Active citizens and passive learning: A qualitative study of students' perspectives on citizenship education across England and Wales

Eleni Andreouli (Corresponding Author)
School of Psychology & Counselling, The Open University, United Kingdom
eleni.andreouli@open.ac.uk
ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2182-5549

Sandra Obradović
School of Psychology & Counselling, The Open University, United Kingdom
sandra.obradovic@open.ac.uk
ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7930-3909

Katharine Young
Cardiff School of Sport and Health Sciences, Cardiff Metropolitan University, United Kingdom
kyoung2@cardiffmet.ac.uk
ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2438-888X

Tom Burton
Shout Out UK, United Kingdom
tom@shoutoutuk.org

Annika Hecht
London School of Economics, United Kingdom
annika.hecht78@gmx.de
ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0942-2720

Abstract

Across the UK there has been a steady, but rising, concern over young people's political engagement. Citizenship education (CE) is one policy response to this lack of engagement, seeking to mould young people's transition to full citizenship according to prevailing values and ideals of citizenship. In this paper, we examine CE in England and Wales reporting on the findings of twenty focus groups with secondary school students across ten schools. We identified four representations in how students represented good citizenship: Communitarian; civic; transactional; and rights-based citizenship. We also found, across our focus groups, a clear preference for practice-based teaching that connects abstract ideas around citizenship into lived experience – which students missed in actual CE practice. In the discussion of the paper, we draw on these findings to make recommendations for future CE provision in the UK and more broadly.

Keywords

Youth citizenship; everyday citizenship; citizenship education; social psychology

1. Introduction

Across the UK there has been rising concern over young people's political engagement. 18–24-year-olds have the lowest voter turnout, including in the most recent UK general election in July 2024 (Ipsos, 2024). Often, these statistics are used to argue for the rising political apathy among young people. However, research on political culture has argued that younger generations are indeed politically engaged, but that their political engagement differs from traditional forms of participation (Dalton, 2007; Norris, 1999; O'Toole, 2015). Dalton (2007), for example, argues that citizenship norms have shifted from duty-based, towards more 'engaged' citizenship norms. Being a 'good' citizen, then, becomes driven more by self-expressive values rather than engaging in forms of participation defined by elites (such as voting). These norms differ across generations (Hooghe & Oser, 2015) and are important to understand as they come to guide political behaviour (Flanagan, 2013).

Where do these citizenship norms come from? Different 'socialising' agents have been studied within this literature, including the role of family (Hooghe & Stiers, 2022), peers (Quintelier, 2015) and school (Henn & Foard, 2014). Our interest in this paper is in the role of schools, as previous research highlights its relevance for developing democratic knowledge and skills (Kisby & Sloam, 2014), patterns that extend into adulthood as well (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Our interest is in the perceptions that young people have of what it means to be a good citizen, and if, and how, that is reflected in their perceptions of the citizenship education they receive.

Research on CE shows that it has a positive impact on democratic engagement, increasing political interest, participation, and voter turnout (Campbell, 2019; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Keating & Janmaat, 2016; Whiteley, 2014). This impact has been found to be long-lasting, with skills and values formed in school during adolescence shaping political habits and identities well into adulthood (Weinberg & Flinders, 2018). Yet, as Weinberg (2021) argues, there is a paradox at play – while citizenship education has a positive impact in schools when it is taught, its prevalence and provision is scant. Citizenship education (CE) was introduced in the UK with the aim of tackling declining levels of social capital (Kisby & Sloam, 2012). Because education is a devolved matter, the implementation of CE has varied across the four UK nations (Jerome, 2022). Recent studies in the English context, highlight significant gaps in the accessibility and quality of citizenship education. A 2022 Department for Education report found that only 24% of secondary students received weekly citizenship lessons, and another quarter had never received any at all. Furthermore, just 16% of schools employed a trained citizenship education teacher, highlighting a severe shortage of qualified instructors (DfE, 2022). This has ramifications for the teaching of citizenship education as teachers feel fundamentally unprepared (Sant et al., 2024). Consequently, this divergence in educational provision can in turn have the opposite effect from what it intends, exacerbating socioeconomic, gender and racial inequalities in political engagement (e.g., Body et al., 2024; Janmaat et al., 2022).

Despite the positive effects of citizenship education on democratic engagement, recent work highlights how its framing continues to prioritise traditional forms of political

participation at the expense of other forms of citizenship such as digital citizenship (Mirra et al., 2022; Peart et al., 2023). This can potentially clash with young students' own norms of what it means to be a citizen, inadvertently removing their agency as citizens in the making (Brodie-McKenzie, 2020).

To be effective, citizenship education needs to relate, and respond, to young people's lives, their interests, and ambitions. What seems crucial then, is a better understanding of how young people themselves make sense of what it means to be a good citizen, in their own words, and how this might promote forms of political engagement that are not often recognized as such by political institutions.

As such, the present paper sets out the following two aims:

(i) To provide an in-depth understanding of experiences and views of citizenship and CE from students themselves

(ii) Provide useful recommendations for CE in UK and generally so that it speaks to young people's interests and ambitions.

2. Youth citizenship in the everyday

In this paper, we approach youth citizenship as an everyday practice (Andreouli, Figgou & Kadianaki, 2025). Our approach is based on social psychological research of citizenship and on work from critical youth studies which treat young people as agentic, rather than 'incomplete', citizens (Lister, 2008; Smith, Lister, Middleton & Kox, 2005). Below we outline our perspective by drawing attention to three interconnected dimensions of youth citizenship, that it is: (i) citizen-focused; (ii) practice and process oriented; and (iii) relational.

Social psychological work on citizenship over the past several years (e.g. Condor, 2011; Stevenson et al., 2015; see Andreouli, Figgou & Kadianaki, 2025, for an overview) has adopted a critical social constructionist approach that conceptualises constructions of citizenship as cultural resources which are socially elaborated and that are drawn upon in everyday interactions (Haste, 2004).

This citizen-focused perspective on everyday citizenship (Andreouli, 2009; Andreouli, Figgou & Kadianaki, 2025) marks a clear departure from more conventional work in the field of citizenship studies, which has traditionally focused on legislative and policy frameworks across time and space and/or on normative theoretical of models of citizenship. Complementing normative articulations of the concept of citizenship, social psychological work has shed light on 'common-sense' understandings of citizenship. Lay political thinking about citizenship may be connected to but it does not overlap with normative models. There is unavoidably a mismatch, even a tension, between the relatively neat typologies of citizenship *in theory* and the messiness of citizenship *in practice* (Isin, 2024).

Socio-psychologically, common-sense, as a form of lay knowledge, has been theorised through the lens of social representations theory. Social representations are systems of knowledge that are jointly constructed and elaborated by social groups and communities in their everyday lives (Sammut et al., 2015). They can be described as the symbolic infrastructure of everyday culture, enabling people to navigate their social worlds (pragmatic function) and to interact with others on the basis of shared knowledge (communicative function).

Social representations of citizenship are grounded in people's conceptions of the social order, that is, on normative models of social relations (Staerklé, 2009). Research in Switzerland by Politi, Sarrasin and Staerklé (2022) has shown, for example, that citizenship is represented as matter of deservingness for migrants who wish to naturalise as citizens. To evidence their deservingness, migrants need to abide by strict naturalisation criteria (financial, cultural, linguistic). This representation is anchored on a transactional understanding of the social order, whereby migrants 'pay back' to their 'host' society in order to gain citizenship rights. Importantly, and illustrating the contextual and relational quality of citizenship representations, citizenship is represented differently *by* different groups of people and *in relation to* different groups of people. For example, rather than an *earned* right, citizenship may be represented as a *given* right when it comes to ethnic nationals. Whilst for migrants, citizenship is often seen as a privilege that can be earned, for ethnic nationals it can more readily be represented as a birthright, stemming from an immutable ethnic essence (Kadianaki & Andreouli, 2015).

A similar approach to citizenship that is relational and sensitive to power differentials has been developed by critical young studies scholars. Drawing on feminist critiques, Lister (2008) has drawn parallels between the exclusion of women and the exclusion of young people from full citizenship. This work has brought to the fore and has challenged the assumptions that underly young people's exclusion from political life: that they lack capacity, responsibility and independence, and that they should be restricted to the private sphere (like women have historically been).

Lister's argument for youth citizenship rests on an understanding of citizenship-as-practice:

> [The] recognition of children as citizens is not so much arguing for an extension of adult rights (and obligations) of citizenship to children but recognition that their citizenship practice (where it occurs) constitutes them as *de facto*, even if not complete *de jure*. (Lister, 2008, p. 18)

Citizenship as practice demands that we adopt a more expansive conceptualization of the political that includes youth culture, including leisure and consumption (e.g. Harris, 2015). Thus, whilst routinely seen as a-political, the spaces that young people occupy and the activities that they engage with can become sites where rights are enacted, claimed, or restricted. This is a point well made by critical youth studies scholars (e.g. Kallio, Wood & Häkli, 2020; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Wood, 2022) and by social and community psychologists (Jayawardana & Sonn, 2025/in press). For example, Gray and

Manning (2022) studied young people's experiences of urban public spaces in South England. They found that, far from being open and accessible to all, public spaces are highly regulated sites where young people are commonly excluded (and feared) because they are seen as not adopting appropriate citizenship behaviour. Seemingly mundane practices, such being in a park at nighttime, is often seen as problematic and concerning, with the police intervening to ask young people to leave and go home. Young people often navigate such narratives of being 'troublesome' by appropriating micro-geographical spaces like park benches (Gray & Manning, 2022). Such small acts of place appropriation can be understood as 'mundane' acts of citizenship; they are practices through which young people realise themselves as bearers of rights to public space.

Our approach to citizenship in this paper is firmly processual: it is made, unmade and negotiated in spaces of everyday encounters. This is particularly evident in youth citizenship, which can be understood as a liminal space of transition between the not-as-yet citizenship of childhood to the full citizenship of adulthood (Wood, 2012, 2017; Walther, 2023). This transition is not a linear passage between a stage of political immaturity to a state of fully recognised citizenship. Rather, youth citizenship is characterised by an ambivalence between the actual/performed political agency by young people, on the one hand, and their lack of formal recognition as citizens, on the other hand. This is fundamentally a tension between 'politics' (denoting everyday forms of political action) and 'Politics' (referring to the formal recognition of citizenship as status; Wood, 2022).

Everyday 'politics' and institutionalised 'Politics' may align but they can also be in conflict. For instance, the school is simultaneously a space of both "youthful agency" and "adult control" (Wood, 2022, p. 338). The tension between 'Politics' and 'politics' in youth transitions is particularly evident in citizenship education. CE is a formalised rite of passage that seeks to scaffold young people's transition from a stage of presumed political immaturity to the stage of responsible citizenship according to prevailing citizenship ideals. In this paper, we seek to understand how students in England and Wales perceive CE and how far it corresponds to their own views of citizenship. Ultimately, we are concerned with drawing constructive links between CE as a technology for scaffolding young citizens, on the one hand, and students' own interests, views and ambitions, on the other.

3. Methods

This paper reports findings from a qualitative research project in schools of Wales and England, led by the first two authors. We conducted focus groups with students and interviews with teachers and headteachers. This paper reports on the student focus group findings. A follow-up study reported elsewhere (Hecht, Obradović & Andreouli, 2025) included a UK-wide survey of attitudes towards CE among the general population.

Research in Wales was conducted in 2022-23, during the roll-out of the new Curriculum for Wales, which includes a provision for creating "informed, ethical citizens of Wales

and the world" (Welsh Government, 2022) as one of the four purposes of the new curriculum. Whilst citizenship education does not constitute a subject in its own right under this framework, it permeates its ethos and informs its overall approach. In Wales, we worked with five schools in different parts of the country. To achieve diversity in the sample, we worked with three Welsh-medium and two English medium schools. We conducted 10 focus groups with a total thirty-five Y7-8 students (11-12 yrs.).

The data in England were collected in 2023-24. In the English context, citizenship education is compulsory for students in key stages 3-4, aged 12-16, but its delivery in the classroom can vary substantially across schools (Weinberg, 2021). We worked with five schools from different parts of England including areas of relatively high/low deprivation, in London and the North of England. We conducted 10 focus groups with a total of seventy-nine students in key stages 3 and 4 (Y9-10, 14-15 yrs.). Ethical approval for both studies was granted by the Open University Ethics Committee.

The same topic guide was used for all focus groups. It was semi-structured, starting with warm-up questions about the local area and the school, followed by questions about citizenship, young citizenship, and democracy. Questions about these concepts were framed in the abstract (e.g. what comes to mind when you think of citizenship) and in 'real-life' contexts, prompting students to give examples from their own experiences. Students were also asked to reflect on citizenship in the nations where they resided, Wales or England, compared to other parts of the UK and the world. The topic guide concluded with questions about citizenship education in schools, in relation to its content and its usefulness for future life.

The data were transcribed and translated into English (for Welsh medium school data)[1]. Analysis was conducted by the first two authors of the paper. The data from Wales were collected and analysed first; English data were collected the following year and were analysed separately. Both sets of data were analysed through a collaborative thematic analysis (Cornish, Gillespie & Zittoun, 2014) focusing on students' understandings of citizenship, democracy and citizenship education.

The specific process we followed was:

Initially, both authors coded a small sample of the focus group data and developed a coding frame separately. In a collaborative analysis session, the two coding frames were brought together and checked for overlaps and discrepancies. Following discussion, the authors agreed on a shared coding frame which they used to analyse the remaining data. In a final collaborative analysis session, when all data had been coded, the two authors reviewed and revised the coding framework and grouped codes together into broader sub-themes and themes. We followed the same process for the Welsh and English data.

[1] For ease of presentation, focus group extracts used in this paper are translated from Welsh to English where applicable.

Following the separate analysis of the two datasets, the authors brought together the two (Welsh and English) coding frames and considered common patterns and themes. We used the theory of social representations as a guide for integrating the two coding frameworks. We were particularly interested in mapping out students' representations of citizenship and their constituent features (relations, norms and practices). As will show, our collaborative thematic analysis produced four main representations in students' accounts of citizenship: communitarian, transactional, civic/republican, and rights-based.

In addition to representations of citizenship, we were also interested in exploring students' views of citizenship education in their schools. The second analytic section below presents, briefly, our analysis of students' perspectives of CE. As CE in the two nations differs, we only present here some overarching themes that were recurrent across focus groups in both sites.

4. Findings

4.1 Representations of (good) citizenship

Citizenship as an abstract concept, was unfamiliar to students and difficult to explain when asked directly by the facilitator. In contrast, when asked to consider what it meant to be a 'good citizen', the concept of citizenship was more readily understood. When discussing good citizenship more concretely, students were able to articulate what they understood by citizenship and relate it to their own experiences, very often being able to discuss complex ideas and navigate contentious topics.

As Table 1 shows, we identified four main representations in students' accounts of citizenship: *communitarian, transactional, civic, and rights-based*. In line with the theory of social representations, we draw attention to the relational elements of citizenship representations (who or what is citizenship defined against), normative content (who is the ideal citizen in a given understanding of social order) and its everyday enactments (practices through which people realise themselves as citizens).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

4.1.1. Communitarian citizenship

When students were asked about what being a good citizens meant to them, for the most part, they drew on a communitarian approach to citizenship. They mentioned topics around community contribution, such as volunteering, and helping behaviours, such as being nice to others in more need, and being respectful and tolerant. This was, for the most part, a local-oriented approach to citizenship which emphasised inter-community relations in the neighbourhood, as the extract below illustrates.

EXTRACT 1
I: What is a good citizen?
BS5: Good citizen, yes, is if you get a city everyone needs to do basic things everyone needs like respect, not doing bad things, doing recycling things like that.
I: Are you good citizens?
BS5: Yep, because in the house I help dad and I just do football and a lot of sports and when I see rubbish I pick it up and put it in the bin, I work hard and make people laugh.
I: How do you help your dad?
BS5: So my dad is a caretaker in primary school and I just help him there and in the house.
I: What do you do to be a good citizen?
BS4: Well, to be honest I'm a good citizen because I'm not in the community often but when I'm here I'm not really out enough to be a bad citizen.
I: What is a bad citizen then?
BS5: Like people who don't follow the rules. People who litter everywhere and be nasty to everyone. (BFG2, Wales)

Students in Extract 1 respond to the interviewer's question about good citizenship by making reference to 'mundane' acts of everyday care towards others and the local community, such as litter-picking and recycling. As its mirror image, bad citizenship is narrated in terms of littering "everywhere" and being "nasty to everyone". Citizenship is thus represented as a matter of civil behaviour, towards other people and in relation to the neighbourhood. It is interesting to note too that in Extract 1, not being present in the public as a young person is presented as one way that young people may act as good citizens ("to be honest I'm a good citizen because I'm not in the community often but when I'm here I'm not really out enough to be a bad citizen"). This alludes to a representation of young people as troublemakers which fundamentally excludes them from the realm of citizenship (Hart, 2009).

Our finding about the prominence of communitarian citizenship among students, echoes existing literature which shows that young people across Western societies are less active in traditional 'electoral' forms of citizenship and more interested in 'engaged' (c.f. Dalton, 2007) community-based citizenship through active local participation and helping (e.g. Dalton, 2008; Flanagan, 2013). This representation of citizenship decouples institutions of government from the practice of citizenship. The focus is on everyday contexts, but these too appear de-politicised because there is no consideration of the role of power in community relations. The community is assumed to be a politically neutral space of interpersonal engagement where people are expected to be civil and giving towards each other.

In some student discussions, there was also a paternalistic quality to citizenship-related accounts of helping, as Extract 2 shows.

EXTRACT 2

I: What do you think it means to be a good citizen? Can you give me examples?
MBSS8: Taking care of others.
I: What would that look like?
MBSS8: Maybe like volunteering, food banks
I: Do you mind saying what Food banks are? What would that mean?
MBSS8: Like giving food to people who are in need. (MBSS8, England)

Communitarian helping, epitomised in the act of local volunteering, is as articulated as an act of charity towards "people who are in need". Yet, as noted earlier, within these communitarian narratives of citizenship, there was no reflection on the part of the students about the political and structural dimensions and roots of social inequalities (which create the need for food banks in the first place). Such considerations were present in the rights-based representation of citizenship (see 4.1.4), which was also drawn upon by students, albeit to a smaller extent.

4.1.2. Civic citizenship

In addition to communitarian citizenship, the most prominent representation of citizenship in the focus groups was civic citizenship. Compared to communitarian representations, the civic or republic conception of citizenship was aligned with more traditional norms of citizenship, stressing the role of the state as a key political actor over and above the role of citizens and communities. Good citizenship in this representation refers to the active participation of citizens in the established political system, what may be referred to as 'Politics' as opposed to 'politics' (c.f. Wood, 2022) in the everyday. Voting in elections was the most frequently mentioned political behaviour through which people realise themselves as citizens:

EXTRACT 3
I: How would, how would that be part of being a good citizen?
MBSS3: Being a good citizen, I guess just rooting for the right person.
MBSS1: I think yeah, I think that voting, when you vote it doesn't really matter who you vote for, but being a good citizen is taking part in, like, decisions made that affect you. And so, voting sort of plays a part in that because you're voting for who you think (…) good or like support your, the place you're living. (MBSFG2, England)

As the extract above shows, voting is seen as a crucial form of political action, not simply because it gives the electorate the opportunity to get their preferred candidate or party in power, but in its own right. It is the principle of casting a vote rather than its outcome that makes it important for citizens' democratic participation.

Yet, students were also critically reflective of the limits of citizens' political representation through electoral politics. As Extracts 4 and 5 show, students also appeared disillusioned about ability and will of the political class to represent citizens' interests.

EXTRACT 4
MSS13: I feel like the people who are like running, I feel like there are just like, rich people who just don't understand anything that we go through. (MSFG2, England)

EXTRACT 5
SSS3: like, um, how do I say this ... umm, like, the government should do like what, like, for example, when you're voting for them, they say, I'll do this, I'll do that. But when they get to the, to the position, they don't. (SSFG1, England)

In Extract 4, politicians are presented as out-of-touch with citizens because of their superior class position, and in Extract 5, politicians are presented as instrumentally seeking to advance their own interests' rather than citizens'. In both extracts the social contract between elected representatives and citizens, which forms of the basis of democracy in the civic representation of citizenship, is violated.

4.1.3 Transactional citizenship

In the focus groups, citizenship was also discussed in terms of citizens' financial contribution to the community by having a job and paying taxes. Citizenship in these accounts was anchored on a transactional understanding of social relations between co-nationals. The political subject, the citizen, was modelled on the image of the homo-economicus, who operates 'rationally' to maximise their self-interest as well as the public good. Accordingly, the good citizen was represented as the productive citizen, whilst the bad citizen was constructed as the burdensome citizen who takes more than they give.

EXTRACT 6
I: What would a good citizen do?
MSS6: Abide by law. Be a productive member of society. Like getting a good job, like a lawyer or something.
[...]
I: So, do you think there's a difference between being a sort of citizen generally or do you think there's something about being a young citizen or being young, is it different in any way? Or do you think it is essentially the same as what's expected of adults?
MSS11: I think a young citizen, like, their job in society is to, like, learn and grow into an older person who will contribute more to society like. Like, at the moment, we can't do much, we can't get a job. We can't pay for finances or anything, we can just do the best we can to learn about these things and prepare for the future. (MSFG1, England)

Extract 6, very explicitly, presents an image of the good citizen as the productive citizen. It is worth considering who is excluded (c.f. Lister, 2008) from this

transactional representation of citizenship as articulated in this discussion. "[B]eing a productive member of society", as MSS6 suggests, is not about having any job, but it is about having a "good job" like a lawyer. This is a classed representation of citizenship – with people from working-class and lower socio-economic backgrounds being excluded from the ideal of the good citizen. It is also a gendered perspective because it excludes those members of a society, particularly women, who undertake most of (unpaid) domestic work such as childcaring and other care work. Furthermore, the emphasis on financial transaction as the basis for good citizenship excludes young people themselves. As MS11 argues later on in the same discussion, because young people cannot get a job and contribute financially to society, this also means that they "can't do much". Youth citizenship here is constructed as incomplete. But unlike other adult-centred understandings of citizenship, the reason that young people are not full members is not because they are politically inactive, but because they are financially unproductive.

In accordance with the transactional citizenship representation, students in some discussions, expressed a preference for CE teaching that develops financial and employability skills, as Extract 7 shows.

> EXTRACT 7
> *I: What are the things you think you need or would like from your citizenship or PSHE Lessons?*
> [...]
> SSS6: I wanna learn how to apply for a job. Whether you get taken by a room yourself to learn about it or as a class, other jobs, maybe like, what's going on your CV when you're applying and what not
> *I: Any other topics you'd like help on? Or is it purely just jobs?*
> SSS8: How To buy a house and how to like, mortgage it
> SSS9: How to make a lot of money before you buy a house, to get a better house. (SSFG2, England)

Practical teaching about life skills was a recurrent theme in students' discussions about citizenship education and related subjects (see also 4.2 below), and it echoes our survey findings (Hecht, Obradović & Andreouli, 2025) which showed that adults in the UK placed greater importance to skills teaching in citizenship education (in particular, financial and digital literacy) rather than values and civil behaviour. Such life skills covered other topic as well, like digital skills, which were very often they were couched in terms of how to get well-paid jobs and be financially savvy (e.g. how to invest money). Arguably, our data show that students were aware of the financialised society in which they were growing up and were keen to prepare themselves for successfully navigating it as future citizens.

4.1.4. Rights-based citizenship

The fourth representation of citizenship drawn upon by students was rights-based. This was the most citizen-oriented and citizen-empowering construction of citizenship in the

focus groups. It placed more emphasis on citizens' own capacity to act as political agents, echoing, in some student accounts, liberal notions of citizenship that foreground individual freedoms (c.f. Janoski & Gran, 2009). Compared to the other three, it was also more critical towards power asymmetries between groups in society (but not always – see Extract 10 below).

The rights-based representation of citizenship was mobilised less commonly by students in the focus groups. It was often drawn upon when students had some prior understanding and/or family experiences of migration into the UK. Extract 8 is taken from a focus group with students in an inner-city and ethnically diverse school in England where many students have a migrant family background.

> EXTRACT 8
> MBSS10: Is it being able to live in a country with like all legal documents and stuff? [...]
> *I: These are all really good answers. If you can give me as much detail as you can, that really helps. Thank you.*
> MBSS9: I think it's like the rights and stuff like that, that you get to live in a certain country or like the area, you know. (MBSFG1, England)

In Extract 8 citizenship is related to the rights afforded by the state to its legal citizens. The two students (MBSS10 and MBSS9) seem to implicitly refer to the rights that migrants obtain when they acquire citizenship in a country. MBSS10 makes reference to "being able to live in a country" and "having legal documents", and similarly, MBSS9 mentions rights to "live in a certain country". Citizenship is thus linked in this extract with immigration and specifically with the new powers and entitlements that new citizens acquire when they move from the position of the migrant to the position of the citizen. The two students in Extract 8 mobilise a representation of citizenship that is about empowerment and freedom, particularly the right to live in a country – which is the starting point for securing a good life in the future. This future-oriented construction of citizenship is most evident in Extract 9, which like Extract 8, comes from students in an ethnically diverse school of England.

> EXTRACT 9
> SSS2: I just think citizenship is just like, it's just like trying to start afresh in a new place, and then you just getting used to it. And yeah. And then by the time you get, like, papers and all, you feel more confident, walking around.
> SSS1: And also getting the passport because this is their country's passport. (SSFG1, England)

In Extract 9 citizenship is explicitly linked with the opening of future life possibilities (starting "afresh in a new place"). This discussed by the students as both a matter of legal recognition, made concrete through "papers" and "passport", and in terms of a sense of personal agency and empowerment ("you feel more confident, walking around").

In both Extracts 8 and 9, rights-based citizenship is about people's *freedoms to*. As noted, these accounts look to the future and foreground citizens' agency and empowerment through the recognition of rights. Put differently, rights are seen as possibilities for action, and citizenship is about securing and enacting rights. In the next extract below students also mobilise a rights-based representation of citizenship but in this case, they make reference to rights as something that should be respected or tolerated.

> EXTRACT 10
> *I: If you had to describe what you think it means to be a good citizen, what would come to your mind? So have a little think and then say.*
> SSS2: Tolerance.
> *I: Tolerance? What d'you mean by that?*
> SSS2: Tolerance, where I come from, things like LGBTQ it was like, not accepted. And then like you, you're, you're like, forced to live in a country where there's like people have freedom to do whatever they want. And then you do, you don't, you're not allowed to discriminate, so you just have to tolerate it. (SSFG1, England)

Extract 10 echoes a liberal conception of citizenship which emphasises tolerance for individual liberty (Janoski & Gran, 2009). Here the emphasis is not *on freedom to*, as in Extracts 8 and 9, but on a more passive understanding of *freedom from* (discrimination in this case). The students refer particularly to issues of sexual and gender diversity which, in the UK, is protected by law, as compared to these students' countries of origin. In this liberal rights-based representation of citizenship, one group's rights necessitate duties for other groups. Further, the students' reference to the notion of tolerance foregrounds the majority's power and its generosity over the minority's agency and entitlement.

4.2 Citizenship in the school

The complexity with which students often articulated issues of power, belonging and political agency was not fully matched by the quality of citizenship education, as discussed by students. Whilst a certain lack of interest in school subjects for (pre)teens may be expected, the discrepancy between students' complex accounts of citizenship, on the one hand, and their views of the poor quality of CE provision, on the other hand, is important. This discrepancy suggests that, to a significant extent, schools have been unable to build on students' political capacity in order to develop thought-provoking and engaging CE material.

For the most part, students either thought that CE in schools was non-existent or inefficient in preparing them for the future of full citizenship and political (and life) responsibility. As opposed to more interactive and creative subjects (like drama), the delivery of CE-related subjects was discussed as inconsequential, irrelevant, even boring – as Extract 11 illustrates.

EXTRACT 11
I: What could they do better to teach you to learn to be better citizens?
BS5: Like acting it out maybe?
[...]
I: Have you seen people come and act things out at school?
BS5: Yes, in drama we've done a lot of things like acting in the circus, we've done that this year. And acting someone fighting and you need as separate them. I really like drama because of that and in English we do a lot of acting like Shakespeare and stuff and I really like that.
BS4: I think literally just do it, so we don't just look at the board and write things down. Because if we do it that way, we don't take it in because it doesn't feel important. They don't do anything interactive. If they do something more colourful because often it's just a plain whiteboard with a lot of writing on the screen in really boring font and I don't learn much.
(BFG2, Wales)

As the extract above shows, students show a preference for student and practice-based pedagogy as opposed to teacher-focused whiteboard teaching. The students discuss drama teaching as an example pedagogical approach where students can "act out" what they are taught and most educationally effective and fun.

Similarly, Extract 12 below presents a teaching scenario where students actively play out a scenario of political decision-making, which requires combining big thinking around social priorities (healthcare, education etc) with pragmatic decision-making considering financial constraints in the here-and-now.

EXTRACT 12
MSS11: We've done that before we did it in Year 8 and it was actually quite fun. We all got to like, become our own parties.
I: What did you do? What was the setup?
MSS8: We just got into different groups, and we just got a piece of paper, and we discussed what our, like, main priorities in society like, if it was education, if it was health care. And then we actually got to vote for the person who had the best speech and like the best ideas of what we should do.
MSS4: And also, you've got money in that lesson, and you had to say, I want to spend that amount of money on that, like education, or healthcare or something like that. But you have to go with a certain budget.
(MSFG1, England)

In short, students in research in Wales and England showed a clear preference for practice-based teaching that connects abstract ideas around citizenship, participation, democracy, into lived experience. As noted above, this also echoes findings from our UK-wide survey on CE (Hecht, Obradović, & Andreouli, 2025). In that work, we found that the general population of the UK find CE provision rather

poor and shows a preference for “real-world” applied skills teaching that would nurture young people into responsible citizens (e.g. financial literacy, media literacy, critical thinking skills). Consequently, our findings suggest that students want citizenship education to resemble their own sense of citizenship as something that is situated in everyday practice, rather than a body of knowledge about political governance.

5. Discussion

Across the UK there has been a steady, but rising, concern over young citizens’ political engagement. Part of this concern is borne out of examining the low voter turnout among young people (Ipsos, 2024). Recent research has challenged the implicit link between political engagement and its direct evidencing through voting, arguing that younger generations are in fact politically engaged, but in ways that differ to traditional forms of participation, and are driven by diverging understanding of citizenship (Dalton, 2007; Norris, 1999; O’Toole, 2015).

The aim of the present paper has been to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences and views of students on citizenship and CE, and to consider how these findings can inform useful recommendations for ensuring that CE in the UK speaks to the interests and ambitions of young people. In examining the experiences and views of students across a sample of students aged 12-16 years in England and Wales, we found four main ways of representing what it means to be a good citizen, but with little understanding of the concept of citizenship in theory. The four representations include communitarian, republican, transactional and rights-based conceptualizations of citizenship.

Our analysis of the data highlights a tension between how citizenship is understood, and expressed, by young people, and how it is taught in school. Namely, for our participants, a central element of citizenship is not what it ‘means’ (i.e. knowledge about political institutions), but how it is ‘done’ (i.e. enacting one’s agency to have an impact). Being a good citizen depends on political and community participation. To be able to participate, in turn, students need to be taught relevant skills. As such, they (and the public alike; Hecht, Obradović, & Andreouli, 2025) have a desire for citizenship education that is less knowledge-based and more pragmatic, and skills based. This is also reflected in students’ views on CE in schools, where ‘acting out’ what they are taught is seen as both most educationally effective and fun, in contrast to being passive recipients of top-down information.

Both conceptually and educationally, citizenship is therefore understood and learned through practice. Considering that the UK government has recently (at the time of writing) undertaken a review of the existing national curriculum and assessment system in England, with the desire to “ensure they are fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people” (DfE), it is more important than ever to consider the views of young people themselves, and how these can be translated into actionable recommendations for policy.

To do so, it is important to, firstly, re-conceptualise our understanding of young people, not as citizens-in-the-making, but as young citizens in their own merit, a point also made by critical youth studies (Wood, 2017, 2022). Even before voting age, and before opportunities to formally engage in politics, young people can articulate and reason about complex political issues (e.g. inequality, privilege, representation) in the context of 'real-world' challenges. Relatedly, previous research has shown that voter turnout for young people is not linked so much to political efficacy (which might be in its infancy), but rather one's general self-efficacy develops through other domains in life (Condon & Holleque, 2013). As such, participatory approaches to education can work to foster this general sense of self-efficacy which in turn can have positive implications for future political engagement. Young people could also reflect on their own liminal positions as citizens – considering both their (potential and actual) capacity to act as citizen and the limitations of that stemming from their youthful spontaneity and carelessness.

It is important to reflect on the limitations of our study. The research reported in this paper is limited in its scope. Our study is in-depth and qualitative, therefore, our sample of participants and schools is relatively limited and not representative. Moreover, the research was conducted in England and Wales and thus, we cannot claim to represent the entirety of the UK. Nonetheless, as noted in the Methods section, we took steps to increase the diversity of our sample, recruiting schools from different parts of England and Wales, including areas of relatively high and low deprivation as well as English and Welsh medium schools. With these steps, we have sought to achieve maximum diversity of views and experiences, instead of representativeness. This has allowed us to draw broader theoretical implications from our findings and recommendations for areas of policy improvement. Further, despite our relatively sample size, we have been able to draw links with existing larger scale research, including our own UK-wide survey (Hecht, Obradović, & Andreouli, 2025). In taking this research further, we suggest that more qualitative work is conducted within other areas of the UK, not least Northern Ireland and Scotland where there are differences in the national curriculum. This should take place alongside more large-scale research of the entire population in the UK as well as in other comparable national contexts. This would allow for further interrogating the present findings and making more targeted policy recommendations on the basis of differences in the CE context and delivery.

To conclude and going back to the implications drawn from the present research, we argue that schools should build on students' existing political capacity, their agency and on their existing interests in political topics – which, as shown in our research, are multifaceted and often extend beyond traditional civic education topics to life skills. Our work suggests that CE should balance theory *and* practice and seek to empower young citizens by teaching theory *through* practice. For our participants, citizenship was a largely foreign concept, made concrete through relatability and practical teaching. To be effective, CE needs to be guided by students' own understandings of citizenship and their interests/ambitions (e.g. around life skills development). Therefore, there is a need to align experiences of citizenship with experiential teaching of citizenship. One way that this has been explored is using arts-based approaches (e.g. Enslin & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2013; Morgan, 2018). In much of this work, the focus has been on how

teaching arts has secondary benefits for the development of democratic and civic knowledge and skills, rather than using arts to develop citizenship skills and capacity. However, we would argue that using the principles of arts-based teaching, which emphasizes active, rather than passive, learning, can open new opportunities for teaching citizenship – a point made by some of the students in our own research. Indeed, as the principle of deliberative and participatory democracy itself emphasizes active 'doing' on the part of citizens as a requisite of healthy functioning democracies. Citizenship education should be guided by a practical, action-based pedagogy which builds on young citizens existing potential to think and act politically. Importantly, practical teaching needs to be aligned with young people's own interests and ambitions to be relevant and effective.

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Table 1. Representations of (good) citizenship

Representations of (good) citizenship				
	Communitarian	*Civic*	*Transactional*	*Rights-based*
Relational anchor	Interpersonal, Community (local context)	Social contract between citizens and the state (the 'polity')	Societal (national context)	Intergroup and Societal (local and national context)
Ideal citizen	Being nice, helpful	Law-abiding, politically literate, active	Productive worker	Empowered, agentic, respectful
Citizenship practice	Small acts of everyday care	Participation in 'Politics' (e.g. voting)	Economic contribution through work, taxation	Enacting and respecting rights