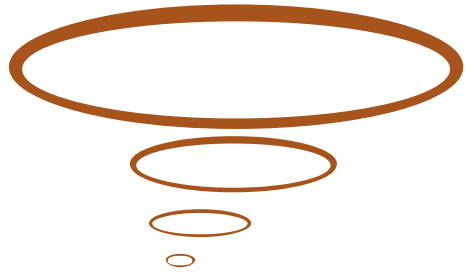


# THINKING SPACE (1)



## Reflections on the Scottish referendum and young people's participation

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WHILST WORKING last year during the Scottish Independence referendum I helped to run a small Yes shop in the village where I live. It was busy one day and I noticed three schoolgirls standing furtively at the door, as if afraid to cross the threshold. I went out to speak to them and asked if I could help:

*'We were wondering about something to do with the referendum.'*

*'Aye, what's that?' I asked.*

*'We keep hearing about TTIP or something like that and were wondering what it is?'*

As someone who has worked with young people for many years and with an academic interest in the political participation of young people, I was astonished that here I had three young people who were compelled to seek out information on a topic they didn't fully understand. It was at that moment that I knew something special was happening in Scotland. Of course, anecdotal evidence like this doesn't tell us much about broader patterns of political participation. But as someone who was engaged in the referendum, I think it is indicative of the engagement and participation of young people last year.

In this short article, I will try to pull out some of the reasons I think young people did engage with the referendum process and also identify reasons why young people are choosing to disengage from the formal political process. I will make some tentative suggestions that could potentially address this situation, based on conversations I had with young people, as well as my own research where I carried out in-depth, qualitative interviews with five politically engaged (on both sides of the debate) young people during the referendum.

### Young People's Formal Engagement

Having worked with young people and now researching their exclusion, it is difficult not to get frustrated with the continuous debate concerning the issue of whether or not 16 and 17 year-olds

should get the right to vote. On the one hand we hear that young people aren't interested – 'if 18 year-olds can't be bothered to vote why should 16 year-olds be given the right to vote?' On the other hand, politicians who are seeking to give young people the vote seem to imagine that the simple act of enfranchisement will act as some sort of democratic salve; young people will magically appear at polling booths and democracy will be reborn. Both positions are well off the mark in my opinion.

A post-referendum report from the Electoral Commission (2014) suggests that turnout amongst 16 and 17 year-olds (there were 109,593 young people registered to vote in this age group) was 75% compared to 54% amongst 18-24yr olds. The figures are, as expected, lower than for their older contemporaries (85% for 35-54yr olds and a whopping 92% for those 55 and over). If this is correct, that three-quarters of 16 and 17yr olds voted, it is a spectacular success and vindicates the decision to extend the vote to young people.

The recent General Election also saw a welcome increase in young people voting, with 58% of 18-24 year olds turning out to vote (BES, 2015). Prior to this, less than 50% of young people turned out to vote from 2001 onwards. The full breakdown has yet to be published, but early analysis suggests that turnout amongst young people in Scotland was much higher than other parts of the UK, pushing up the national average (this is the case for all age groups) (Independent, 2015). However, compared to their older contemporaries, young people are still significantly less likely to vote, to register to vote and are less committed to political parties. In short, young people are shunning 'conventional' politics.

However, we know that young people are engaging in politics – just out-with the formal sphere. Their participation appears to be 'issue-based' reflecting a growing political 'consumerism' – dipping in and out, picking issues that are of importance to them. Much research has shown that young people are looking at issues such as militarism, Third World debt, animal rights, nuclear power, environmentalism and anti-capitalist policies amongst others – and have little confidence in their elected officials to either represent them or deal with what they see as globalised issues. Young people are engaging in new ways which the traditional formal structures are unable or unwilling to accommodate – such as petitioning, boycotts, demonstrations and online activity such as blogging and internet campaigning.

Young people demand a new response and so far our old politics has not responded. Our institutions are failing to engage with the politics of youth; until they do, it will be of little surprise if young people remain outside the realm of formal politics. Young people are still largely seen as 'citizens-in-the-making' rather than citizens in the here-and-now. But the recent experience of working with young people during the Independence Referendum has firmly cemented the belief in my mind that young people are just as capable as their older contemporaries in making political decisions based on considered reasoning.

## Citizenship Education and the School

Dr Jan Eicchorn (2014) carried out a quantitative study with over 1000 young participants during and after the referendum, looking at their level of political interest, and compared these results with parents and adults. Some of the key findings make for interesting reading and rebut some of the common charges laid at their door:

- Young people are not uncritically mimicking parents in voting decisions – over 40% voted a different way from their parents;
- Young people who discussed the referendum with parents did not feel more confident having done so;
- Young people are not less politically engaged than adults;
- Where young people discussed the referendum at school, their confidence did increase.

Eicchorn concludes by stating ‘that young people who do not get the chance to discuss politics in an informed manner in the classroom miss out. There is no other institution that seems to be able to create the same positive effect on political confidence’ (2014: 12). This mirrors other research which suggests that the socialising influence that school possesses can play a significant role in arming young people with the skill, knowledge, critical capacity and confidence to engage in the political sphere. Research has found that turnout in a first election is crucial in leaving a ‘participative footprint’ in one’s voting ‘career’ (Plutzer, 2002). Because young people are embedded in what could be a highly productive social environment at school, it is lamentable that we are not using that space more to encourage young people to participate in politics.

In terms of my own research into this matter, the young people I interviewed over the summer were less than complementary about the ‘citizenship education’ they received at school. In their opinion (and this is supported by, for example, Biesta, 2011) the political education young people largely receive is not political at all. At its worst it revolves around their social responsibilities and encourages them to engage in ‘pro-social’ behaviour (don’t drink, don’t take drugs, volunteer etc). At its best it teaches young people about politics rather than how to do politics. If we are serious about engaging young people in democracy this undoubtedly needs to be addressed.

### An alternative education?

Unfortunately, at the moment, many young people feel that politics is something that is done to them and not with them. Young people feel alienated from politics (I have little doubt that many adults feel this way too); they are bored by politicians and formal politics but not with political issues and ideas. So how can educators contribute to the re-engagement of young people in the political sphere? I have some tentative suggestions based on reading and my own research and experience during the Independence Referendum:

1. *Treat young people as citizens.* The young people I worked with during the referendum enthused about activities such as debates, meetings, hustings, and voting. This means a re-conception of young people, from ‘citizens-in-the-making’ to ‘citizens-in-the-here-and-now’. These were not just mock events (although some were) but involved politicians coming to the school and truly engaging young people, looking for their votes. The young people felt that they were taken seriously. They felt *involved*. They felt *engaged*. It is little surprise that these activities and events had an impact.
  
2. *Encourage Group Learning.* This requires the social aspect of educational practice being brought to the fore. Democracy is not learned in isolation, but in co-operation, argument and action – all of which were highlighted as important (and enjoyable) aspects of the experience of the young people over the last two years. This means not only prioritising group learning but also involves a serious step change from the current ‘political’ education which individualises young people and looks to address social dysfunction. Young people are not blind to this and from my discussions with them, they actively enjoy working with each other. This should be encouraged as Warren and Mira (2008:30) note, ‘as young people build relationships, talk with each other about their values and the issues they face, they build some shared understandings and a sense of common interests’. Only by engaging in dialogue, reflection and practice with others will young people begin to unpack the issues that limit their political participation as a collective and offer a starting point for a response. After all, isn’t association, dialogue, reflection and praxis the very essence of a healthy democracy in any case?
  
3. *Be active in the community.* It is clear that young people place a high value on participation at the local level, that offers them the opportunity to participate directly and engage with others. This undoubtedly shapes political participation as they seek opportunities out-with schools which have failed to satisfy their motivation to become involved. Getting young people out into their local communities to be political is (and should be) a key facet of their political education. Citizenship education as it stands is detached from the lives of young people outside the school and a one-size-fits-all approach seems doomed to failure unless it takes into account the contextual factors that constitute their everyday lives. This means educators have to pay attention to the micro-politics of young people’s lives. Much research has highlighted the importance of family, peers, media and the broader social networks on political participation and attention should be paid to these, if not drawn upon to boost participation.
  
4. *Consider the importance of Power.* The final lesson to draw from the experiences of young people during the referendum concerns the issue of power. It was apparent that young people embraced those political activities where they have a sense of power in the immediacy – attending demonstrations, signing petitions, taking part in debates and

being out in their communities talking to people. In other words, they have a sense of power when they have an active role in shaping what is going on around them. Without attendance to this fact young people will inevitably be switched off from a citizenship agenda that prioritises a vision of a good citizen as someone who ‘pulls their weight’ and takes responsibility for themselves. Framed in this way and without any reference to political power young people will, quite rightly, seek alternate ways within which to represent themselves and their political views. But herein lies the rub – if young people continue to be misrecognised as ‘citizens-in-the-making’ or worse, as ‘domestic extremists’ when they do demonstrate against issues that impinge on their lives, then their participation will continue to be ignored.

There is great political education work going on with young people – I don’t want to be seen to be being disrespectful. But it isn’t embedded into the very fibre of our education system as it could be. Of course this isn’t just to do with schools and education. Politicians must recognise that they have utterly failed to take into account the issues that young people feel are important. Simply giving young people the vote is not enough. Their interests and issues need to be given consideration and taken seriously.

Unfortunately, as political parties become more target-driven, policy agendas are focused on where they can get the most ‘bang-for-their-buck’. This inevitably leads to the ‘grey vote’ – and young people’s agendas are seen as peripheral. This has created a vicious circle where young people are not voting and now politicians can seemingly ignore their concerns with impunity; their entitlement to the most basic social security is looking increasingly imperilled by the major parties at Westminster. Young people have become the victims of policy as they suffer for their ‘failure’ to participate in elections which do not speak to their lived reality.

## Our Challenge

Young people do want to learn about politics, to be involved in politics and to be able to influence politics. We have much to teach them but just as importantly, young people have much to teach us – this is democracy. The exclusion of young people from the political domain is not only negative for them – it impoverishes the overall debate if we miss out on the contribution of a potentially politically fertile section of the population.

I want to finish by posing an additional challenge in an area I think is ripe for further investigation. Much research suggests that it is of fundamental importance that young people need to feel that they are involved with and have a stake in their society. Exclusion from the economic sphere and the methods of production and consumption is undermining the level of commitment young people feel to participate. What makes this all the worse is that it is young people who have been hardest hit by the economic turbulence of recession and austerity with the unemployment rate for

young people running (at times) at three times the rate of the rest of the populace. This is further compounded with recent studies showing that their real incomes have fallen faster in comparison to other age groups. As working patterns change and we see a rise in a ‘precariat’ class, how is this going to influence political participation? If young people’s connection to employment becomes more tenuous, how will this impact on political engagement? If young people are further excluded from the economic sphere then I fear that this is only going to add to the distance between young people and ‘formal’ political participation. And we’ll continue to see a repeat of the recent budget where young people are punished for their non-participation – reduced entitlement to social security and the increasing shadow of full-blown workfare looms.

Schools can only do so much – they are, after all, merely a reflection of the society within which they reside. All the educational engagement in the world may be in vain if young people continue to be ignored by our political class and excluded from the world of work. The Independence referendum showed that young people can do politics – the question is does our politics want young people?

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