Submission of evidence in response to questions 5 and 9. **Barriers in learning political engagement for disadvantaged communities and how they can be addressed within the education system**

**Summary**

Disadvantaged school students have less access to participatory forms of learning Citizenship at school compared to their more advantaged peers and thus lose out on opportunities to learn the skills and attitudes for political engagement. This is one reason why disadvantaged communities feel left behind as they feel they have a limited voice in the decision making of the country. One explanation for why this is happening is due to the voluntary nature of these activities within the school environment. Advantaged students self-select to participate as they frequently have been shown to have had a head start in learning these skills and interest for political engagement already in the home. Our evidence suggests that access to compulsory citizenship education classes is not affected by social economic background in England. In addition, these classes are shown to have a stronger effect on disadvantaged students reducing the inequalities in future political engagement.

**Introduction**

White working class communities can be argued to feel left behind partly as a result of the English education system that reaffirms their political position and lack of voice in society. Although the education system often gives the appearance of being meritocratic and has the capacity to produce social mobility and improve life chances it often reproduces the status quo and even enhances differences. This is widely researched in terms of academic performance and social mobility into labour market outcomes but much less researched in terms of learning citizenship.
skills and social mobility regarding political outcomes in power and decision making. Our recent research on, ‘Tackling inequalities in political socialisation: A Systematic analysis of Access to and Mitigation Effects of Learning Citizenship at School’ (Hoskins, Janmaat and Melis forthcoming in the Journal Social Science Research) has recently addressed these questions and established;

1) The elements within the English education system that have formed a barrier to the learning of political voice of disadvantaged communities

2) How these barriers in the English education system can be overcome through Citizenship Education and the role that the education system can play in reducing socioeconomic differences in political engagement

We will address these two aspects in this order below.

1) The elements within the English education system that have formed a barrier to the learning of political voice of disadvantaged communities

Students learn citizenship attitudes, values, knowledge and skills through participatory approaches to learning that can be classified in 3 ways;

I. Real life or simulated political situations in the school, for example, school councils (Hoskins et al 2012).

II. Through the transfer and debating of political knowledge in citizenship education classes (Whiteley 2012) and,

III. Through using a participatory pedagogical approach to teaching and learning across all disciplines that invites the students to express their own opinions in class and to disagree openly with the teacher. This is often referred to in the literature as an ‘open climate of classroom discussion’, a pedagogical strategy that has been found to have a strong and
sustained positive influence on political engagement (Hoskins et al. 2012; Torney-Purta 2002; Hahn 1998; and Campbell 2008).

In our research, (Hoskins, Janmaat and Melis forthcoming), we found that disadvantaged youth have significantly less access to political activities in school and an open classroom climate for discussion (Table 1). Using the Citizenship Education Longitudinal dataset, that followed a representative sample of young people from schools in England 2002-2014 (starting at age 11-12) and using advanced statistical analysis, we found that from the age of eleven young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be involved in Political activities at school including student councils, debates, mock elections and less likely to perceive that they are in a school and class environment in which they are invited to contribute, state their own opinion and have their voice heard. This access to political learning, moreover, was influenced by social background for each year studied between the ages 11-16 years old (see table 1). We think that there is no justifiable reason why young people from different social backgrounds should have different levels of access to political learning during their compulsory years of education and this continual reinforcement over many years may well be contributing to certain communities feeling a lack of power and control in their lives.

Table 1. Social gaps in access to citizenship education, open climate of classroom discussion and political activities as learning sources for political engagement. The results of the OLS Regression analysis whilst controlling for gender and ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Round 1</th>
<th>Round 2</th>
<th>Round 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age 11-12</td>
<td>Age 13-14</td>
<td>Age 15-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship Education</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social &amp; Economic Background</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Climate</td>
<td>Social &amp; Economic Background</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One possible explanation for different levels of access to political activities in school is that these opportunities are likely to be voluntary and that young people from disadvantage backgrounds are more likely to opt out of these activities. For example, participating in debates or students councils may well be a choice and influenced by an individual’s existing levels of political efficacy, political skills and interest. These qualities could already be higher amongst students from more privileged social backgrounds as these aspects of competences are likely to be cultivated within more middle class home environments. There is clearly a case for making political activities at school compulsory for all students, across all classes and all schools. In addition, getting teachers to encourage students from less advantaged backgrounds to stand for positions in school councils could also play an important role in reducing political inequalities.

A second explanation concerns access to an open classroom climate. As this is a learning process rather than a specific activity it is more complicated to ensure access for all students. We argue that what is likely to be occurring is a result of miscommunication between disadvantaged students and more middle class teachers and middle class school environments. Thus young people from less privileged social backgrounds may feel less able to have their voice heard and to express their opinion in class. Better training of teachers to support open discussion across the whole curricular and school environment for all children regardless of their social background could be one method for enhancing access to this form of learning. In addition, highlighting to parents the importance of political discussions and supporting children to take decisions in the home could also be another useful avenue for policy development.
2) How these barriers in the English education system can be overcome through Citizenship Education and the role that the education system can play in reducing socioeconomic differences in political engagement

Perhaps the most important finding from our recent research (Hoskins, Janmaat and Melis forthcoming) is on Citizenship Education. We found no evidence to suggest unequal access by social background or prior levels of political engagement on access to Citizenship Education (see table 1). Importantly we also found that Citizenship Education is beneficial for learning political engagement in every year studied. In fact using a specific statistical analysis to assess changes in political outcomes among children in England between ages 11 and 16 (Hoskins, Janmaat and Melis forthcoming) we also found Citizenship Education to be more effective in enhancing the political engagement levels of those from lower social backgrounds than of those from more privileged backgrounds, thus decreasing the differences between social groups intended political engagement. In England education is now compulsory until the age of 18. If citizenship education could also be made statutory until that age, it offers the prospect of further reducing social inequalities in political engagement. This promising finding regarding citizenship education builds on the research from Gainous and Martens (2012) who found similar results in the US.

In England citizenship education could be targeted at disadvantaged students, for example, within vocational education and training courses that in general include a higher intake of socially disadvantaged students. Nevertheless, we would not argue that citizenship education should only be for less advantaged students as not all more privileged young people are socialised into political engagement in the home and vice versa. We suggest that compulsory citizenship until 18 combined with ensuring quality citizenship education in vocational education and training are promising policy directions to support young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds to gain a greater political voice in the democratic system.

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