I have been a teacher since 1999 and as part of my PGCE opted for Citizenship to be a supplementary subject as I felt it would complement my Religious Studies training and give me a wider understanding of society beyond my own experience. I soon realised the value of Citizenship education and its role in promoting active members of society and socially responsible citizens. I have since been a firm advocate for the subject and have sort out many different learning opportunities for my pupils to participate in, even being involved in the creation and pilot of a Young Leaders Award endorsed by the Archbishop of York. Of course Citizenship is important, how on earth do we hope to inspire the next generation to become socially responsible and exercise their democratic rights if they don’t understand what they actually are or have a skewed, self entitled approach to their place in the world?

Over the years I have seen cohort after cohort become involved in charity fundraisers as part of a school charity event often relying on non-uniform days and cake sales at break to raise funds for the local hospice, which in itself is admirable but there is so much more to being an active citizen and engaging with the issues which face us as a modern society. I have seen the rise in interest in the subject at my school, we offer it as an option at GCSE, I have keen individuals with bright ideas and idealistic values looking to make a difference in the world, some wish to go on to a career in public services or law and therefore hold a genuine interest in the topics covered. Then there are some, who at a loss of what to choose have pulled the subject ‘out of the hat’ to ‘give it a go, my mate says its easy’ and of course it is easy for some, but not all. Unfortunately, particularly since the focus on E-bacc subjects, I have had more of this pupil category in my classes as they have been ‘encouraged’ or steered towards my subject so as to not affect the results from another curriculum area.

Feeling a little bit like a last resort is a challenge but alongside the ones who have chosen the subject and are passionate about it some balance is created and an interesting climate for debate. It is therefore essential to engage the pupils and use whatever resources are available. I find it is essential that they all get the opportunity to visit Parliament and see where decisions are made, to participate in the workshops provided by the Parliamentary Education Centre and ask any questions they want without fear of ridicule. I offer this visit every year and although it is a long way to travel and I get very little sleep, it is a small price to pay for the experience the young people receive visiting the capital.

I have noticed over the years that pupils have been more willing to engage in active citizenship, at first it was because of the coursework project and something that has to be done, but now more and more projects are springing up and many more pupils asking for support with charitable actions and civil engagement. Where as in the beginning pupils would opt to do a ‘campaign’ about fair trade or litter, where they would do a survey of family and friends and interview the canteen and caretaking staff, I’m finding much more gritty topics being chosen in recent times. This past year I had two pupils visit a local primary school and deliver E-safety workshops to each class – extremely high quality workshops that made me very proud. In a similar way two further pupils looked at xenophobia in the town after being inspired to look at this after the Brexit referendum. They went so far as the write to the local press and had a letter published, this turned into a rather public debate where they were able to maturely and sensibly promote a balanced and well informed argument setting their opinions out clearly and diplomatically. One of these
young men, as a result, has expressed a desire to work in politics in the future and in my opinion, he will be an asset!

Topics such as human trafficking, LGBTQ+ rights, race relations, xenophobia, foodbanks, the migrant crisis and other such contentious issues have replaced the airbrushing of models in magazines, recycling and litter as issues the pupils choose to campaign about. We filled a transit van full of supplies to be sent to Syria and the refugees in camps around Europe, another example of a pupils altruistic approach, she said that not only did she want to encourage others to change their views but also wanted to practically help at the same time. Seeing young people really step up to the mark and challenge those in the local community and within their families about some of the most important issues in today’s world is what Citizenship is all about. The actions are taking place outside of school much more than ever before with very few taking the easy road of a class survey and interview with a member of staff.

Never have young people been more interested in politics and elections than in recent times. I always run a mock election to mirror the national ones, it is interesting to see how ‘voter engagement’ has increased in the last 2 years and how pupils are wanting to discuss in their form groups the different issues associated with the elections. It is interesting to see some pupils arguing (politely and appropriately) with staff the different social issues and the political parties approaches to them and disagreeing with each other, its challenging and inspiring to see so many young people with strong opinions and ideals, that respect the British values and are prepared to stand up for what they believe in. You see, citizenship is so much more than learning how voting systems work, what your human rights are and how the UK plays a part in the world, it is about how you can be all you can be and how you can contribute to society in a way that is much more than a good grade on a certificate. It’s about how the law is there to keep us safe and enable us to achieve great things and change the world, justice is a thing to be celebrated as is democracy as citizenship enables us to accept the views of others, we don’t necessarily agree with them, but they have their views just as I have mine and citizenship promotes respect.

Looking at issues that affect society in an objective manner enables young people to develop their own views and opinions, I have seen the pupils who have taken the subject on a whim become inspired and achieve so much more than a grade; confidence and resilience is developed as well as a sense of pride in our national values. No longer repeating xenophobic phrases about benefits claimants and migrants heard in the local communities these young people are asking questions for themselves and seeking out the answers they require from numerous sources and developing the value of tolerance as they realise the benefits of a multi-cultural society and recognise the perpetuation of negative media coverage as not necessarily representative of the issue.

Citizenship is an essential subject area, I know we deliver a full GCSE option but it is a subject that goes beyond the qualification, we have a strong school council and pupil ambassador program. Our young people are proud of the school and what to be a part of it, they are keen to give back and support those joining us in the future, both pupils and staff. Pupil voice plays a part in the school and representatives from the school council report to the governors regularly on what they are doing. Good citizenship education gives young people a purpose and opportunity to get involved with the things that affect them, gives them a voice and the chance to participate in change.

We are a very different society today from the ‘make do and mend’ Britain of the WW2 era but we have not forgotten the values that we have fought so hard to keep, our young people are valuable
and citizenship education needs to be quality and engaging, not a ‘make do’ curriculum paying lip service to what once was. The pupils are the future and we have a duty to equip them with the very best of tools so when they leave us and venture out into the world they can be useful and contribute positively to society. Not all will respond positively to the issues and opportunities given but there are those who will and the seeds that have been sown may be cultivated well into the future and challenge those who disagree. In a modern world pupils are plugged in to what is happening, they are more aware of world events and different opinions perpetuated from different groups thanks to social media. It has been essential to address the issue of ‘fake news’ and explain that sources of information needs to be verified and supported with evidence. Pupils are becoming more discerning and question the validity of some articles and stories presented to them, however, this can lead to them questioning me and my information! I would much rather have this though, than blind acceptance of an inappropriate ideology.

As a society we are facing many difficult issues that young people have questions about that are not always easy to answer, the recent terror attacks are galling and as adults we are often unable to coherently articulate how we feel about this. In response to the Manchester bombing, not that far away from us, we painted 22 bees around school as a lasting reminder of those who lost their lives, the pupils helped select the locations for these. Many pupils knew people in attendance and needed some way to process what had happened, some staff struggle to deal with the questions generated by such acts, citizenship can help address issues but also enable pupils to make some sense of the world when it appears to be broken.

To conclude, my personal view is based on my experience and passion as a teacher to deliver the best citizenship education I can, I am enabled and supported by my school and SLT in this as the subject is valued and timetabled well alongside other subjects. The best Citizenship education encompasses quality first teaching, the engagement of learners, visitors from the local council, MP’s, the Mayor, Magistrates, Environmental Officers to name a few, in addition to visits to London, Parliament, the town hall and other appropriate venues. As much thought and planning needs to go into the subject as any other curriculum area, the pupils will see the value if the school celebrates the subject and promotes the value of Citizenship Education.

21 August 2017