

EXPLORATIONS INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

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EXPLORATIONS INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL LITERACY

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This research project explored the key drivers of and barriers to young people's political knowledge, interest and engagement otherwise termed political literacy as they reached the age of enfranchisement. I add to the debate around political engagement for the largest politically unrepresented group in Britain, young people under the age of eighteen. As votes at sixteen remained an ongoing debate in the House of Commons my research provided insight and awareness about what supports young people to be politically aware and engaged citizens.

I took a participatory approach in this research by engaging members of the sample population as co-advisors during the research process to collaboratively develop data and methods together. Two phases of research supported the validity and trustworthiness of the study. Phase I provided predominantly quantitative data from a survey (n=200), whilst Phase II provided qualitative data from group interviews and an online ethnographic study (n=138). My study suggested characteristics and themes about the political literacy of young people in the sample group rather than claiming statistical significance from the data.

Key findings showed repeated claims of uncertainty over political knowledge. Mixed levels of political literacy were evident with a fair understanding of basic political principles contrasting with a gap in knowledge surrounding formal politics. Yet the data showed a sizeable number of participants were politically knowledgeable, politically interested, and reasonably well-informed or equipped for active citizenship, even with much lower than expected levels of receiving citizenship education in school. Therefore self-reported political uncertainty did not automatically reflect the actual political literacy of research participants.

A range of factors from a lack of self-confidence, rational ignorance, socio-economic opportunities, poor quality of information in the public sphere and a lack of trust in major media and Government sources were all found to contribute to uncertainty over politics and undermine the political literacy of young people.

Key words: Political literacy; political uncertainty; active citizenship; political participation

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Abbreviations

Advisory Group on Citizenship Education	AGCE
Black, Minority, Ethnic	BME
British Sociological Association	BSA
British Youth Council	BYC
Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study	CELS
Children’s Rights Alliance England	CRAE
Economic and Social Research Council	ERSC
Electoral Reform Society	ERS
End Violence Against Women	EVAW
International Panel on Climate Change	IPCC
Independent Press Standards Office (formerly PCC)	IPSO
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children	NSPCC
Office for National Statistics	ONS
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development	OECD
Press Complaints Committee (now IPSO)	PCC
Personal, Social, Health, Economic education	PSHE
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority	QCA
Sex and Relationship Education	SRE
United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child	UNCRC
Youth Citizenship Commission	YCC
Youth Media Agency	YMA

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Investigating Democracy

1.1 Problems with Democracy

A gloomy picture of young people's political engagement is often portrayed in the public sphere. Well documented instances of declining voter engagement (Butt and Curtice, 2010; Hansard Society, 2006-2012), are given, alongside commonly held notions of apathy or disinterest associated with young people and politics across western democracies (Power Inquiry, 2006; Zengotita, 2005: 129; Whitehouse and Bloom, 2015). Yet negative perceptions of poor voter turn-out tell only one part of the political engagement story and my research sought to find out what young people thought about their political knowledge and understanding, and which sources of information supported their political understanding and engagement in the public sphere.

Dispelling the gloom it is quite obvious by any measure that there are numerous examples of young people's political awareness and engagement at all levels of political activity in society (Catan, 2004; Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009; Henn and Foard, 2011). A few examples to illustrate this; the high turnout in the Scottish referendum in 2014 amongst 16-17 year olds, had an estimated 75% of the 66% young people registered using the opportunity to decide on Scotland's future (Baxter et al., 2015). Just under 970,000 young people voted for policies (Swan, 2015) to be included in the *UK Youth Parliament* manifesto for 2015. Two young people led organisations, the *British Youth Council* (BYC) and the *Youth Media Agency* (YMA) have run well-supported campaigns, the BYC with '*Votes at 16*', the YMA petitioned the Leveson inquiry in 2012, calling for better representations of youth in the national media. Finally, a young man called Owen Winter has run a campaign/on-line petition with '*Changeit.org*' in an attempt to change the UK voting system to proportional representation.

This study investigates young people's political knowledge, interest, skills and engagement, otherwise termed political literacy, as they reach the age of enfranchisement and their transition into adulthood. My research findings add to debates about developing or enabling active citizenship and political participation in the UK. Young people under eighteen, with a few anomalies, remain the largest politically unrepresented group in British society (Barber, 2007). Hence this attempt to better understand what young people's conceptualisations of politics were and how they viewed their political engagement, to compliment an existing body of knowledge in political science and education about young citizen's civic engagement

and political behaviour. In addition to contributing to the academic community the data gathered through this study support initiatives to increase political awareness and engagement on a local, regional and perhaps national levels.

Appreciating the ways that young people understood and engaged with politics is important especially when considering the great range of civic opportunities currently available to young people as they gain the franchise. Ever present cycles of local, regional, national and (until recently) European elections in Britain provide opportunities for political engagement for those reaching the age of enfranchisement. The European Union dubbed 2013 the '*Year of the Citizen*' and my research provides insight and awareness into what being a politically aware, engaged citizen might mean to young people living on a small island in Western Europe.

1.2 Young People's Political Knowledge

Despite the positive advances arising from United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNICEF, 2010) and accompanying legislation from the *Children's Act* 2004 (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2008a), with the right to participate in decision making and the right to good information to support this (Articles 12 and 13), underpinning much government rhetoric. It is easy to view young people as marginalised in society (Aitken, 2001; Roche and Tucker, 2002: 28; Catan, 2004), both from political decision making processes in their local communities on issues relevant to their lives and also from the more formal, political public sphere. During the lead up to the UK referendum on Europe in 2016, John Redwood MP was reported on the Today programme (Whitehouse and Bloom, 2015), claiming that the young people he had been meeting in schools were not interested in the EU issue¹. Redwood claimed that young people of 16 and 17 did not need to be able to vote on the issue and asserted that politically active teenagers were a "*myth put about by pro-Europeans*". My study unpicks further commonly held, similar beliefs held about young people and claims of their political apathy or disinterest, to see how accurate these types of portrayals were.

¹ Research about the UK Referendum on Europe found young people in the 18-24 age group were the most likely to vote remain, although young people were less likely to have voted than older people (Milne, 2016).

Prior to undertaking this academic mission I had over 15 years of experience of working with young people in a rural market town as a youth worker for Shropshire council. The chocolate box image of quaint Tudor streets and beautiful countryside that attracted wealthy incomers from Birmingham or London was sometimes at odds with the isolation and deprivation experienced by the young people growing up there in a low wage area. Trying to explain to people with well-paid jobs who can afford to run a car or else who live with the transport convenience of a city, about the drawbacks of using public transport to be able get to work on time, or the ability to get home in the evenings when the hourly buses stopped running at 6pm, was just one of many concealed difficulties that characterised young people's experiences of growing up in a high house price, low wage area.

My MA regarded the effectiveness of youth work participation strategies in South Shropshire and found that in terms of personal development for the young people the participation strategies used were quite effective. The problems appeared, as recognised in Shier's (2001) *Pathways to Participation*, by the *Carnegie Trust* (2008) and the *Listen and Change* (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2008b) report from *Participation Works* partnership, that the effectiveness of decision making relies on people and organisations beyond the young people I was working with, to listen and make change in their lives and communities. For my research I interviewed young people who had been involved in the *Unzipped Project* (South Shropshire Youth Forum, 2009) that had brought together young people from across South Shropshire to make positive changes in their local communities, culminating in a visit to Westminster to lobby the local MP. During the interviews to find out what participants' thought about the project I was struck by the comments made by one sixteen year old young woman, who giggled with embarrassment as she said she had no idea what democracy was. She went onto clarify that she thought democracy was important but she did not know what it meant. This thesis has allowed me to investigate further the political literacy of young people, this time mainly living in Cambridgeshire, to find out more about their political understanding and knowledge as they make their transitions into adulthood and the potential to take up full citizenship rights.

1.3 Guiding Concepts and Themes

I chose an interpretative methodology to reflect the world as young people saw it. My research aimed to provide a view of the world from their perspectives to compliment an emancipatory, transformative paradigm where young people were recognised for having their own political agency. Key to this interpretative understanding of young people's political knowledge and interest was an awareness of the diverse and multiple realities they experienced and how a vast range of intermingled influences affect them. Hence a social constructivist approach to political literacy was undertaken. Creating knowledge from the meanings young people used to describe and explain their political interactions rather than be confined to one "*convention of understanding*" (Gergen, 1999: 47) of what political might or should be was key to the interpretations.

The research was participatory in part as I engaged with the sample population as much as possible according to youth work tradition, greatly valuing the voluntary participation of young people during the research process rather than wanting to treat them as distant objects under study. Young people as participants and co-advisors have helped to collaboratively build a richer picture of data about their political literacy than I could have possibly imagined on my own.

Research into young people's political engagement draws on a body of literature predominantly from political science and education, with reference to critical pedagogy, geography, history and psychology research. My professional background and training was based on the work of critical pedagogics' such as Paulo Friere, Ivan Illich and Henry Giroux, hence my keen interest in the transformative power of education for communities through collaborative, non-hierarchical, and anti-oppressive systems.

A key focus of research in political science involves assessing voting behaviour, political motivation and political engagement in the adult population rather than the smaller body of work investigating levels of political knowledge or interest in young people. My study fits in the latter camp. Early studies that explored young people's political literacy were rather pessimistic about young people's political interest and knowledge (Stradling, 1977; Furlong and Stacey, 1991) with lack of political knowledge cited by young people as one of the main reasons for not voting (Mortimore, 2003:28; Lister et al., 2003; Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009). More recent research (Henn and Foard, 2011) has suggested a general

increase in young people's political interest with 63% of 18 year olds stating an interest in politics (up from 56% in 2003), whilst 64% claimed an interest in the 2010 General Election (up from 48% in 2003). The Hansard Political Engagement Audit report (2015:10-11) identify levels of political knowledge and political interest are important, as the more people know about an institution or process the more likely they will participate or get involved. These are encouraging findings however my study showed research participants with little confidence in their levels of political knowledge and understanding despite widespread interest and informal political activity. This is the focus of the work I present here.

1.4 Research Design

The research was designed in two phases and was multi-strategy, using a sequential transformative design (Robson, 2011:165). This flexible approach was applied so that young people would have opportunities to support the design and development of the research project wherever possible as well as helping meet the demands of me being a solitary researcher learning more about the field.

My predominantly qualitative study sought to explore levels of political knowledge and interest in young people initially from across Cambridgeshire, but then as the methods changed, included young people from across the UK and beyond, to provide a detailed picture of a small segment of young people's political literacy during 2011 - 2014. I explored what encouraged the research participants to be interested in politics and what sources were effective in supporting their political understanding and engagement as well as identifying barriers to their engagement.

Using a combination of methods clearly supported the reliability and trustworthiness of the study through providing three sources of data to check consistency of responses, identify key themes and compare and make contrasts between the types of data gathered. The direction of research was developed and refined in between Phase I and II with the help of three young advisors, who discussed the survey data with me, developed the content of the second research method, and supported reflections about the third research method.

Phase I was largely quantitative in design, whilst Phase II combined two qualitative methods with the findings from all methods integrated during the interpretation of the data. Both phases were subject to scrutiny by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel before the research was

allowed to proceed. The literature search revealed my study was rare for my topic area in combining all three research methods for such a small scale study.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis begins with my literature review in Chapter Two establishing definitions of terms and identifying key theorists, it also determines where my research is situated in between education and political science, and where the gap in knowledge occurred. Chapter Three confirms my methodological approach and the steps I have taken to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of my data. Here I explain my analytical framework and key aspects of my ethical considerations. Following on from these chapters in Chapter Four I reflect upon central issues of the fieldwork process and provide greater detail to show consistency and reliability to reinforce the legitimacy of my work.

Two subsequent chapters present the findings of my research. In Chapter Five I deal with central themes found in the research data around the topic of politics, highlighting the prevalence of uncertainty amongst research participants before offering participants' perceptions of politics and politicians. This chapter distinguishes between categories of formal and informal politics found in the data but concludes that a distinction between the two is not always easy to make. Chapter Six moves on to key themes raised by research participants in relation to two areas of the public sphere that are largely held responsible for educating citizens in a democracy. Namely the mass media and the education system. Findings regarding the media considered themes of trust, bias and representation whilst the focus in education were themes associated with the national curriculum, especially in relation to citizenship education and sex and relationship education (SRE).

Chapter Seven is where I discuss substantive issues over the political uncertainty found, explore the political agency of research participants, and address the accountability of the public sphere in educating citizens in greater detail.

Chapter Eight brings my thesis to a reflective, reflexive conclusion. Providing a clear account of my original contribution to knowledge, methodological strengths and weakness, areas for future research and implications for policy makers.

The Political Literacy of Young People

2.1 Critical, Deliberative Citizens

A key debate in political theory centres on understanding the Who? How? and Where? of collective citizen deliberation regarding major concerns in society (Gutmann, 1999; Dahlgren, 2002; Swift, 2002; Crick, 2002; Held, 2006). Political literacy is a cornerstone of this democratic process, the means by which citizens take an interest, develop critical awareness and engage in the 'public sphere'. The public sphere as envisioned by Habermas as, '*the domain where such things as public opinion can be formed...open in principle to all citizens...*' a place where '*public discussions concern...the practice of state*' (Habermas, 1973:288). For this thesis I align with participatory discourses and deliberative democratic theories, where the aspiration is for active citizen's to take part in the governance of society. Where deliberation between citizens and legislators over important issues, connects individual rights, intermediary groups and the state together (Warren, 2002; Eriksen and Weigard, 2004), and is encouraged and supported.

My literature review encompasses an early study by Stradling (1977), which set the scene for assessing the political awareness of young people and paved the way for the Crick Report (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998) that managed to establish citizenship education on the National Curriculum in England and Wales in 2002. Through to reports such as the *Youth Citizenship Commission* (2009) or the *Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study* (Keating et al., 2010) that evaluated the impact of citizenship education on young people who received the subject at school. Whilst also critically evaluating wider research from political science, education, geography, media studies, psychology and political science to acknowledge what is known about young people and their political literacy.

The literature review consists of two sections. The first considers research over the last forty years to illustrate the range of current knowledge about political literacy, established from a diverse range of fields. Key thinkers, ideas and concepts are introduced to assess where gaps in knowledge about political literacy were. The literature about political literacy combines a multiplicity of political and educational discourses and although the concept is non-age specific my thinking is directed towards understanding the experiences of young people as they assume their civic role in the public sphere.

The second section of this literature review regards the social construction of young people as political actors in the public sphere. I problematize the predominance of negative viewpoints associated with political representations of young people in the public sphere, prior to examining diverse typologies of young people's civic engagement that suggest "*one size fits all*" responses are inadequate for explaining what is happening. I draw on the eco-systematic model of civic engagement (Warwick et al., 2010) to illustrate the overlapping, intersectional nature of the area I am investigating. Whilst recognising the importance of a holistic approach to young people's political literacy my focus rests upon the role of the public sphere in supporting or hindering the development of political literacy.

Part One - Situating Political Literacy

2.1 Defining political literacy

'Political literacy' is a multifaceted and dynamic concept (Crick, 2000:61) encapsulating a range of skills, ability, interest and knowledge thought to enable young people's political engagement. Political literacy is a complex term to define due to a range of alternative definitions and the following terms were used as a basis for my literature search, which all included the phenomenon in some way. Wood (2009) was not alone in using the term '*active citizenship*' for his research into young people's political, moral and social capacities (Annette, 2009; Peterson and Knowles, 2009). American researchers commonly discussed the ideas of '*civic engagement*' and '*civic education*' (Flanagan and Watts, 2007; Flanagan and Levine, 2010) whilst European researchers tended to use '*civic competence*' or '*civic participation*' (Barber and Torney Purta, 2005; Hoskins et al., 2011). From political science and education '*deliberative democracy*' (Warren, 2002; Held, 2006), '*political participation*' (Thomas, 2010; Henn and Foard, 2011) and '*citizenship education*' (Crick, 2000; Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009; Keaton et al., 2011), were all commonly discussed central aspects of the skills or competencies associated with political literacy.

Debates over political literacy spanned both political and educational discourse whilst a range of other literacies such as '*critical literacy*', '*scientific literacy*' or '*media literacy*', further explored and explained practices of critical thinking and active learning across a diverse range of scientific and academic fields (Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck, 2004; Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012). As this thesis explores the links between politics, education

and the media, contributions from across the social sciences provided an interdisciplinary approach to exploring and explaining issues around young people's political literacy.

It was useful to consider two types of intertwined, underpinning knowledge in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of political literacy following Stradling's (1977) conceptualisation. His early study, although not without limitations largely arising from the survey method design provided rigorous evidence of over 4,000 young people's political literacy. The first type of knowledge was termed propositional knowledge; that is an individual holding factual knowledge about politics (Stradling, 1977:2). The second type of knowledge was procedural knowledge whereby an individual had the skills and competence to use the facts learnt (Stradling, 1977:2). Both types of knowledge reinforced and supported the other.

Without the 'know how' of procedural knowledge, the idea of political literacy remains inert. Lacking the ability to deliberate with the political 'facts' learnt can render the individual passive, merely in possession of information but not in a position to use it. Yet without developing a wider knowledge of political ideologies, structures and principles, procedural knowledge remains uninformed and ran the risk of being what Plato (Crick, 2000:16) saw as '*the rule of opinion over knowledge*'. Stradling explains it as,

"the politically literate person...would understand and use... political concepts... to construct simple conceptual and analytical frameworks; ...would be a rational thinker able to critically analyse and evaluate political information; would be able to offer justifications and reasons for their own views and understand the justification and reasons given by others" (1977: 48).

It was notable in the literature that factual propositional knowledge was commonly assessed through quantitative studies measuring political knowledge scores (Stradling, 1977; Heron and McManus, 2003; Rowe, 2005), whereas procedural knowledge was more often researched through qualitative studies associated with understanding the efficacy of active citizenship or civic competence (White, Bruce and Ritchie., 2000; Lister et al., 2003; Wood, 2009). I recognised, explored and gathered evidence of both types to obtain the fullest picture possible of the political literacy of my sample group.

Further parallels are drawn with Gutmann's (1999) concept of deliberation, as not being one single skill or virtue, mirroring the dynamism of political literacy. Gutmann identified

literacy, numeracy and critical thinking along with having contextual knowledge of an issue and appreciation of other people's perspectives, whilst adding further qualities such as veracity, practical judgement, integrity, non-violence and generosity to her definition. More recently the available guidelines for teaching citizenship education in Britain specified two key abilities for political literacy, which were critical thinking alongside "*the ability to advocate, understand and represent different views that differ from your own*" (Qualities and Curriculum Authority, 2007: 44). The ability to critically review and assess information, to deliberate on a range of salient points as a means to reconcile differences is a central point in understanding the concept of political literacy.

To summarise, political literacy denotes a blend of skills, abilities and knowledge enabling critical and conscious engagement with political ideas and concepts, in a practical and useful sense. Political literacy describes the complex and variable condition of a person being politically aware about themselves and their place in the wider world. It requires an individual to have skills of reflexivity and deliberation as well as knowledge of abstract political concepts. As my thesis is concerned with identifying what supports the development of political literacy what follows is a critical look at a range of research and ideas about citizenship education, critical thinking and principles for deliberation, beginning with an introduction into the foundations of political literacy in Britain.

2.3 Political literacy and citizenship education in Britain

Historically the idea of educating individuals to think critically about themselves or their place in the world is not a new one, in Britain or further afield. William Godwin was writing about the importance of individual rationality and independent thinking in 1793 (Heater, 2004; Suissa, 2006), *Education civique* has been taught in France since 1871, whilst at the turn of the twentieth century the American educationalist Dewey was placing purposive and active learners at the centre of the learning process (Flanagan and Watts, 2007). Yet in Britain the teaching of any sort of political education has traditionally been treated with suspicion, in fact the teaching of politics was actively discouraged in British classrooms during the 1980s (Jeffs, 2005). Common arguments rejected political education on the grounds of bias or indoctrination, or claimed that traditional obedience to authority in British society was itself sufficient education (Crick, 2000). Nevertheless a breakthrough for political education in Britain came in 1997 (Heater, 2006), when the new Labour Government,

specifically Secretary of State David Blunkett, with influential support from Conservative Kenneth Baker encouraged Bernard Crick to establish the case for including citizenship on the National Curriculum.

An enthusiastic proponent for the development of political literacy since the 1970s, Crick was a Professor of Politics at Birbeck College who wrote prolifically about democracy, citizenship and key political philosophers for over forty years. Crick was part of what McCowan (2009: 22) termed the “*political literacy movement*” comprised of a group of academics; Derek Heater, Ian Lister, Don Rowe, David Kerr, Richard Stradling and Ian Porter who promoted ideas of citizenship education and political literacy to encourage actively engaged civic participation in young people. These academics, many of them contributing to the Hansard Society *Working Party of the Programme for Political Education* (Stradling, 1977), were chiefly concerned with developing the argument for political education to be included on the school curriculum. Their challenge was to identify the importance of, and develop the way forward for an education policy supporting young people’s development into critically aware social actors. Whilst simultaneously addressing the fears of bias and indoctrination accompanying ideas of political education. As a result the focus of the Crick report (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998) shifted towards conceptualising citizenship education rather than political education (Crick, 2000), in part to allay fears of bias and indoctrination but also to perhaps better convey what the potential curriculum subject could cover.

Crick was possibly the most prominent contributor to the political literacy movement, chairing the Advisory Group on Citizenship (AGC) whose seminal report, “*Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in school*” (AGC, 1998), influenced the inclusion of citizenship education on the National Curriculum in 2002. The publication became widely known as the Crick report and was instrumental in establishing the idea of political literacy as one of three mutually supportive principles underpinning the teaching of citizenship education in school, alongside community involvement and social and moral responsibility. The report that the aspiration for political literacy was to represent “*a term that is wider than political knowledge alone*” (AGC, 1998: 13), in keeping with a civic republican approach to political education (Crick, 2002; Faulks, 2006).

Crick, Lister and Porter declared their aim was not to postulate “*a universal role or model*” of political education or literacy but to clarify what common elements could exemplify a

politically literate person (Crick, 2000: 61). A politically literate person was identified as “*knowing about the main political disputes; what beliefs the main contestants have of them; how these disputes affect them personally and how to respond in an effective and respectful manner*” (Crick, 2000:64). Political literacy required understanding different points of view, using critical thinking to pick out bias or prejudice and being able to determine who and how was defining the terms of debate (Douglas, 2002). To sum up, the concept of political literacy rested on an individual having conscious understanding of the world along with some capacity for action (Crick, 2000).

The political literacy movement provided a solid foundation to understanding the development of political literacy, democracy and citizenship education in most parts of Britain. Although the Crick report (AGC, 1998) was criticised for a “*lack of definitional clarity*” (Faulks, 2006: 126) this missed how the report was pitched to allow for autonomy in the educational environment. The aim for teaching democracy in a broad sense meant citizenship education was deliberately framed to not be overly prescriptive, to be a light touch and flexible (Crick, 2000). It is also important to note that formal citizenship education in schools need not be the only route to improving citizen’s political understanding and experiences. Nevertheless research about the current condition of citizenship education in schools was extremely useful for illustrating where the gaps in knowledge lay and two key reports follow now.

The Youth Citizenship Commission and Citizenship Education Research

Multi-stage research carried out by the *Youth Citizenship Commission* (YCC, 2009) was varied and extensive, using debates, consultations, on-line polls and interviews (n=1,100) with young people aged between 11-25, as well as 250 stakeholders and an advisory board of young people to build a broad, mixed picture of youth citizenship in the UK. Three key themes emerged, empowered citizenship, connecting with young people and changing the way decision makers and institutions work (YCC, 2009:5). Particular to my area of interest political literacy was discussed as the bedrock for empowered citizenship, requiring a greater focus in citizenship education as currently delivered.

The report identified young people as having a lack of political knowledge or information over political processes and also a lack of opportunities to be involved in politics (YCC, 2009:20), along with negative associations with politics (YCC, 2009:18). A broad range of conclusions were provided about the negative aspects of politics, a perceived distance

between decision makers and young citizens, found the majority of young people in the study feeling disempowered and thinking they could not make a difference to politics. The uncertainty over politics was brought into sharp focus during my own data collection process and became a focal point for establishing the characteristics of political uncertainty and effects upon political literacy.

The ten year long *Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study* (CELS) was also impressive for scope and reach. Data from over 43,000 young people and 3,000 teachers in nearly 700 schools provided a mixed picture about citizenship education in England. The report concluded that citizenship education can have a positive impact upon citizenship outcomes (Keating et al, 2010:iii) despite variables shaping these outcomes such as, age, life-stage, background factors, prior citizenship outcomes and levels of received citizenship education, with an unexplained dip at Key Stage 4 (15-16 years old). The report provided clear recommendations for the delivery of discrete citizenship lessons in schools and beyond into young adulthood (Keating et al, 2010:iv). Again political literacy was identified as important for citizenship outcomes, with the authors claiming the need for more support and training in this area for citizenship teachers.

Conclusions concerning citizenship education in the UK or England often remain framed within deficit model educational debates, seeking to fix the problem of what individual young people are perceived to lack (Wood, 2009). Government policy responds to the ‘problem’ of young people and in this case, their lack of political knowledge, interest or engagement. In 2010 the UK coalition government pushed the idea of a ‘Big Society’ forward, setting up the £355million National Citizen Scheme pilot for 16 year olds. The National Citizen Scheme formed part of the government strategy found in *Positive for Youth* (DFE 2011:41) that aspired “*to develop the skills needed to become active, responsible citizens*” in young people. Although the National Citizen Scheme was criticised in 2011 by the Education Select Committee for being an impractical and expensive way of providing what already existed at the time through national youth work provision (Sloam, 2012:106)

Problems with citizenship education are continually exacerbated by patchy government support for the subject, described as a ‘*political football*’ (Tonge, Mycock and Jeffrey, 2012:599). The Curriculum Review Expert Panel recommended in December 2011 that citizenship be reclassified as part of the basic curriculum and no longer treated as a statutory subject (Grimes, 2011), whilst PGCE funding for citizenship teachers was withdrawn.

Citizenship was the *only* subject on the National Curriculum to receive this treatment even though over 81,000 students chose to sit the GCSE in 2011. In contrast although citizenship education remains a statutory subject for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland includes citizenship within a Global Citizenship theme where citizenship principles are included in all subjects across the curriculum. An approach corresponding with the Swedish method (Sandstrom, 2010) whereby knowledge is content to be developed in a communicative and reciprocal style with pupils across subjects rather than top down transmission models of social or moral values.

To broaden the scope of political literacy I now briefly link with ideas of critical consciousness (Freire, 2007) to provide another view for thinking about the part played by critical reflection and deliberation in developing personal political values and strengthening a person's capacity for political engagement.

2.4 Freire and Critical Consciousness

Shortly before studies into political literacy emerged in Britain, a backlash against the educational domination of the Catholic Church was occurring across the Atlantic in South America. Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich were the two best known proponents of a variety of radical educational ideas that sought to support the development of deprived communities and the empowerment of oppressed individuals, initially in Brazil and Puerto Rico. With books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) and *Disabling Professions* (Illich, 1977) these thinkers pushed back at what they considered the systematic oppression of indigenous people, through expected obedience to chauvinistic and paternalistic ideas of cultural superiority epitomised by the Catholic Church they were both part of (Gabbard and Stuchul, 2003).

Freire's dynamic concept of "*critically transitive consciousness*" (2007:14) or critical consciousness from his book *Education for Critical Consciousness*, particularly supports understanding of political literacy. Freire made the case for individual's developing critical awareness about their own economic, social and political domination through working with illiterate adults, excluded from society through the effects of poverty. Freire (2007: 13) described them as being "*submerged in the historical process*" unaware of broader problems "*outside their sphere of biological necessity*". Freire identified how people's critical

awareness was limited by their own immediate need for day to day survival. Through his work Freire observed how the development of a person's critical consciousness, and the way a person regarded themselves and their place in society was key to transforming their understanding of the world. A process whereby people would develop their understanding or awaken (in Brazilian the term is 'conscientizacao') from the limits of their social or political circumstances (Freire, 2007:37).

Critical consciousness, taken as a process of learning and reflection, enabled people to "*perceive, respond and question their context and increase capacity for dialogue*" (Freire, 2007: 13). Critical consciousness described an ongoing, dynamic and flexible phenomenon, a transformatory process of learning and reflection. A process often established through good youth work practice, in progressive schools, probation and some social care settings with hard to reach young people. One aim of youth work is to inspire critical consciousness in young people, enabling them to reflect on their values and identity, to build a critical dialogue about the world and their place within it, and to develop strategies that help them make sense of and deal with the world creatively (Young, 2006). The developmental aspect of critical consciousness is of key interest to my research in exploring political literacy and the barriers to understanding.

Shor (1999) discussed Anderson and Irvine's recognition of critical literacy being '*part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations*'. Reference to this reflexive, self-aware process appears in a range of debates about critical literacy, deliberation and participation (Gutmann, 1999; Gregory and Cahill, 2009), as well as previously noted (p.20) in the most recent government educational guidelines for citizenship teaching (Qualities and Curriculum Authority, 2007: 44). The idea that to be in a position to understand other people's points of view it is essential to know where and how your own have formed; with an ongoing 'reflexivity' about what your own opinion is and where your ideas have come from. Reflexivity is a fundamental aspect of becoming and being politically literate (Freire, 2007:13), a process, which incidentally, underpins my research practice.

The idea of a person's transformation into political understanding or awareness was captured in research carried out on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000) to study young people's interest and engagement in politics. White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) purposively sampled 193 young people, aged between 14 and 24 years old

from across Scotland, England and Wales. Although the study was clear that the sample was not representative the data gathered through a combination of focus groups and interviews supports my study.

Of interest were examples of political consciousness developing, through descriptions of ‘latch-point’ moments where young people’s interest in politics activated (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000: 16). Three types of latch-point moment were observed in the sample group, occurring through changing personal circumstances (e.g. work or becoming a parent), being exposed to political information about a political issue or having an opportunity to engage in politics (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). An individual’s capacity for developing critical or political consciousness was not set in stone although the report did not indicate how widespread these latch-point moments were or give a greater depth of understanding about them. Nevertheless the transformative potential of critical consciousness encourages an optimistic position towards understanding and inspiring young people’s engagement with politics.

So far the emphasis has been on individual agency, the ability to learn or develop the skills and critical awareness for increased political engagement, now my discussion moves to structural ideas of democratic deliberation that support the inclusion of fully engaged citizens in the public sphere.

2.5 Deliberative Democracy

The “*who gets what, says who*” conundrum of political philosophy (Wolff, 2006: 6), requires reflection on how political decisions are reached and by who in society. Citizen inclusion in decision-making has been debated for centuries, yet it is advances in Human Rights discourse and legislation such as the Children’s Act, 2004 that has supported the right of young people to participate in decision-making over the last thirty years. The type of democracy a society considers it has is fundamental to this issue. Deliberative democracy is one of the most recent models in democratic theory, and is described as a theory that attempts to improve “*the quality of democracy*” (Held, 2006:232). Social and political developments such as increasingly pluralised lifestyles, religions or ethnicities that are all subject to the forces of globalisation, have transformed the capacity of the state to act or react (Warren, 2002). Deliberative democracy builds on existing liberal and republican models of democracy, in an

attempt to develop a model better equipped to meet the demands of these modern mass societies (Warren, 2002; Erickson and Weigard, 2004).

What distinguishes deliberative democratic theory from liberal or civic republican views of democracy is pursuit of equal participation opportunities for the citizenry that promote effective routes of collective reasoning and decision-making (Warren, 2002). Theories of deliberative democracy retrieve a “*core ideal of reasoned public debate as the foundation for making decisions*” (Carter and Stokes, 2002:11). Deliberative democracy illustrates a commitment to “*informed debate, the public use of reason and the impartial pursuit of truth*” (Held, 2006:232), with the aim of providing consistent, effective political opportunities and engagement across the public sphere. Principles of inclusivity, equality and participation are integral to the democratic model that support my thesis.

Two predominant schools of thought approach the idea of reasoned debate in the public sphere. One approaches from critical Habermasian perspectives of ‘emancipation’ the other through liberal Rawlsian conceptions of ‘accommodation’ (Rostboll 2008: 707). This thesis acknowledges contributions from theorists in both schools but is grounded in a critical Habermasian view of the world concerned with communicative action and discourse ethics in the public sphere (Erickson and Weigard, 2004; Edgar, 2006). In brief I agree with the view that autonomous actors (citizens) are central to legitimising social practices, values or principles through communicative action (deliberation) in the public sphere, underpinned by practicing discourse ethics to raise the moral dimensions of deliberation.

The idea of discourse ethics allows for fairness in dialogue, to reach open ended ‘solutions’ to moral problems, and explores ideas of meaning, truthfulness and the right to speak (Edgar, 2006). If the problem affects you, you have a right to be involved and contributors to the debate are required to be clear and honest in their discourse and disclose their subjectivities, leading to what Habermas termed an “*ideal speech situation*” (Gardiner, 2004: 40).

Achieving a purity of speech in every exchange of dialogue is extremely idealistic (Gardiner, 2004) but some of the fundamental problems found with young people’s political literacy have their roots in this area.

Building upon the shared norms proposed by discourse ethics in deliberative discussion, Alexander (2010: 106) offers seven principles regarding the theory of ‘*accountable talk*’ in the classroom. These principles transfer equally well over expectations for deliberation in the public sphere and the collective progression of individual political literacy.

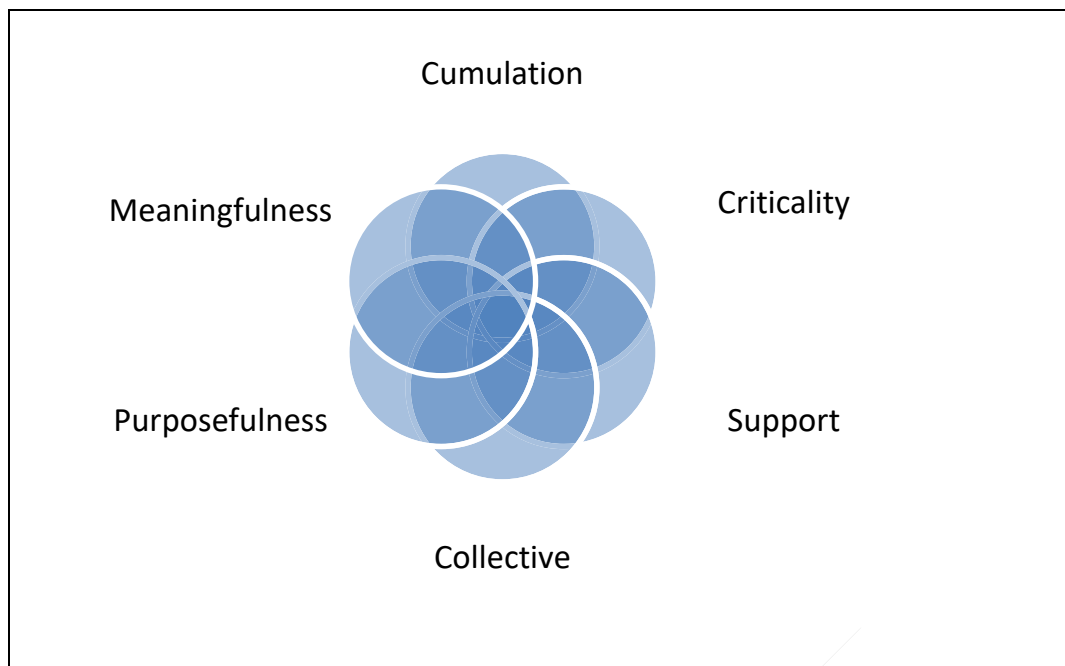


Figure 2.1 The figure 2.2 of Accountable Talk, Alexander, 2010.

The seven principles are central to citizens being included and genuinely involved in honest and meaningful deliberative opportunities. Deliberation in this case benefits from being collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful, critically building on existing knowledge to advance (Alexander, 2010). The idea of meaningfulness of communication highlights the need for deliberation to be relevant if it is to be significant, and where their presence is relevant, for people not to be excluded from deliberations.

It is clear from the literature that the public sphere, much like conceptions of democracy, has remained a widely accepted yet idealistic conception. At its peak in the 1830s the public sphere was only accessible to a small percentage of the white, middle-class male population (Ericksen and Weigard, 2003; Crossley and Roberts, 2004). Yet the Internet provides massive potential for realising deliberative democratic theory, by valuing equal distributions of power in collective decision-making in society, and equal participation in collective judgement. Politically interested, civically minded people draw together online through a plethora of forums, from individual personal representation through social media sites such as *Facebook*, *MySpace* or *Twitter* to online pressure groups representing large groups of people that far outstrip membership of traditional political parties in individual countries. UK based *38 degrees* has over one million members that get involved in campaigns to influence government policies, whilst *Avaaz* is international in scope, with over 16 million members in 193 countries (figures from 2014). Both groups campaign on a range of social justice issues that are responsive to members' requests, to offer alternative avenues of public engagement

in the public sphere. An ability to be producers as well as consumers of media encourages greater inclusivity and activity, but invariably increases the need for citizens to have good levels of critical awareness over the messages being produced and consumed (Hoeschmann and Poyntz, 2012).

2.6 Education, Critical Theory and Deliberative Democracy

Obvious parallels between the three theoretical stances discussed support conceptualisations of politically enabled and engaged citizens. All provide critical analysis of individual, structural or ideological phenomenon to offer understanding about the skills, attributes or environments that nurture political literacy, consciousness and deliberation. However the theoretical foundations of political literacy reflect the social and historical context from which they emerged and whilst these theories retain relevance to my thesis they require careful application to avoid the following criticisms.

Although Crick, Freire and Habermas theoretically supported the development of politically enabled citizens in society, they diverged somewhat with their conceptions of how ‘politics’ or ‘the political’ were viewed (Smith, 2002; Crossley and Roberts, 2004; McCowan, 2009). Based in a deficit model of education, the Crick report was accused of being biased towards a participatory version of citizenship (Kirton and Brighouse, 2001), and for the limited way in which politics and the political were viewed (Faulks, 2006: 127; McCowan, 2009). Crick agreed that earlier work from the political literacy movement did suffer from narrow conceptualisations of politics and the political (Crick, 2000). But he made no apologies for his “*radical agenda of civic republicanism*” (Crick, 2002: 114) Even so, for all the radical potential of this approach to citizenship education it remained firmly situated within the formal, paternalistic, elite structures and institutions of political and educational power.

Freire developed a broader conception of politics and the political far earlier than the political literacy movement. McCowan (2009) attributes this to heavy criticism Freire received for excluding women from his early work, leading Freire to expand his thinking to include accounts of gender, race and social class to better reflect how anti-dialogical, anti-communicative practices oppressed marginalised groups in society. Importantly Freire’s approach appreciated the significance of how diversity in identity, status or experience that failed to conform to social or cultural norms (Nash, 2000:157), affected opportunities for

political participation for different groups of people in society. A characteristic repeatedly observed over fifteen years of youth work practice with isolated and marginalised young people in rural areas.

Habermas received similar criticism for holding an elite, idealised version of the public sphere, which neglected public spheres beyond those of white, middle class males (Crossley and Roberts, 2004). His theories were considered to be too abstract at times for real speech situations (Gardiner, 2004) although the seven principles of accountable talk (Alexander, 2010) do provide practical, ethical dimensions to communication in the public sphere that potentially could lead to far better standards of deliberation for democracy.

Rostboll further argues (2008: 707) that it is the synthesis between critical Habermasian ideas of deliberative democracy and liberal Rawlsian viewpoints that obscures the idea of individual autonomy, which is key to valuing diversity of opinion. As critical tradition converges with the liberal tradition of majority viewpoint, the importance of consensus is maintained rather than a less consensual, more realistic acceptance of opinions from a wider public (Crossley and Roberts, 2004). If deliberative discourse theory aims to occupy an intermediary place (Erickson and Weigard, 2004), without presupposing outcomes measured according to normative ideals of common good (Warren, 2002), this needs to be addressed.

The objective for a deliberative democracy must surely be to achieve robust and inclusive deliberation, some variant of accountable talk (Alexander, 2010) between wider publics and the state institutions that claim to represent them. Sharing truths and building upon knowledge that varies rather than perhaps reaching one final consensus on any particular issue. To be useful deliberation needs to be inclusive, reciprocal, meaningful and ongoing. The transformative power of critical consciousness develops through reflexive dialogue between individuals, enabling increased levels of political involvement or engagement, which encapsulates some of the dynamic qualities of political literacy. Political literacy requires genuine practical opportunities to develop skills as well as to inspire further engagement be this in public spaces on or off the Internet.

Deliberative theories conceptualising the nature of reasoned, accountable debate in the public sphere offer both practical initiatives focused on enabling small scale deliberations in society, and broader macro theories to tackle the relationship between the state, media and civil society (Chambers, 2009:323). This thesis offers a view on both, with participatory and qualitative research methods offering opportunities for small scale deliberations in local

communities, whilst considering the macro-level relationships that support or hinder civic engagement such as ongoing technological transformations and the right to accountable talk in an aggressive, often factually limited public sphere.

Part One of the literature review identified a gap in knowledge regarding young people and their political understanding, and identified useful aspects of deliberative democracy and political literacy required for undertaking a civic role. The discussion now moves to political representations of young people in society resting on perceptions of young people's political behaviour and how these are commonly categorised.

Part Two - Socially Constructing Young People

2.7 Political Constructions of Young People

Viewing society through a blend of social and sociological constructionist lenses, questions the foundations of normative historical and cultural processes interconnected through the daily discourses people use, and the structures that influence these discourses (Gergen, 1999). Viewpoints that prioritise discourses and social structures influencing our constructions and understandings of reality. Gergen (1999:5) introduces the idea of social construction as *“reflection on our existing beliefs about reality”*. Thinking about the ways the world is structured using alternative visions of knowledge, truth and the self, which relies on day-to-day discourse to maintain and develop meaning. My thesis is concerned with understanding political literacy through reflection of a broad array of academic discourses, in synthesis with dialogues young people in the sample group used to understand the political world and their place in it.

Normative assumptions regarding young people's age and competence, and the implications of this for how young people are viewed as citizens in society (Wyn and White, 1997:1; Smiler, 2009) are integral to my interpretative approach. Part of my approach challenges the preponderance of negative and stereotypical attitudes about young citizens found in the literature (Stradling, 1977; Graham, 2004; White, 2009) or commonly portrayed in the public sphere (Young People Now, 2005; Zengotia, 2005; Clarke et al., 2008; Whitehouse and Bloom, 2015; Gould, 2015) that exclude and marginalise young people from being seen as

active agents. Furthermore my viewpoint recognises the limits of normative ideas of government and takes them to be much broader than party politics in Westminster, with the necessary inclusion of political institutions such as the criminal justice system or the education system, through which the state derives its authority from. Government seen broadly as “*the whole body of rules, practices and institutions under whose guidance we live in society*” (Miller, 2002:4), including those inculcated by mass media, religious instruction, charitable organisations and family structures.

Neither child, nor considered fully adult, young people’s ambivalent status in society locates them in contested spaces, both in terms of biological and social expectation. Childhood is held in much legislation to be any age under 18, yet there appears no one defining age of adulthood. Rather a transitional period of adolescence occurs between the ages of 12-21, providing a continuous and shifting range of legal and social boundaries to cross (NSPCC, 2012). Anomalies exist, such as the age of criminal responsibility being set at 10 in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, whilst the age of enfranchisement is set at 18, except where it is 16 for the Isle of Man, Channel Islands and possibly a continuation of the lowered age in Scotland. Where the margins of childhood shift into adolescence and combine with increasing ambiguity over what it means to be an adult, commonly held and culturally defined perceptions or stereotypes of ‘child’, ‘youth’ and ‘adult’ are constantly challenged over what they mean (Atkin, 2001; Tisdall et al., 2009). For this thesis I recognise that young people taking their role as citizens rests on notions of competence that cannot rely on any shared biological age but rather on individual motivation, interest and capabilities.

The debate over the competence or ability of young people to take on responsible civic roles in society reflects social expectations of maturity and experience associated with conceptions of ‘youth’ or ‘adult’. Recognising and valuing the competence of people, of any age but especially young people is integral to my research. Not doing so is problematic. I relate to Graham’s (2004:1) observation that infantilising and disempowering young people creates problems over their inclusion in society. As educational and leisure systems or opportunities separate and segregate young people from the rest of society, representations that discriminate against them often disadvantage or exclude them further (Graham, 2004:23).

It is encouraging to identify that work with young people did move away from the idea of ‘making’ incomplete young people into adult citizens towards the idea of supporting autonomous young people into ‘becoming’ citizens (Warwick et al., 2010). This approach

recognises a growing demand for autonomy from young people and their advocates, based on the right to make appropriate decisions for themselves established by ideas of informed competence (Children's Rights Alliance England, 2008; Larcher et al., 2011). This stance contradicts perceptions of children and young people's vulnerability, in need of adult protection but the argument is more nuanced than an either or discussion. The argument is that, given both genuine opportunities to make decisions and good quality information to base the decision on, children and young people are equally as capable as adults of reaching decisions for themselves (Larcher et al., 2011). This idea is not without criticism especially in the field of sexual health (Gillick competency 1982 and Fraser guidelines 1985) but the discourse over an individual's competency to decide and give informed consent have become fundamental to many aspects of research and practice with children and young people.

Aitken (2001: 7) identifies young people as holding multiple identities and perceptions, commenting that "*no universal category of experience exists*". When discussing or researching young people and their life experiences, treating all young people as one homogenous group based on their shared biological age is erroneous (Wyn and White, 1996; Aitkin, 2001; James, 2005; Hartas, 2011). Where research about young people and their cognitive capacities at different life stages is referred to in this thesis, it is included for guidance rather than establishing conclusive assumptions about all young people's competencies and capacities at certain ages. Taking a broad perspective to consider the ways young people engage with politics and how politics is defined is necessary to reflect the multiple realities of young people's lives. Recognising diversity is fundamental to understanding variance in political literacy especially if we acknowledge the observation from O'Toole, Marsh and Jones (2003), that to the respondents in their study social inequalities such as class or gender are not merely variables to be measured but are the politics of lived experience. In order to understand individual responses and attitudes it is of fundamental importance to understand the social and environmental context the young person lives in and has experience of.

Spence (2005: 46-47) reiterates how the terms "youth" or "young people" are used to stereotype and generalise about the experiences or behaviours of a diverse and complex range of people. From negative depictions in local and national press (Young People Now, 2005; Clark et al., 2008), public sphere discourses that omit, hide (Skelton, 2010), or constricting policies such as the "*statutory participation age*" (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2009), these representations or omissions commonly feed into a set of definitions of

young people being problematic for society (Aitken, 2001; Roche and Tucker, 2002; Wood, 2009). Often young people are viewed in terms of deviancy and disaffection or else defined through their vulnerability or risk in society (Griffin, 1997; Young, 2006; Wood, 2009; Hartas, 2011). This practice is well documented and is usual in applying a set of negative assumptions about young people's character or behaviour (Spence, 2005; Young People Now, 2005; Clarke et al., 2009; Wood, 2009).

These issues are pertinent for my research *with* as well as *into* young people and hold implications for wider practices and representations of young people in society (James, 2004; Tisdall et al., 2009). To accurately reflect the experiences of young people I maintained a non-judgemental approach, recognising the individuals as such and resisting the urge to prejudge or over generalise their experiences. The following discussion illustrates major discourses around young people and their political engagement.

2.8 Myths of Apathy Vs. Disaffection and Disillusionment

A common perception, found in many western democracies is that formal political participation is in decline and citizen apathy is one of the most frequently cited reasons for this. Authors write of a “*democratic crisis*” (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998), “*malaise*” (Swift, 2002) or “*popular indifference*” (Mair, 2013) where citizens are disengaged or disaffected from formal political institutions of government. The visible demise of young people engaging with traditional duty based forms of citizenship in the public sphere, such as voting in elections or joining a political party, has long given political commentators cause for concern (Crick, 1998; Mortimore, 2003; Butt and Curtice, 2010; Stoker, 2013). Already I have touched upon the problem of using inadequate and stereotypical assumptions to describe complex realities in society and here I argue against assumptions made about young people's engagement with politics, which have the ability to undermine young people's actual engagement in the public sphere.

The Power Inquiry set up to investigate adult involvement in politics, devoted the first chapter of its report to what was identified as the “*myth of apathy*” (Power, 2006). A considerable amount of evidence was gathered for the report through a far reaching, nation-wide consultation exercise that clearly established the public as being politically involved, engaged and keen to deliberate on a wide range of issues. Robust, annual quantitative surveys

of over 1,000, face to face interviews with adults from across Great Britain, informed the Audits of Political Engagement (2004-2012) for the Hansard Society, which reiterated these findings. Although the Hansard Audits do not claim their sample group to be demographically representative, they consistently show a general increase in claims of certainty to vote and knowledge of politics within the sample groups, a trend that was found to decrease sharply by 16% for the first time in 2011 (Hansard Society, Audit 9, Pt1, 2012: 1). Throughout the decade this situation was tempered by the increased dissatisfaction found with formal political systems, viewed as a downward trend across all the age groups surveyed. The realm of formal democratic institutions and processes such as voting or joining a political party was where public participation was noticeably waning (Power, 2006; Hansard Society, 2012; Mair, 2013).

The Power Inquiry report (Executive Summary, 2006) suggested several reasons for this disconnection, from similarities between the main political parties who are seen to be lacking in principle, problems with the unequal electoral system and inconvenient voting procedures to two reasons that appear most relevant to my research. One is the *“lack of information about formal politics”*, the other claimed,

“citizens do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions – this includes party members in the main political parties who feel they have no say in policy making and are increasingly disaffected”

Power Inquiry, Executive Summary, 2006: 17

As back-bench MP's have also expressed dismay over having little or no influence on decisions that are reached by the Government in Parliament (Goldsmith, 2011), questions are raised about the legitimacy of a representative democracy that appears unable to adequately represent the interests of the citizenry.

Apathy is a frequently cited characteristic in discussions about young people and politics (Zengotita, 2005; Warwick et al., 2010) yet existing research evidence into young people and politics demonstrates this claim to be inadequate oversimplification (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Catan, 2004; Banwart 2007; Henn and Foard, 2011). The pessimistic notion of inert, uninterested young people with little appreciation of politics identified in the earlier research (Stradling, 1977; Furnham and Gunter, 1991; Heron and McManus, 2003) peels back to reveal a far more complex picture of their political literacy or political participation.

An assessment of young people's thoughts and opinions in the literature commonly challenges widespread and negative assumptions made about their political engagement and understanding (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Lister et al., 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Paesek et al., 2006; Banwart, 2007; Wood, 2009). Research established that young people were more politically engaged and interested than was generally accepted (Henn and Weinstein, 2003; Henn and Foard, 2011). A consistent theme emerging from current research found that young people were more likely to be interested in politics than not. Only 12% of respondents reported no interest at all in politics for Henn and Foard's valuable online survey of 1,025 eighteen year olds in 2011. This comparative research used quantitative and qualitative data to find interest in political matters amongst young people significantly increased from 56% in the first study taken in 2002, to 63% in 2011 (Henn and Foard, 2011). Findings that compare well to the 58% of people aged 18 and over who expressed an interest in politics for the Eighth Audit of Political Involvement in 2010 (Hansard Society, Audit 8, 2010). Perceptions of the disconnect between commonly held negative opinions of young people against the positive realities of young people's political interest or involvement were of particular interest to my research, especially when considering the relationship between young people and the political public sphere.

Repeatedly research evidence showed the problem with people's engagement with politics was one of disaffection or disconnection rather than apathy. A range of studies recognise how citizens (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Hartas, 2011; Street et al., 2011; Birch and Allen, 2011; Henn and Foarde, 2011), but especially young citizens in this research, were disaffected by the institutions or systems claiming to represent them. This is problematic for a number of reasons I discuss now.

Hartas (2011) used qualitative focus group discussions with eighteen, 13 to 15 year olds in the education system, to elicit their thoughts and opinions about their schooling experiences. This robust study found young people classified as 'disaffected', (described as such due to how teachers perceived their attitude and academic achievement) were most concerned about their self-identified needs being listened to and responded to by their learning establishment. Analysis of the discussions picked up a major constraint to their participation came from a culture that showed a lack of respect for the young people (Hartas, 2011) and a lack of genuine involvement opportunities. Disaffection, Hartas (2011: 113) argued may be an expression of dissatisfaction with what young people were being offered by mainstream

models of education or training and was a way of challenging the lack of respect shown to them.

A prominent and recurring theme found in the literature was of young people being excluded or marginalised from decision or policy making because of their age, with their concerns not being taken seriously or not being listened to. The literature around participation regularly discusses concerns over manipulation, tokenism in consultation (Badham and Wade, 2008) and again perceptions abounded amongst young people that they were just not being listened to (CRAE, 2008; Carnegie UK Trust, 2008), supporting a reflection by O'Toole, Marsh and Jones (2003: 359) that for many young people politics was "*something done to them, not something they can influence*". The authors concluded there was a shift away from democratic procedures to a culture of managerialism, whereby "*practitioners may actually be disempowering communities by delivering them up to top down policy change*". Decision-making has to hold power and relevance to participants, as well as being able to make a genuine difference.

Further problems arose in the literature regarding exclusion and marginalisation with a suggested correlation between people who are engaged and trusting of the political system and the likelihood that they will obey the law (Birch and Allen, 2011). A particularly pertinent viewpoint as various studies showed that some 66% of young people currently do not trust politicians (Henn and Foard, 2011) and commonly held views see politicians as untrustworthy, self-interested, ineffective, remote and unrepresentative (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Street et al., 2011; Henn and Foard, 2011). White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000: 44) also identified there was a problem with "*the limited way in which young people viewed politics*", as a key reason for young people's disengagement from politics. Holding narrow perceptions of what politics was, seeing politics as poorly behaved MPs in Parliament was problematic for maintaining young people's interest in politics and perpetuating a sense of irrelevance about politics. Whilst research from Street et al. (2011:2), found that whilst young people were often cynically and uninterested in mainstream politics they were quite willing to use popular culture to politically engage, indicating motivation towards political involvement through less traditional routes of participation. This is disconcerting as cynicism, it has been argued is a bigger threat to democracy than apathy (Crowther et al., 2010 see p.111).

Individually or combined problems of exclusion, marginalisation and cynicism manifested in young people switching off from politics, perceptions that formal politics was tedious and

irrelevant to them. It was important to note the discourse of disaffection (Hartas, 2011), or apathy was commonly applied through notions of individual responsibility determining a person's situation as their own responsibility; rather than recognition of systematic social or cultural factors that a person may have little or no control over.

In order to classify the types of political engagement existing amongst young people discussion moves to the different typologies found in the literature search showing how young people may choose to be involved in politics – or not as the case may be.

2.9 Typologies of political engagement

From the earliest research into young people's political literacy Stradling offered three basic categories of young people as, political consumer, political activist or participant, and political student (1977) in a crude attempt to distinguish different levels of interest. This contribution was limited as there was a lack of information how Stradling drew these conclusion. Although the categories were described as providing a multi-dimensional approach allowing different levels of understanding about young people's political interest Stradling failed to acknowledge young people who did not engage with formal political structures and systems at all or those who were cynically disengaged. In their well substantiated study White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) reflected greater complexity and fluidity of young people's political engagement or disengagement in developing five categories of young people's political interest (Figure 2.2), from interviews and focus groups with nearly 200 young people aged between 14 -24.

The first two categories, type one and type two were identified through their lack of interest in politics, with a dislike of politics and perceptions that politics was boring. The difference between these two types was type one was indifferent to politics, whereas type two cynically avoided politics. Type three was seen to be selectively interested in politics, only engaging if an issue was seen relevant to them. Otherwise type three was quite similar to types one and two. Type four was described as having a passive interest in current affairs or relevant issues and was in the early stages of developing political views. Whereas type five was considered highly interested in politics, displaying high commitment and active interest; these young people were recognised as the most politically sophisticated and used a variety of sources to shape and inform their understanding.

The authors (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000) noted a fluidity through the proposed categories whereby a young person's interest in an issue could activate, evolve and develop, and not necessarily in the numerical order of the categories given. The fluid nature of a person's interest or engagement reinforces how Freire reported activation of critical consciousness (pp.22-23). Although numbered these typologies are not a hierarchical model of progression but rather an indication of the diversity possible regarding young people's political engagement. Political engagement or disengagement cannot be considered a static entity and this is reflected in the radial style of table used (Figure 2.2).

The study sample was not representative and gave no indication of how widespread each type appeared in the sample group it was impossible to make a judgement on how typical each typology was of young people's political engagement. Yet the model was useful during my research fieldwork for asking young people what they thought about their engagement with politics, which is raised again in 5.2.

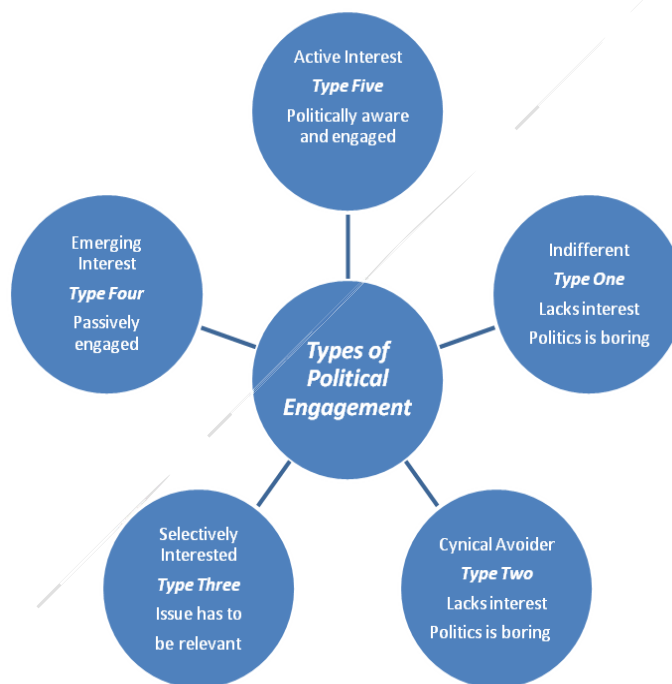


Figure 2.2 Typology of Young People's Political Engagement (adapted from White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000:11)

The Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC, 2009:15-17) also categorised five levels or segments of political engagement within their sample group of 11-25year olds, and were able to break down the types to percentages. It was difficult to overlay the YCC categories with the previous typology as the YCC categories were developed in response to specific questions the young people were asked. The two biggest groups identified were recognised

as being less cynical as the other groups, with 30% '*trusting and non-engaged*' who trusted politicians to make the right decisions on their behalf and did not want to be politically engaged. Followed by 25% of '*voting is enough*' who again felt politicians would care about them and represent their views.

Whilst the smallest group at 5% were identified as '*positively politically engaged*' defined as empowered and engaged young people and seen to sit somewhere between the following two larger groups of '*willing but disconnected*' 15% and '*savvy and cynical*' 22% young people. The young people in these three groups were all recognised for their cynicism, and little to no faith in politician's ability to make the right choices on their behalf. The YCC segmentation provided some idea of the levels of trust, political engagement and cynicism amongst the young people asked but it was difficult to draw stronger conclusions past the group surveyed. These typologies provide a deeper understanding about the range of political interest or engagement undertaken or displayed by young people and illustrate good levels of political engagement.

Now discussion turns to the eco-systematic civic engagement model (Warwick et al., 2010), which helps support a holistic understanding of the different levels of variables impacting on each person's political literacy.

2.10 Accounting for Variables

Explaining which variables impact upon political literacy remains a complex task because of the variety of sources, structures or influences that require consideration. Developmental psychologist Bjorklund (2007: 7) points out, human nature is only properly understood "*when in the context of social groups*". Understanding how people engage with social and political systems requires acknowledging psychological characteristics unique to the individual combined with various levels of experience in the environment, from the family unit, educational establishments, media sources and ideological ideas emerging from religious or cultural thought.

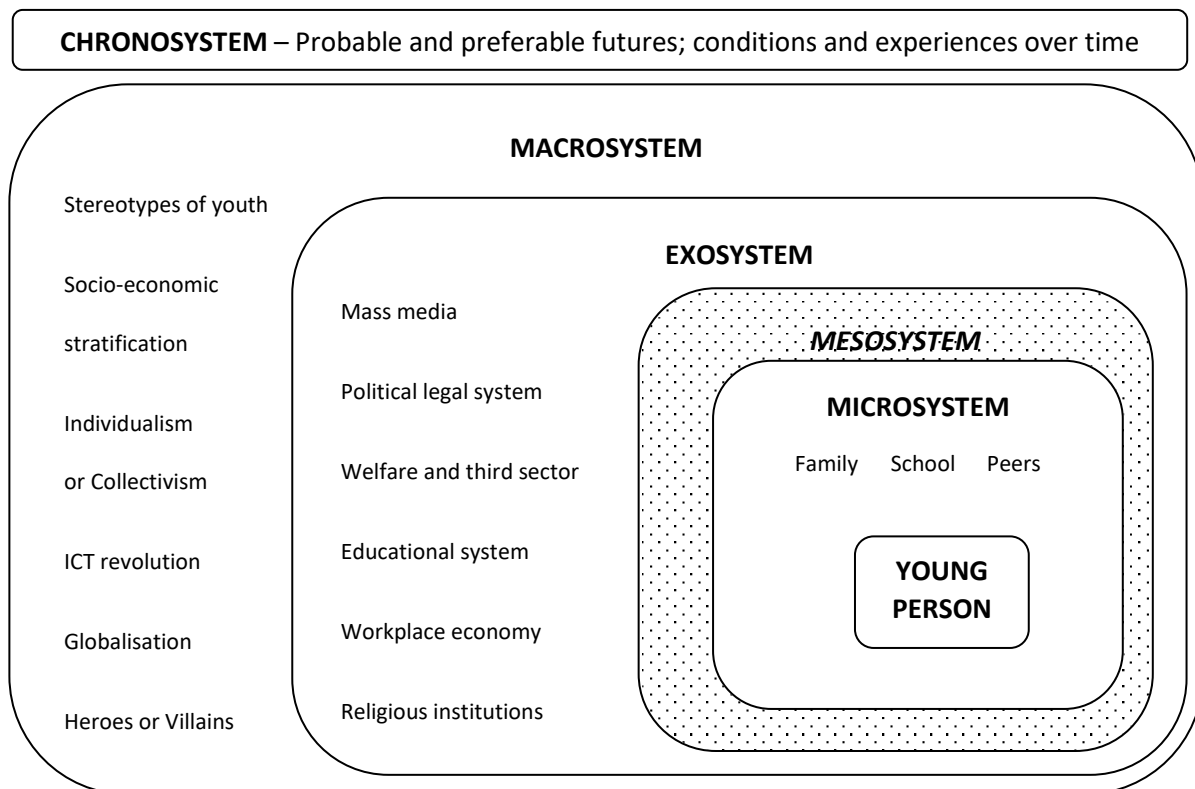


Figure 2.3. The Ecological Model of Engagement (Warwick et al., 2010:4)

Applying Bronfenbrenner’s 2004 systems-based ‘ecological model of engagement’ (Greig and Taylor, 1999:31), as adapted by Warwick et al., (2010) to my study, enabled recognition of the extensive, multiplicity of influences that interplay on young people and their political literacy or political engagement (Figure 2.3). It is important to consider how sources and influences fluctuate and this model accounts for dynamism and movement in people’s lives. The ecological model of engagement recognises the intersectional nature of influences on people’s lives by identifying meso-system levels “*both within and across the micro-system and exo-system levels*” (Warwick et al., 2010:5) to illustrate the contextual complexity of different influences on different levels interconnecting and relating to each other.

Individual micro-system level influences

The ecological model places each individual young person at the centre of their experiences and acknowledges the importance of intrapersonal traits such as character, values and experience on any further understandings about their civic engagement (Warwick et al., 2010:4). The micro-system level illustrates direct influences between the young person and micro-system level interactions such as family, peer groups, religious groups, teachers and

school, which can all reinforce and maintain public discourses or normative practices of society. Evidence from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study, (CELS) illustrated a variety of micro-level influences impacting on a young person's citizenship such as their age, life-stage, socio-economic circumstances, prior citizenship outcomes and levels of received citizenship education (Keaton et al., 2010), which all had measurable impacts upon political understanding. This research evidence demonstrated key areas of influence upon political understanding with parental involvement including parental literacy levels and social and economic background influencing political literacy (Keaton et al., 2010).

Exo-system level influences

Surrounding the micro-system level is the exo-system level, introducing structural influences such as social or political institutions immediately apparent in young people's lives, including influences from the mass media, economic, community, educational or religious institutions, social movements and non-governmental organisations. For this thesis the exo-level system effects, where structural influences maintain normative perceptions about society in the public sphere, are of particular interest. My analysis of young people's political literacy takes that media representations are not just reflections of the world but also construct our understanding of it (Lewis et al., 2005:8).

Political literacy requires critically understanding, interpreting and evaluating different types of communication and information, mostly available in the public sphere (Furnham and Stacey, 1991; Douglas, 2002; Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012). Consequently access to good quality information that supports the public as a whole in being politically literate is of vital importance. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 2010) relates to the mass media and the public sphere, establishing the right of young people to have access to reliable information, that is information which is useful not harmful to them in Article 17.

Yet comprehensive research into how the media report on public participation found media portrayals of public opinion were often inaccurate and based on inference rather than systematic evidence (Lewis et al., 2005:94). The authors argue that the news media help impoverish popular ideas about politics and by replacing notions of citizens with consumers limit public political engagement in the public sphere (Lewis et al., 2005:5). A finding echoed by Street, Inthorn and Scott (2009), who looked at how young people talked about and used popular culture to relate to politics. The report identified that the way politics was

covered in the news was one cause of young people's disengagement from the public sphere, with widespread disdain for politics and the irrelevance of news to the 16-18 year olds researched (2009:3).

Related to these problems are the way negative or misleading reports about young people are found in the media. The following figures illustrate the percentage of negative reports about young people in local and national papers over one week periods from 2004, 2005 and 2007 that were respectively 71%, 56% and 48%. The figure of 48% compared against 23% positive and 29% balanced or neutral reports in 2007 (Clark et al., 2009:6). Even though the figures suggest this situation may be gradually improving, this interesting piece of research illustrated the undue attention and emphasis paid to a minority of sensational behaviours that tended to mislead the public on the realities of young people's lives (Clark et al., 2009). With the net result of perpetuating harmful stereotypes rather than providing good information in the public sphere.

Views expressed by mainstream media outlets or by the Government did not match perceptions of young people observing or those taking part in those activities. For example, regarding the August riots of 2011, a survey of 517 young people for the Jack Petchey Foundation (2011) found 45% of respondents with the view that coverage of the riots was unfair about young people's role in them. Another study found 85% of respondents (n =270), not all of them young people², who had participated in the riots, citing anger and frustration at the way they experienced policing in British cities (The Guardian and the London School of Economics, 2012). Yet this perspective failed to make an impact on prominent and widespread discussions about the causes of the riots in national media outlets. Poor parenting and violent incidents were the focus of one serious toned discussion on BBC Radio 4 shortly after the riots. Despite one young person identifying police brutality as a potential trigger for the rioting during the lead-in interview, this point was ignored throughout the subsequent discussion.

Notably young people's active political involvement often finds them countering the deficit model of young people presented in the public sphere (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Clark

² Young people were predominant research participants, with 79% of the riot interviewees aged between 10-25 years old but not everyone involved in the riot was classifiable as a young person (Guardian. LSE., 2012).

et al., 2010). One example was early in 2012, when 60 organisations led by young representatives from the Youth Media Agency approached the Leveson Inquiry seeking fairer representation of young people in the media. A submission was made requesting age to be included as a category of discrimination and asking that journalists should exercise a duty of care over negative portrayals of children and young people in the press (Mahadevan, 2012).

Audit 9, Part II (Hansard Society, 2012) investigated public attitudes to the press and broadcasting media and found that public attitudes were strongly concerned about the quality of reporting in the British media. In the preface Lord Grocott spoke of the “*concerns about the media’s role – in conveying information and knowledge about politics*” and about the ability of the press to usefully hold politicians to account (Hansard Society, 2012: 1). The report found that tabloid newspapers were viewed by the public – even by those who read them – as purveyors of dishonest reporting, negativity and constant tarnishing of individuals (Hansard Society, 2012). The political journalist Osborne (2005:253) has suggested the modern British media make “*the world a nastier, meaner place*” with a “*tendency to polemicize the world rather than seek understanding*”. These views illustrate problems threading through the content provided by British media at the exo-system level in society that hinder citizens’ ability to reach good levels of political understanding.

Macro-system level

The macro-system level overarches all the subsequent levels and is where ideologies, attitudes, narratives and discourses that provide cultural influences in society are represented. Already I have discussed ideas of political education and citizenship (2.3), deliberative democracy and the public sphere (2.5), and stereotypes of children or adults (2.7) with regards to young people in society. It is useful to consider two further aspects here, those of gender and culture to assess influences that are often not immediately apparent.

An emerging area of interest for my thesis from the literature available was considering the effect of gender on political literacy. Siim (2000: 3) discussed how the concept of citizenship was problematic for an analysis of gender, with an inherent “*contradiction between the universal principle of the equality of man and the particularity or difference of women and other excluded groups*”. Her argument inspected “*the female ability to determine daily life and collective ability in the public sphere*” (Siim, 2000:4) concluding that on no reasonable basis were women considered equal in society, supporting an understanding of political exclusion being an ongoing consequence of gender. Through comparing women’s

experiences of the political public sphere in three European countries, France, Britain and Denmark, Siim identified Britain as having a particularly male dominated political public sphere based on a male bread-winner model that held continuing implications for women's ability to influence and be fully involved in the public sphere. Exclusion from politics was compounded by women being reluctant to engage in political activities until they reached higher standards of political knowledge than men tended to do (Ondercin and Jones-White, 2011). Therefore a potential problem for young women and political participation was exclusion not only by age, race or class but through limited social expectations associated with their femininity.

The expectation of holding good levels of political knowledge before proper engagement with politics has been found in both young males and females thinking that until they properly understand politics they were unsuited to voting (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Lister et al., 2003; Street et al., 2010: 3). The main reasons for not voting given by young people who were eligible to vote in the 2001 General Election, aside from boredom or cynicism over politics, was a lack of political literacy (Lister et al., 2003:15), with the view given that it was more irresponsible to vote in ignorance than not vote at all.

Banwart (2007) researched young people (categorised between 18-29 years old), and examined their self-reported perceptions of political interest, which atypically moved away from an analysis based on measuring correct factual answers. Banwart considered studies that looked at how knowledge was measured to gauge if this had an impact on perceived differences between the genders, and found the evidence was inconclusive, suggesting gender was not a significant predictor of answering questions wrongly (2007: 1153). There were no significant differences between young men and women's interest levels and overall levels of political interest were high.

Recognising gender as a socially constructed concept based on perceptions of biological difference, still leaves problems with how expectations of 'feminine' and 'masculine' shape the social world we experience (Spender, 1980; Siim, 2000). Although I have identified research showing problems around the issue of women's engagement with politics, broadly research remained inconclusive in the area of gendered political knowledge, interest or behaviour.

Meso and Chrono-system levels

The meso system level accounts for imperceptible change and flow between people and ideas, across cultures or the life stages of an individual combined with experiences. Ideas of cultural difference that affect young people's political literacy in Britain are not a central focus of my research. However cultural influences constantly and consistently shape young people's experiences as well as my interpretative paradigm. As well as the previously discussed issue of gender (p.43) examples of cultural differences between countries were shown in the comparative case study from Sandstrom et al. (2010), into what young people thought about their citizenship education in Finland, Sweden and England. The authors concluded that English pupils were better informed about their rights and responsibilities, as well as being more rhetorically skilled than their Nordic counterparts, but English pupils were less accustomed to open and confident relationships with adults than the young Swedes and Finns. Recognising that cultural influences affect or are affected by issues of gender and social class as well as nationality, ethnicity, regional differences or religion makes any generalisations about political literacy difficult to establish. The meso system level accounts for the effects of interconnectedness and transformation that are not always immediately apparent.

Uniquely the ecological model also allows for a temporal level of understanding through the chrono-system, allowing for transitive collective influences developing over time, and acknowledging future potential for change. The inclusion of the chrono-system offers space for the development of young people's political literacy or engagement, such as the latch-point moments presented in the research from White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000), whereby young people's knowledge is not stationary or inert but liable to progress and evolve.

Both the meso and chrono-system levels deal with abstract perceptions of the world that are fundamental to understanding about our lives yet remain difficult to identify or quantify. For my study recognising how individual characteristics combined with the interconnectedness and diversity of the external environment through the stages of the ecological model of engagement enabled a richer, holistic explanation of the potential influences or variables impacting on a young person.

2.11 Summary (Part 2)

Reviewing the literature that supported my social constructivist lens examined differences in social perception over what it means to be a child or an adult. This in turn raised issues of autonomy, competency and responsibility that were difficult to categorise in relation to one age group. Appreciating how limiting stereotypes affect young people, from the way they are viewed and expected to act through to control over what they are allowed to do as a result of adult decision making, highlighted some of the barriers to political participation and supported my emancipatory paradigm.

Considering representations of young people and their political engagement in the public sphere raised systematic inaccuracies and a lack of complexity in portrayals. If the systems claiming to represent citizens cannot genuinely listen to concerns or are disrespectful about young people and their difficulties it is perhaps one inevitable outcome that problems with young people's political engagement will appear.

The typologies of young people's political involvement usefully presented ways of countering assumptions about young people's political engagement and provided a more nuanced understanding about the dynamism of young people's potential to politically engage. Not all young people are uninterested in politics and the typologies introduced ideas of relevance, trust, disconnection and cynicism as varying indicators of young people's political engagement.

The ecological model of engagement illustrated that taking a holistic approach is essential for understanding young people's political literacy. Attempting to focus too far in on one particular area of concern ran the risk of losing sight of the interwoven nature of society, and required frequent reflection during the interpretation of data to incorporate this. The aim has been to deepen understanding of key themes of young people's political literacy rather than present conclusive statements.

Participatory Research Design

3.1 The Research Paradigm

So far this thesis has presented the key parameters for my research into the social and political context of young people's political literacy in Britain today. Drawing upon critical theories from education and political science central themes have outlined my critical pedagogic and deliberative democratic framework. The research question, "*Explorations into young people's political literacy: how informed are young people for political engagement and what sources influence young people's political literacy?*" aimed to investigate and develop a deeper understanding of young people's political literacy. Now this thesis turns to the methodological underpinnings of my research, the different methods I used for two distinct phases of fieldwork and ethical considerations. Incorporated within these discussions are the strategies I took to provide rigorous empirical evidence for my study.

To begin is the rationale for selecting an interpretative paradigm with emancipatory and feminist principles and critical reflection upon potential biases arising from my subjectivity. I discuss post-modern and feminist concepts of power and discourse (Spender, 1980; Lukes, 2005) to build upon the critical theories outlined in my literature review, and to uncover the ways dominant and normative narratives can conceal or construct social perceptions.

Following this discussion I explain how my participatory approach developed to provide a rigorous range of up-to-date data for exploring the phenomenon of political literacy. I discuss the rationale for designing a two phase developmental project and provide detail about each method used including the sampling strategy and data analysis framework.

- Phase I utilised a purposive, non-probability survey method specifically designed for young people aged 16-19. Providing mainly quantitative background data about young people's political literacy for the research group in Phase II that could be developed for Phase II.
- Phase II developed along with 3 co-advisors who investigated the survey data, helped draft a research question, and planned and implemented Phase II in the field. This developed from focus groups to group interviews and finally adjusted to include online case studies of young people discussing education and politics.

The final section of the chapter clarifies ethical and moral implications of working with young people between the ages of 16-19 with emphasis on consent and competency issues as well as confidentiality and safeguarding concerns. This discussion illustrates the underpinning deliberations necessary to support the transparency, integrity and quality of my research.

3.2 An Interpretative Approach

How we know what we know? The ability to identify what ‘truth’ might be commonly preoccupies methodology chapters in social research. Reading the literature it became apparent that there is no one category of universal understanding (O’Leary, 2005) rather there are a range of perceptions, in this case regarding political or citizenship education, the public sphere and critical literacy, to which my research findings are an addition. The idea of young people’s political literacy interested me and was greatly influenced by ideas I hold, and principles that I value about the world. In the literature review I introduced the influence of critical theory and social constructionist concepts on my thinking. For this part of my thesis radical feminist perspectives as well as values generated from over fifteen years personal development and practice as a professional youth worker are introduced.

In common with social justice approaches (Ayers, Quinn and Stovall, 2009: xiv), theories about where power lies and how ideas are formed or decisions reached in the collective governance of society are significant to my thesis, with particular interest in the consequences and impact on those excluded from decision-making. For my thesis collective, inclusive approaches to governing society are drawn upon, encapsulated in theories of deliberative democracy (Warren, 2002; Erickson and Weigard, 2003; Crossley and Roberts, 2004) that recognise the value of encouraging informed debate, with the use of reason and the impartial pursuit of truth to support this deliberation (Held, 2006). I stand with Rousseau and other theorists of individual equality and sovereignty, in what may be naive, romantic or idealistic views of the world. Nevertheless it would be difficult for me to honestly approach my research from any other perspective than the interpretative paradigm I have chosen.

It is fundamental to my interpretative paradigm to acknowledge diverse and subjective versions of knowing the social world, where reality is conceptualised as dynamic and open to negotiation in meaning (Walliman, 2011). It is problematic to assume that all young people

exist as one homogenous group and to consider them to be all the same or share similar characteristics or experiences on account of their biological age (James, 2005). As pointed out in the literature review (p.15) it is risky to do so as no one “*universal category of experience exists*” (Aitken, 2001: 7). To present a more accurate reflection or interpretation of people’s lives it is necessary to account for identities, experiences and perspectives that are not static, that are subject to transformation and development from within and without that reflect the dynamic, transformational and fluid qualities of life. These dynamic differences may be difficult to capture in an academic piece of writing, presenting a specific moment in time but they are intrinsic to representing the experiences and perceptions of young people included in this research.

Within the interpretative paradigm I have chosen emancipatory theories or principles of knowledge are particularly important. Emancipatory approaches to research, such as those taken in feminist or social justice research, are characterised by a commitment to presenting multiple views with the emphasis on promoting the views of excluded or marginalised groups (Robson, 2002; Cresswell, 2009). Not all young people are excluded or marginalised in society as inherent influences of age, class, ability, gender or ‘race’ and ethnicity support a multitude of experiences. However my approach challenges dominant social and political ideologies that shape negative or divisive ideas and portrayals of young people in society. In identifying, exposing and addressing fundamental asymmetries of power in society, especially those that may particularly affect young people (Robson, 2002; Bronner, 2011), my aim was to critically challenge ideologies or practices that restrict young people’s political engagement.

My literature review (p.16) drew attention to established difficulties with the representation and inclusion of young people in society and how this representation may affect political understanding or engagement. Through providing an alternative narrative, promoting young people and their viewpoints, my research provided a platform to hear about the realities of young people’s lives from their perspectives. What follows is a brief discussion regarding conceptions of power in the public sphere that establishes the normative function of dominant discourse.

Power in media discourse

Media representation cannot be considered wholly problematic for young people in society, as the diversity of output, experiences of exposure and reaction to messages is far too

complex to tie down to single cause and effect solutions. However the previous chapter (pp 36-38) substantiated some of the realities of young people's political engagement that contrasted starkly with typical negative representations of young people dominating mainstream media channels. Further analyses of macro-level influences in society illustrates the ways these representations can affect normative expectations, opinions or experiences, through the process of 'otherness' (Greer and Jewkes, 2005:20). Whereby other people are viewed as different in a negative way, be it contributing less, perceived as inferior or suggested to be deviant in some way, as explained here from a feminist perspective.

"When one group in society possesses the power to decree its own experience as the only meaningful, ordered and normal experience, it also has the power to define that which is outside its experience as meaningless, chaotic and abnormal".

Spender, (1980: 369)

Spender is discussing how groups or individuals are excluded through the dominant discourses held by society. Illuminating the ways power is concealed in language or discourse, this quote exposes how accepted 'truths' about the world are framed and the difficulties people face if they exist outside the dominant group. This perspective argues that the language or discourse we use reflects power: who has the power to define the problem in a particular way and who is silenced by particular representations. Spender (1980) was specifically discussing the invisibility, silence or absence of women in public discourse. A discourse framed by patriarchal norms that repeatedly exclude, ignore or misrepresent the experiences of women, which is replicated in political structures and practices (Siim, 2000). The idea of woman as 'other', something to be ridiculed, feared, despised and labelled as deviant (often sexually) outside the social norms of society can exclude women and their ability to fully participate in the governance of society. This 'othering' process has been shown to work with young people in a similar way. Examples of negative representations of young people in mainstream media as, 'feral', 'thug', 'delinquent' (Camber, 2012) or 'chav' that incorporates notions of social class (Jones, 2011), combine with discourses of criminality, deviance or shame to stigmatise and exclude young people from public debate.

Whilst agreeing that power resides with those able to maintain normative values that achieve widespread cultural acceptance in society, such as through elite sanctioned media channels (Herman and Chomsky, 1994) or by use of expert opinion in defining problems (Illich et al., 1977), I disagree that power is static within structures and is pre-given in all situations. Lukes

(2005) radical view of power takes up the argument for agency and cautions against assuming powerlessness in the face of ideological domination, and he recognises the importance of the interplay between agents and structures. Power does not always have to be dominant or repressive. It can be productive in a “*local, progressive and capillary*” sense (Alex and Hammarstrom, 2008: 169). Fitting with Freire’s idea of critical consciousness (p.18-19), identifying people’s capacity to be agents of change, allowing for a positive view of young people’s developing political literacy and political engagement, despite persistent perceptions to the contrary.

A flexible view of power is particularly appropriate when associating political literacy with the transformative potential of critical consciousness (Freire, 2007). The ability to step back from any given narrative, to explore different levels of meaning and intention in what is being said or shown is a fundamental aspect of being politically or critically literate in contemporary society (Crick, 2000; Beck, 2005). Developing a critical awareness of how power works through different ideological values and concerns, which is verified and reinforced by dominant narrative sources, is just one aspect of the intricate picture that power presents to politically literate citizens. Theories about power and discourse emphasise and reinforce the necessity of encouraging a politically literate citizenry, to be informed and engaged in the public sphere. A citizenry that is able to respond to social issues or influence situations. My research aim was to understand how informed young people were to engage in the public sphere from their own perspectives and now discussion moves onto the research methods I used to do this.

3.3 Participatory Research Design

My participatory research design developed directly from the needs of the research question as well as reflecting epistemological influences. Taking a top-down approach to young people’s political literacy was exclusionary and potentially undermined the validity of my study, therefore incorporating participatory research strategies was a primary aspect of the research design. Here I introduce key influences and processes that led me along the route I took.

So far we have seen that the discourse surrounding political literacy stems from progressive ideals about the best ways to prepare or educate citizens for a political role in the public

sphere. Political literacy is a mixture of an individual's developing capacity to actively participate in the community alongside knowledge and understanding of formal political institutions and citizenship. As a young person I benefitted from participation opportunities in my local community with the guidance and support provided by youth workers that contributed to my progressive view of educating for political literacy. An education that prioritises people being included in their own learning, and requires what is being taught or discussed has use or is relevant to them (Douglas, 2002; Alexander, 2010). Political education that is not limited to any particular age of person in the spirit of lifelong learning (Annette, 2009).

Therefore a clear research aim was to address how informed young people were about politics from a young person's perspective, rather than just providing a "*yardstick of knowledge*" (Stradling, 1977: 5), framed wholly from an adult perspective. The use of a participatory research approach would help counter bias or assumptions from the adult researcher, and supported developing authentic depictions of political literacy. A person centred approach, mirrored emancipatory methods of enquiry to account for multiple realities shaped by a broad range of socio-political values (Walliman, 2011), not from pre-held assumptions.

The origins of participatory research (PR) or, as American researchers often termed it community-based participatory research (CBPR), were synonymous with groups or individuals who are marginalised or excluded from society (Gonsalves, 2005). As I argue young people remain excluded from political roles in the public sphere, whilst participatory research uses processes intended to counter that exclusion. Over the last decade participatory research with young people has taken place in a wide range of settings to include their voices, within public and environmental health (Moules, 2005; Cole et al. 2005; Brindis et al., 2008), alongside geographers researching urban spaces and drug use (Pain and Francis, 2002), and with youth advocates in participatory and community mapping exercises (Unzipped, 2009; Carnegie UK Trust, 2008).

Using a participatory approach included young people in research about political literacy and informed, enabled and empowered participants to make sense of their world in ways that were accessible to them. Participatory approaches support a view of the world strengthened by perspectives from the community under study. As Sharpe (2011) noted it is too simplistic to identify young people's involvement in research as a straightforward binary, with passive

recipients having research done to them versus active subjects who have the necessary confidence or ability to engage with research, a lot depends on individual capacities or commitment. My approach actively encouraged young people's inclusion in as much of the research process as possible, not just as respondents but in having their opinions influence the direction and development of the project as much as the outcomes. In this sense participatory research can be seen as a process rather than a methodology (Pain and Francis, 2002).

Throughout my research I was committed to including the community under study in a respectful, inclusive manner, keen to encourage high levels of informed consent within an anti-oppressive working environment. I used youth work knowledge, skills and experience to create a safe, creative space for this (Young, 2006:2). During implementation of the survey in Phase I my knowledge and experience of working with young people supported my appearance in their spaces and sensitivity to the challenges presented, such as lack of confidence, disability or poor literacy levels. It was important to communicate information about the study in the most efficient ways possible, which often meant the briefest way possible and at levels the young people understood, letting their responses and questions guide me.

Working alongside Sam, James, Tim and group interviewees in Phase II required knowledge and experience of group work to form and maintain the groups, with effective identification and use of people's skills or knowledge within the group. The basis of my participatory approach rested on recognising individual contributions to the project and appreciating the diversity of participants as much as possible. This was often a descriptive process rather than an action process. Ingram and Harris (2001) recognise good youth work practice begins from where the individual is, not from assumptions about where they are expected to be. The authors also identify time is necessary to establish trusting relationships where mutual respect is developed, although time often appeared in short supply in the research environment. Opportunities for self-development and learning were offered to young people throughout the research process. A process that I considered as important as the outcomes and required two key features of participatory research that I will discuss now, sharing power and authenticity.

Sharing Power

Participatory or collaborative approaches to research are characterised by the attitude to sharing power between participants that fit emancipatory paradigms of viewing the world (Gonsalves, 2005; Mertens, 2005; Brindis et al., 2008). Issues of power exist throughout

human relationships and the relationship between the adult researcher and the young person researcher is no exception. Jones (2004: 113) asserted that the adult researcher was the authoritative figure and the position of the child is subordinate to that. Jones questions if democratising research is possible and claimed that attempting to level out power inequalities is just a superficial nod to egalitarianism. There are two difficulties with framing the world in this particular way for the young people I was researching, the first was holding fixed points at which age children become adult, as levels of competency are so different amongst individuals. The other arose from words such as authoritative and subordinate being used to frame the issue in a particular way. The thought that democratising research as Jones claims is only superficially possible is problematic for young people who are interested, capable and responsible.

At the beginning of the last century women's suffrage was fought over as women were often held inferior to men in capability or intelligence (Spender, 1983: 269). Deficit models of children and young people often work in a similar way, to reinforce the idea that children or young people are less complete than adults, lesser people who are deficient in some way (Jones and Welch, 2010). Conceptions of child and adult vary greatly as explored in the literature review (pp.25-26). These conceptions affect assessments of individual competence, capability and ability to take on responsibility. In youth work practice one way the issue is practically addressed is by using the term young people or person, rather than child to reframe the term of reference (Young, 2006). The aim is to encourage a view of a whole person, to move away from making assumptions based on assumed competences or capabilities related to biological age. This thesis considers children or young people as active 'subjects' with their own agency, able to assert their right to make informed decisions for themselves without resorting primarily to age-related assumptions (Tisdall, Davies and Gallagher, 2009; Warwick et al., 2010).

My expectation of sharing power did not sit comfortably with words such as 'authoritative' and 'subordinate' that imply an unyielding hierarchy. These terms were problematic as during the research I considered myself as a learner as much as the co-advisors or participants, (Davis, 2009) not as a teacher or authority figure. My role as a co-ordinator was to encourage active participation in the research from individuals at levels that were comfortable for them, not instructing them over what they must do. Yes I was the adult and held a certain amount of status or responsibility with that role such as the ethical ethos of the research, resource management and timekeeping. The emphasis of participatory research is

on developing inclusive deliberation and consensus between all participants. I was aiming for more than a narrow search for answers from a one off consultation established through a top-down, preordained agenda. Every person has something to offer, which included me but as part of the whole. Various participation models suggest how power can be shared and here I use the Treseder model to explain underlying levels or degrees of sharing power.

Treseder's (1997) *Degrees of Participation* usefully illustrates a range of potential power relations within groups. Unlike hierarchical models such as Arnstien/Hart's *Ladder of Participation* (Badham and Wade, 2008) Treseder's model offers greater flexibility over identifying what sort of participation is taking place in a practical way. The model identifies adult and young person roles and illustrates the fluid, changeable nature of power relationships between individuals that takes place in different groups or settings over time. Although Treseder's model fails to account for tokenistic or manipulative views of power, which the hierarchical models emphasise.

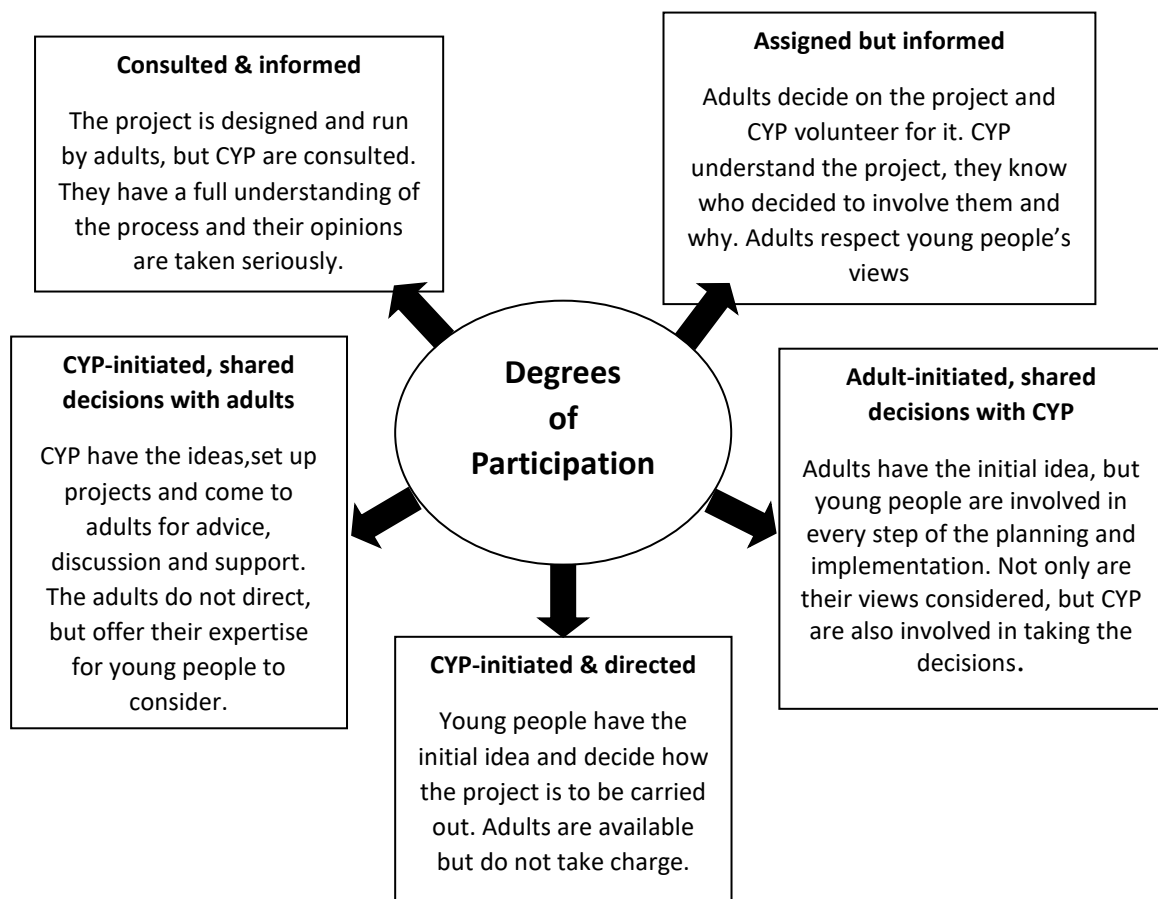


Figure 4.1 Empowering Children & Young People (Treseder, 1997)

The five degrees of participation shown, range from '*consulted & informed*' that is projects designed and run by adults whereby young people are asked for their opinions through to '*young people initiated and directed*' where young people have the initial idea and decide at all levels how the project will be carried out. Adults are available for advice and support but they do not take charge. This participation model sees agency as being with individuals rather than with organisations or wider social contexts. More recent models from Shier (2001) and Sharpe (2011) identify and apply emphasis to organisational or institutional engagement or participation, which gained greater significance after my data analysis.

Treseder's model (Figure 4.1:54) illustrated potential power interactions and contexts relevant to the group settings I was working in. The co-advisors clearly fell in the *assigned but informed* degree, whilst *consulted and informed* and *adult initiated and shared decision* making were also relevant at other times with the survey and paired interviews. Sharing power with co-advisors, Sam, James and Tim, regarded striking a balance between meeting the requirements of the research question and my academic goals, with any subsequent direction they wanted to explore. This was quite a risky, often uncomfortable place to be when ceding control of ideas but it was necessary for developing creativity and ownership within the research group.

Sharing the power required individuals trusting each other and flexible, adaptable, reflexive thinking (Pain and Francis, 2002) helped me manage quickly developing, changeable situations. Unfortunately suggestions by co-advisors could not always be wholly incorporated in my research such as using snowball sampling or making better use of the political literacy toolkit that established what skills Sam thought a politically literate young person required but these were useful discussions for those involved giving us all a deeper understanding of what we were looking for. The issue of power sharing required regular reflection throughout my thesis to weigh my participatory research practice against.

Authenticity

Through seeking to clarify the ways in which young people understood and interacted with politics as well as the meanings or importance they associated with the term, my research involved individuals collaborating in a process of critical reflection. Reflective collaboration provided an authentic and relevant account of young people's experiences, and their interpretations helped construct shared meanings that everyone involved was able to learn

and benefit from (Pain and Francis, 2002; Sharpe, 2011). As a white, middle-aged woman, even with fifteen years' experience of youth work with young people I was not in a position to realistically assume first-hand knowledge of young people's political understanding. I could empathise, read and synthesize previous accounts, interview, listen and reflect upon different views but I could not speak with greater authority on young people's experiences or values than young people could themselves. The term biographical baggage (Aitkin, 2001: 8) describes a difficulty adults face with empathising with young people especially where adult preconceptions shadow what young people are actually experiencing. Following on from Illich and *Disabling Professions* (1977), Nicholls (2009:120) notes "*the genesis of collaborative, participatory research was to destabilise the control of professionals and experts in their creation of knowledge about others*". To assume '*I knew best*' because of my age or experiences was partial, limiting and arrogant (Spender, 1980). Providing an authentic picture of young people's political literacy required representing their views or ideas as comprehensively as possible, rather than solely making a presentation of my ideas about what those views could or should be.

Young people's views were represented in Phase I as there was a small qualitative dimension in the survey but the parameters of the research method and content were assigned by me as the lead researcher to the degree of '*adult initiated, shared decisions with young people*' according to the Treseder model (Figure 4.1:54). It was in the development of Phase II where young people's participation increased, a deeper, authentic contribution developed and the research moved into *assigned but informed*.

Co-advisors, Sam, James and Tim spent three months, establishing what Phase I had found, bringing fresh eyes to the themes, mapping their local area to establish where groups of young people were, looking at the coding categories and data analysis, and incorporating ideas over the research method in the development of Phase II. Discussions centred on points of interest emerging from the data such as who was getting what questions wrong, what made us interested in politics and looking at links between the data and key literature informing the study, especially Stradling (1977) and the Hansard Audits (2010-2013). As a result of the latter exercises Sam created a Political Literacy toolkit (Appendix i) to illustrate what skills a person may need to be politically literate.

The research question for Phase II was devised in collaboration with Sam, James and Tim, and the subsequent research methods chosen all bear the imprint of their ideas, opinions and

views. Tim was a vocal proponent of the focus group method as he liked that if they were done well they were inclusive of participants. After meeting once in September Tim and James failed to attend any further meetings. Sam maintained his support for the research for over a year, developing and running through the interview schedules and coming into the field and being an integral part of facilitating the first group interview. I provided Sam with a reference for the work he did, which he used to support part-time job applications. Although relatively brief in terms of being a whole group, the co-advisors input changed the perspective of my research, of being ‘about’ young people to research being ‘done’ with young people in Cambridge, a participatory process that improved the authenticity of my research.

As well as providing an authentic voice or platform for young people it is important to acknowledge that a participatory approach to research undoubtedly benefited me. Working in collaboration with the co-advisors and participants was an opportunity to test my understandings in relation to theirs, understand more about their lives in Cambridge and provided extra impetus and motivation for my research. Sam, James and Tim shared ideas and knowledge that gave my thesis greater accuracy in reflecting young people’s lives at that particular point in time.

Recognising my own bias and mental habits were also part of the participatory process and recognising my own strengths and failings was not easy and high levels of reflexivity were necessary. Predominantly I hold a relaxed, laissez faire, literally: ‘let (them) act’, (Collins, 2000: 867) attitude to life. This attitude was all well and good when things went favourably but not so good when difficulties arose. Sharpe (2011) noted the struggle between being a critical friend or enabler and knowing when and where to lead. The need to take control, challenge, or direct outcomes where necessary could not be ignored and was difficult to balance with the participatory process at times. Over-ruling collective decisions was probably the worst aspect of this struggle. Assessing the authenticity of this collaborative piece of work was not straightforward or clear. Ongoing reflexivity through regular supervision, feedback from presentations and discussions with colleagues were important parts of this learning process.

Now I move on to discuss both phases of research in chronological order.

3.4 Research Methods: Sample Groups, Tools and Analysis

I used multiple research methods designed in two phases, with a sample group of young people aged 16-21,³ initially from across Cambridgeshire.

- **Phase I** Quantitative survey with 200 young people studying in three colleges across Cambridgeshire. Simultaneously approaching and developing a small group of co-advisors willing to advise my research project.
- **Phase II** Qualitative group interviews, with 10 young people studying or working from across Cambridgeshire.
- Three online case studies of young people discussing politics, broadening the sample group to include 128 young people from across the UK, and including a couple of international commentators.

3.4.1 Phase I Sampling Strategy

Three key influences for choosing the sample group to gather evidence for the research question were; the features or characteristics of the target population under study, previous evidence from studies into young people and their political literacy, and the resources available to me. The following discussion weaves these three influences together. I applied non-probability sampling (Robson, 2011) to both phases of my research as I was not seeking to make statistical generalisations beyond the sample group surveyed.

Referring to the different types of sampling as outlined by Robson (2011: 276) I chose heterogeneous sampling as a deliberate, purposive strategy for selecting individuals who would vary widely in their levels of political literacy, from a field narrowed down by age and location, mainly but not solely due to resource limitations. Shared characteristics of respondents in both phases of research were, their age, their attendance at a further education college and their geographical location.

The rationale for targeting young people aged predominantly, 16-19 in Cambridgeshire for my research rested on three observations. Firstly the suitability of this age group made sense

³ The age range was originally planned to be 16-19 but a few slightly older young people answered the survey and one 20 year old was involved in the paired interviews.

from their proximity to the voting age, which was consistent with the approach taken by Henn et al. (2003, 2011). As first time ‘attainers’ it was of particular interest to assess how informed young people thought they were for the role they were nearly or newly eligible for and what supported or hindered them.

Secondly existing research identified those younger than 16 years old may conceptualise politics from a narrower standpoint. Adelson and Green’s (1966) early study found those under 15 having difficulties understanding concepts of individual liberty or a sense of wider community, whilst those aged under 13 years old generally struggled with understanding the wider social consequences of political action. More recently, the extensive Citizenship Longitudinal Study (Keating et al., 2010) observed a ‘*Key Stage 4 dip*’, where young people between the ages of 14-16 were seen to lose interest in politics, and a decrease in efficacy and likelihood of participation. The cause of this apparently age-related phenomenon remains unresolved, although it may correspond with hormonal issues or exam pressures for this group. If this life-stage has such a pronounced effect on young people’s political engagement it may go some way to explaining the pessimistic conclusions of previous studies carried out with this particular age range.

Thirdly, selecting the age group made sense from an accessibility perspective with regards to sample size and diversity. Gathering enough respondents for a valid sample size, necessary for the quantitative element of my study meant accessing a broad sample of ‘ordinary’ young people with regards to social class, ability and ethnicity, as well as aiming for as balanced as possible gender representation. Meeting a valid sample size appeared achievable through approaching a mix of local colleges and Sixth Forms from across Cambridgeshire. Obvious limitations to my approach were the exclusion of young people who were at work, who were not in training, or those with disabilities or parenting responsibilities preventing them from attending college.

Initially I planned to research Sixth Form colleges just in the city of Cambridge but I was criticised in a research seminar by a PhD colleague for ignoring the wider youth population from across the county. This was useful criticism as it moved me away from introducing localised bias (Payne and Payne, 2004) to the quantitative method. Further investigation illustrated the urban conurbation of Cambridge as Liberal and affluent whereas the surrounding rural areas were Conservative, interspersed with high pockets of deprivation, although both political parties were governing as a coalition when my study began.

Examination of the county demographics pointed to wards of deprivation especially in the north east of the county. Limiting my sample to young people predominantly from Cambridge could have introduced an urban, affluent bias to my results as well as excluding young people from less affluent and isolated rural areas. Therefore sample group were selected from each of the three operational areas identified by Cambridgeshire County council, namely East Cambridge and Fenland, Huntingdonshire and South Cambridge and City (Cambridge County Council, 2011) for Phase I of my research.

To ensure a broad mix of ‘ordinary’ young people for the sample group different types of college were approached; with two Tertiary colleges and an independent Sixth Form agreeing to allow me access. Originally I attempted to access Sixth Forms combined with schools, with limited success. As these had small pupil numbers in comparison to larger colleges it became apparent that there would be difficulties with collecting sufficient voluntary responses from such small cohorts. Although I took steps to include young people with a diverse range of backgrounds in the targeted age groups, my survey findings do not apply past the Cambridgeshire sample group to a wider population of young people.

3.4.2 Phase I Quantitative Survey

In Phase I the research questions asked, how informed were young people aged 16-19 with basic political concepts? How interested were this age group in politics and what sources supported their political knowledge? My initial aim was to obtain a snapshot of young people’s political literacy levels in Cambridgeshire for 2011-2012. Attempting to judge and assess how satisfactorily data from the method would capture the phenomena under investigation was a difficult task and open to interpretation. I had to consider how accurately the data would reflect what political literacy was whilst effectively engaging young people with the topic of politics. I chose a survey to answer the research questions.

Previous empirical evidence illustrated that survey methods were popular and efficient ways of finding out more about levels of young people’s political literacy, especially in assessing political knowledge (Stradling, 1977; Denver and Hands, 1990; Henn and Weinstein, 2003; Heron and McManus, 2003; Cleaver et al., 2005; Henn and Foard, 2011). The studies by Henn et al. (2003 and 2011) were notable for assessing young people’s political interest and motivation rather than just political knowledge. I wanted to establish up-to-date information

for analysis (Black, 1993), reflect upon current levels of political knowledge from one geographical area, provide data to supplement and inform the next steps of research, and collect data to contrast with comparable data in the field (Banwart, 2007; Keating et al., 2010; Henn and Foard, 2011; Hansard Society Audits, 2005-2012).

Criticisms of surveys point to inherent bias established by the researcher in content selection (Payne and Payne, 2004) or sample choice, as well as poor response rates or reactive errors of participants. Surveys are also a top-down method of data collection with the content of the questions setting the agenda. These observations form the basis of the following discussion explaining why I designed and implemented the survey in the way that I did, and discusses the limitations of my method. Brewer and Hunter (2006) identified that the biggest criticism of surveys is that they are used alone, a criticism I addressed with two strategies. Firstly I invited young people from the target sample group to be co-advisors to reflect on the data and support the development of research in Phase II. Secondly I used group interviews and on-line data in Phase II to prioritise young people's knowledge and voice in the data and check my own assumptions. These strategies allowed my research to develop along the lines of multi-strategy research design (Robson, 2011).

Problems with survey development

From selecting the initial topic of research to the content and design of the questions chosen the survey predominantly reflected my own preferences in what or was not regarded as appropriate indications of knowledge or interest. I may have approached the topic with a narrow conceptualisation of what politics or the political was but parameters had to be set and I focused on drawing out evidence about key principles and processes that underpin the formal democratic system in Britain. To address concerns over content bias I extensively consulted with colleagues and supervisors and referred to previous research (Stradling, 1977; Denver and Hands, 1991; Mortimore, 2003; Heron and McManus, 2003; Cleaver et al., 2005; Banwart, 2007; Keating et al., 2010; Henn and Foard, 2011). I also considered the most current citizenship education guidelines provided by the Government (Quality and Curriculum Authority, 2007). This process, along with design and layout took five months from inception to successfully gaining ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Panel, and a very quick pilot before final alterations were made.

The initial survey carried out in the field (Stradling, 1977) revealed a time consuming document that was, in places, logically inconsistent. Previous experience of working and consulting with young people determined that the survey design needed to appeal both aesthetically but equally importantly in terms of their expected time investment. I wanted to strike a balance between designing a concise survey that engaged participants whilst providing enough evidence to answer my research question. Early questionnaire designs comprised just two sections, one of background information and one of multiple choice political knowledge questions. Multiple choice questions are generally considered easier to engage with and answer as well as ease of scoring and providing reliable uniform data (Fink, 2006: 14). However it became apparent that this design did not provide evidence about young people's motivation or interest in politics. Concerns over the ability of this limited range of content to reflect political literacy led to the development of three definable sections for the survey, namely background context, multiple choice political knowledge questions and agree/disagree statements to gather information about political interest or values (using a Likert scale). These are briefly discussed now.

The first section of the *Understanding Politics* survey consisted of nine questions, asking for background data about age, gender, ethnicity, disability, subjects being studied in college and received citizenship education at school. This information provided a small amount of comparative data to define the sample group in terms of prevailing characteristics of ability, ethnicity or gender (See Appendix ii: 204).

Section two contained 15 political knowledge questions, mainly asked in multiple choice format to establish levels of basic political knowledge. I deliberately omitted questions to do with political personalities for reasons of brevity and to limit my exploration to broader principles of governance that apply whoever is in government. Respondents were asked to correctly identify definitions for democracy, accountability, lobbying, constitution, referendum and the cabinet, as well as identifying the correct voting age and identifying traditional ideologies associated with party politics. Three questions were not multiple choice, one closed question asked for a yes/no response about whether respondents agreed or not with the current voting age, the other two questions were open and asked about views on the current voting age and what were good sources for political information.

The concluding section posed sixteen value statements in an attempt to gauge young people's political interest. These were in four linked areas of, politics, voting, human rights and

equality. Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a five point scale, from a choice of strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree and strongly disagree. Ten questions were considered positive statements and six were considered negative statements. Overall the questionnaire design attempted to engage young people in various ways on a topic that may not readily hold their attention and present it in an accessible, engaging format. Further strategies developed to encourage respondent participation in my research are discussed now.

Engaging Participants

After some consideration I chose a face to face approach to implement the survey, going in person to engage with respondents. This was the best approach for my skill set and the most appropriate way to encourage broad and inclusive participant engagement of possibly difficult to reach young people, on the topic of politics in an interesting, accessible way. Criticisms of the Marx survey in 1880 (Buckingham and Saunders, 2004) illustrated self-selection and how surveys often appeal to people who are interested in the topic of your study rather than those who are not. By being there in person I could encourage less motivated people to participate.

Additional reasons for using a face to face method were reservations I had about learning the skills necessary for developing a robust online survey within the timeframe available. I was also wary of the potential for on-line participants to seek answers to questions in the absence of controls for this, giving a less accurate picture of their political literacy. Furthermore I could not assume all young people were computer literate and a face to face approach was potentially better for supporting less able or literate participants. Finally implementing the survey in this way, visibly introduced me and my research to the community, which was a strategy for recruiting young people to engage as co-advisors for my research and get more involved.

Problems associated with informed consent can occur when implementing surveys. The literature showed surveys commonly being used in classroom settings to measure young people's political literacy (Stradling, 1977; Denver and Hands, 1991; Heron and McManus, 2003; Cleaver et al., 2005; Keating et al., 2010). Classrooms are particularly convenient locations for accessing potential participants and capturing motivation for completing a task. However there remain issues with the coerciveness of a classroom approach, as hierarchical systems of teacher authority can undermine the idea of freely given, informed consent. Having an informal educational background I chose to situate my research in informal, more

relaxed settings to engage potential respondents. Such as common rooms, corridors and cafeterias that were potentially neutral, less coercive environments or situations to better support the idea of freely given informed consent.

3.4.3 Phase I Exploratory Data Analysis

I used an exploratory data analysis (Robson, 2011) approach to presenting the data gathered from the survey in Phase I. Predominantly the survey produced quantitative data with a small amount of qualitative data embedded in the design (Appendix iii: 205). I wanted to reduce the potential for bias and error in my data analysis and interpretation (Mertens, 2005) therefore the data showed the range of responses given to any particular question or statement by number of respondents and was usually recorded in table or graph form to illustrate this. My study reflected one particular reality in space and time, rather than claiming to make transferable statistical generalisations about a complete population. An exploratory data analysis was the most straight-forward and complimentary approach to achieving clarity with my quantitative findings.

The qualitative data that emerged from the survey was counted and classified to show the prevailing characteristics of the responses given. Coding categories relied upon the reasons given for agreeing or disagreeing with the voting age or sources of political information, and were presented in simple pie chart format to illustrate the breakdown of responses.

The data collation process was quite straightforward, from initial entry of data onto a Microsoft excel spreadsheet, through to the coding of the responses and development of a code book (Appendix iv: 216). There were three components to the code book (Oppenheim, 2003), comprising the text of the questionnaire, a variable allocation document, and coding frames used for the qualitative questions. The raw spreadsheet data and copies of subsequent analysis were securely stored on password protected computers, with a backup copy stored on a USB stick kept alongside the paper copies of the questionnaires, in a locked filing cabinet in a password protected room. Even though there was no personal identification information collected on the surveys I maintained good research practice with responsible, confidential and secure data storage.

Excel Spreadsheet

The raw data from 210 surveys was entered onto two pages of an Excel spreadsheet. Every row in the spreadsheet represented all the data gathered from one survey. The first page

contained background information and responses to the political knowledge questions (Excel columns B-Z in code book). The second page contained data from the political interest statements (Excel columns AB-AQ in code book). Once the master copy was established I copied the data into another workbook to begin sorting and cleaning the data.

Ten responses were withdrawn, either from people outside the age range (14, 22, 25) or those which had given no useable information. This left me with two hundred responses. Four columns were added to the spreadsheet data entry, one being for an eight digit case number, the other three to put scores for question responses - one for political knowledge, one for political interest and one overall total score. Then I coded the data.

Code Book and Variable Allocation Document

Part one of the code book (Appendix iv: 216) provided numbered survey questions in full, and the Excel column letter for each question. The three definable sections to the survey contained background context, political knowledge and political interest. The first eleven questions (B-L) provided background context such as, age, gender, ethnicity, ability, what participants were studying and previous citizenship education. Questions K and L asked for qualitative responses to any citizenship education received and what the respondent considered good sources of political knowledge.

The next section comprised nine mainly multiple choice questions (M-Z). Two of the questions had subsections and the final question was divided into four responses, with a total score out of twelve. Correct responses to the questions were indicated by the letter 'y' in italics. The final section of the survey (AB –AQ) measured political interest and values through responses to sixteen value statements on a five point Likert scale, with the gradations between 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree.

Part Two of the code book comprised the variable allocation document. The column headings identified which Excel column was associated with the data; what the case number consisted of (giving an example) and what the variable allocation information was. The case number consisted of college attended, gender, age, received citizenship education and their total score. This information identified individual responses and was useful for data comparison. Allocation information varied slightly from question to question but questions provided either yes or no, or correct and incorrect answers. Numbers were allocated with 1 signifying 'yes' or 'correct' and 2 signifying 'no' or 'incorrect'. The number 9 was used for 'no information'.

The emerging evidence helped develop the next phase of research with co-advisors in Phase II. A brief overview of the research group is where my discussion moves to now.

3.4.4 Phase II Co-Advisor Research Group

Co-advisors for the study were identified and the research group was established in July 2012. This came about through approaching the son of a colleague by email and asking him if he would be interested in being part of a research group into young people understanding politics. Part of the email consisted of a job description for the role of volunteer researcher. Furthermore if he was interested did he know any other young people in Cambridge who would be interested, and if so could he pass the information on? As a selection strategy on its own this does not sound a particularly inclusive approach but I had promoted the project in all three colleges during the Phase I fieldwork, to no avail. Sam responded with interest and came to a meeting to discuss the research role, expectations and resources.

Consequently the research group comprised of Sam, James and Tim, all aged 16 who were part of a school friendship group in Cambridge. During the research period all the researchers left school and moved onto three different Sixth Form Colleges in Cambridge. Each co-advisor discussed topical, political issues within the research group based on the survey evidence from Phase I, and contributed to discussions when attending meetings. Research group meetings had notes taken and sent out by email to the group a week or so later. Although the clear focus of the group was to discuss and develop Phase I data and evidence, time was necessary to form the group, which included setting ground rules, discussing and managing expectations, building trust between participants and learning more about each other to assess skills and experience. The NYA Research Toolkit (NYA, 2010) supported informal training opportunities with the group, mainly about research ethics, research questions, mapping communities and research methods.

Each co-advisor committed to different levels of involvement. In the fourth meeting discussion centred on what they considered their levels of involvement with the project to be, from low levels of involvement of dipping in and out wherever possible, medium levels of involvement with varying involvement at different stages, to high levels of involvement in the design, collection and interpretation of data (Kellet, 2005). James and Tim fluctuated somewhere between the low and medium levels of involvement for around four months each,

whereas Sam was fully engaged at a high level of involvement for over a year. Holidays and the transition into college both had a large impact on the ability of the whole group to meet regularly together. Despite my best efforts co-ordinating the co-advisors having time to be involved in the research was always an issue for them.

The initial job description did offer volunteer co-researcher roles but two issues arose with this. The first was only Sam had the time and commitment to engage in a fuller capacity to justify the label of co-researcher, eventually coming out into the field and collecting data with me on one occasion. Secondly, criticisms of the participatory approach taken often centred on questioning the substance of the PhD being my own original work if including the work done by the co-advisors. The co-advisors were integral to discussions for the development of Phase I into Phase II and providing rich levels of reflection and deliberation about key issues raised in the data such as decision making in politics, the role of gender in political literacy and the skills necessary for someone to be politically literate. I have aimed to be as transparent as possible about the young people's contribution to the research group in order to allay concerns in this area. However decisions over the final analysis and writing up of the project have been my endeavour alone.

This discussion now moves onto the sampling strategy for Phase II

3.4.5 Phase II Sampling Strategy

To recap the rationale for selecting the sample group rested on identifying characteristics of the target population under study to meet the needs of the research question, previous evidence from studies into young people and their political literacy, and the resources available to me (Payne and Payne, 2004). In Phase II the research question developed through discussions with the co-advisors, based on the data collected and literature about political literacy. Questions arose about how prepared or equipped young people were to engage with the formal political systems they were gaining legal representation in, and what supported them to do this. From the sixth meeting with co-advisors the research question was produced in draft form. Emerging from this the main research question for Phase II was, "*How informed did young people (aged 16-19) think they were to engage with politics?*" shifting the focus to gather, in-depth qualitative responses.

The sampling strategy in Phase II was again deliberately heterogeneous (Robson, 2011: 276), selecting individuals who would vary in their levels of political literacy from a field narrowed down by age and location. Shared characteristics of the respondents in both phases of research were age, attendance at a further education college and geographical location. Discussions with the co-advisors about influences of gender and social mobility affecting political literacy raised the issue of being able to do some comparative research within the method chosen. A decision was agreed by the research group that selection of respondents would reflect equal numbers of each gender. Between six to ten young people were expected to participate in each focus group to find out how they conceptualised politics and what supported their political knowledge, interest and involvement.

The rationale for targeting young people aged predominantly 16-19 in Cambridge continued to make sense from their proximity to the voting age and finding out how informed they thought they were for the role they were entering. Selecting this age range for the sample group avoided the issue of the 'Key Stage 4 dip', (Keating et al., 2010) whereby younger age ranges may have good reason not to be politically engaged. Choosing to do the research solely in the city of Cambridge for Phase II was justified by the practical issues of transport and accessibility for the research group as a whole, to ensure the co-advisors could stay involved and where there were facilities for focus group participants to meet. There were limited time and resources to meet the co-advisors or move them around to different locations, with the Anglia Ruskin University campus being a convenient, well-resourced place for all participants to meet.

3.4.6 Phase II Qualitative Research Methods

To answer the research question developed from the Phase I data, which asked how well equipped young people were to engage with formal political systems, and to follow up what supported this engagement, the co-advisors along with myself considered a number of factors. Quantitative data provoked interesting discussions about the political knowledge of the sample group but the qualitative responses given in agreement or disagreement with the voting age, or for what sources of information support young people's political understanding appeared more illuminating, even where there was not enough context or detail. Reviewing the literature, it was clear that thicker or richer descriptions of young people's thoughts and experiences about political engagement or citizenship (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Lister

et al., 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Wood, 2009) emerged from the range of qualitative methods used in these convincing studies. Therefore the research group became keen to take a qualitative approach with a perceived expectation that the methods could establish richer explanatory data on the phenomena being researched.

After several discussions about research methods available the co-advisors agreed that a focus group would be the best way for us to gather the descriptive data we were seeking to answer the research question. Qualitative data from Phase I had informed useful discussions over voting ages and sources of knowledge and the co-advisors thought that a platform where these issues could be discussed in detail through collective deliberation by young people would provide valuable and valid evidence for my research. Further reasoning identified the focus group method as socially inclusive and accessible with potential for participants to find the experience useful and interesting to take part in (Payne and Payne, 2004).

After a year it became evident that I would not gather enough data through the focus group method, which due to low participation numbers had developed into four group interviews with 10 young people. After receiving ethical permission I went on-line to gather data for twelve weeks from three different sites where young people were potentially discussing politics. Only two of these sites maintained regular discussions about politics, *YouthDebates* and *Powered by Girl*, and provided the final set of data used for my research.

3.4.7 Phase II Analytical Framework

Three methods were used to gather data for this study and the data analysis developed from the initial quantitative study to include richer qualitative data from the interviews and on-line observations. The exploratory data analysis as described in 3.4.3 for the survey provided a basis for the analytical framework subsequently used in Phase II. I used a four part framework originally identified to use with discourse analysis (Tonkiss, 2012) to carry out a thematic analysis of the data from the four semi-structured group interviews (Table 3.1). This comprised four steps, namely; significant concepts and themes, association and variation, agency – of self and others, emphasis and silence to interrogate the data with. Data from the on-line observations were overlaid on the themes arising from the original four part framework and developed according to young people's responses, often reflecting the frequency of an issue but also what was viewed as important by participants.

I took a social construction approach to investigating the data with emphasis on the meanings young people gave to the words and ideas they used. To begin prominence was given to the breadth of discussion rather than any particular depth. Sub-themes identified during the various phases of research fed into one another, allowing me to compare and contrast emerging data.

Table 3.1 Thematic Analysis Steps and Indicators (Group Interviews)

Group Interviews	Indicators
Step 1. Significant concepts or themes	Politics, media sources and education. Main words and ideas that recurred.
Step 2. Association & variation	Formal politics. Informal politics. Votes at 16. Useful sources of political information. Citizenship education, post 16 education, informal education
Step 3. Agency (self & others)	Perception and experiences of politics, media and education.
Step 4. Emphasis & Silences	What participants could not or found problematic to answer. Where there was emphasis or a nodal point

A group of sub themes emerged from the group interview participant's responses. Both formal and informal politics were discussed, such as perceptions of MP's and politicians, or the visibility of homelessness or disabled people in local communities. Also highlighted were discussions about print, broadcast and social media, citizenship education and post 16 experiences.

Online groups were found discussing education and media in relation to politics, which meant the emphasis shifted away from some of the issues I had asked about such as voting at 16 and citizenship education. The framework of sub themes refocused my investigation and new sub-forums were created from observing the online threads and blogs.

Table 3.2 Thematic Analysis Steps and Indicators (Online Observations)

Online Observations	Indicators
Step 1. Significant concepts or themes	Education, media and politics. Main words and ideas that recurred.
Step 2. Association & variation	Education. Media, print, broadcast and social media. Formal politics. Informal politics.
Step 3. Agency (self & others)	Perceptions and experience of the role of education, the media and politics in their lives and society
Step 4. Emphasis & Silences	What participants could not or found problematic to answer. Where there was emphasis or a nodal point.

Word Weighting

For my group interview analysis of ten research participants, a *weak association* indicated 20% or less of participants had raised a theme or concept. A *strong association* indicated 60% or more of participants had raised an issue. For the on-line observations the weighting remained the same but reflected the thinking of a larger group of 47 key contributors (out of 128 on-line participants overall).

This methodology chapter now moves onto the ethical considerations that underpin my research.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Although the topic under investigation and my research methods were non-invasive for research participants, designing and implementing research that adhered to clear ethical principles remained a responsibility. In addition it was my responsibility to ensure that the co-advisors were clear about implementing good ethical practices with research participants and the data collected, but that the co-advisors' right to be treated considerately and fairly was recognised (British Sociological Association, 2002). The *Participant Information Sheets* (Appendix v: 220) were useful as part of the training done in this area.

Good ethical practice was intertwined with all aspects of my research (Blackburn and Holland, 1998). Both phases of research required submission of an detailed ethical approval form to the Faculty Research Ethics Panel at Anglia Ruskin University, that included the rationale, planning and implementation of each research method used including sampling and data storage and management. Research could not proceed without gaining ethical approval. The ethics applications were combined with regular, ongoing reflection with supervisors on how and why I was following a particular course of action or selecting a particular sample or method and the impact on participants (Blackburn and Holland, 1998).

Three primary sources guided the ethical direction of my study; the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), *Research Ethics Guidebook*; the British Sociological Association statement of ethical practice (BSA, 2002) and *The Introduction to Ethics* workbook from Anglia Ruskin University. As well as discussions with my supervisors, other PhD students have further supported my progress in this area as well as previous experiences of working

with young people for a local authority, with regularly updated safeguarding training and emphasis on Health and Safety procedures and data protection. Three linked discussions follow about how I approached informed consent, safeguarding and risk, and confidentiality during the research.

Informed Consent

The central issue in seeking ethical permission for research, with all age groups of people is the issue of informed consent (ERSC). It is generally accepted that special care and consideration applies to research with people who have learning disabilities or young people under eighteen years of age. My focus here is on how I approached consent and competency and the way that assumptions about competency in relation to biological age can complicate the issue.

Since permission to vote was lowered in 1969 from twenty-one to eighteen, eighteen has commonly been held the age of reaching maturity in Britain. Eighteen is the age at which the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC, 1989) no longer applies. Nonetheless anomalies with this situation, such as the age of criminal responsibility being set at ten years old in Britain (excluding Scotland), which is the lowest in Europe, contrasts starkly with ideas of adulthood and maturity in other areas of responsibility. One problem with treating age as the defining characteristic of ability or competency leads to a range of judgments and assumptions that potentially disenfranchise young people (Aitkin, 2001; Graham, 2004). With research showing that 14 year olds have similar levels of competency to adults when confronted with the same hypothetical situation (Kuther and Posada, 2004), I agree with James (2005: 34-35), who argues it would be far more constructive to bracket the idea of age away from determining whether a young person or child is competent to make a decision for themselves. With a social constructionist perspective of society, expectations of age can be problematic. Whilst age appropriate legislation offers young people important protections, depending on the circumstances attitudes are also able hinder the transition of young people into responsible adulthood.

My attitude towards young people's ability to consent is heavily influenced by fifteen years youth work experience. Heath et al., (2005: 404) suggest agency and competency are essential principles in the reasoning behind informed consent. In local authority educational settings (excluding high risk activities), young people were expected to be able to decide for themselves about their level of involvement in activities offered. This applied to young

people from the age of 12-18, age boundaries outlined by the parameters of the job set by the local authority. An integral part of the youth work role was to encourage young people to deliberate upon matters that affect them, to identify potential consequences, to support them getting the information they needed to reach informed decisions, and to meet their needs where possible whilst listening to any concerns they had. Ultimately decisions were theirs to make as long as they felt they had the best information to reach it. This may appear a simplistic approach given the range of influences potentially affecting a person's judgement yet self-determination is a fundamental part of developing responsibility for your own actions.

As discussed earlier in 2.7, encouraging young people's autonomy remains a heavily contested area especially in the field of sexual health, particularly where parents or responsible adults expect various degrees of control over or involvement in children's lives. This runs into difficulties when expectations are out of synch. The Fraser guidelines (1985) that superseded the Gillick ruling (1982) support the concept of individual competency around contraception choices for fourteen year olds and above. If a professional observes there is '*sufficient understanding*' on the part of the young person about what is involved in a particular situation they are deemed competent. Considerable debate exists about the exact interpretation of sufficient understanding; however in the context of my research sufficient understanding relied on me providing information about what the research entailed in a relevant, accessible manner, not coercing the young people to take part and giving potential participants time to choose their level of involvement without feeling pressured. My responsibility was to present information about the research in clearest, least oppressive manner possible. If informed consent is considered in terms of individual competency and understanding rather than centring on the issue of age, seeking consent was generally supported by expectations of the abilities of the sample group to choose for themselves.

Informing participants for both phases of research was primarily done through participant information sheets giving extensive information about the research project and the expectations on participants. This document outlines any risks and describes potential benefits to respondents for taking part. Information about secure and confidential data management as well as contact details for my supervisors were given. A copy of the participant information sheet was enclosed with my introductory letter to gatekeepers in the colleges, to further understanding about the research processes and clarify expectations. In

the field key points of the information were reproduced in college email systems, and on posters and leaflets.

Even with this level of preparation, recognition of individual competency and ability to give consent was not always replicated by other responsible adults in educational or research arenas. Heath et al., (2005) note that informed consent can be undermined somewhat by the role of gatekeepers directing or making assumptions about young people's lives without informing them of potential consequences or asking for their opinion. As responsible adults managing large groups of young people it was perhaps understandable when gatekeepers did not always appear to work in a consensual manner, although not impossible to do so. But my responsibility was to be clear about the process of informed consent with gatekeepers to confirm that young people were not expected or coerced to take part in my research.

Once access to the colleges was gained, young people gave their consent for Phase I by filling in and returning the survey questionnaire. If people did not want to take part or be involved in the research I reassured them that participation was not compulsory and people did not have to take part if they did not want to. In Phase II consent forms were attached to the participant information sheet that was handed out either face to face when I introduced myself to groups of young people in the colleges or by way of an introductory email.

Confidentiality, Anonymity and Safeguarding

Each participant was given information to support their understanding about confidentiality and the participant information sheets (Appendix v) made clear that all information shared would be treated privately and confidentially. The survey in Phase I was completed anonymously so once the young person completed and returned the questionnaire there was no way to identify who has completed it. In Phase II all participants in the group interviews were given pseudonyms in the data to maintain their anonymity. The co-advisors reviewed ground rules for the group interviews, including the concept of confidentiality and considered how it applied in the research setting. This was supported by the six principles of research ethics (ERSC) outlined in the *Research Ethics Guidebook*.

Safeguarding procedures state that confidentiality remains between the worker and young person unless something is disclosed indicating a participant is at risk of serious harm. Disclosures of neglect or abuse were unlikely to arise given my area of research and the public nature of the research environment. Nevertheless I had to show awareness of my legal

obligation to safeguard young people and the correct procedures to follow if a situation did occur, to achieve ethical approval. Recognising good practice of discussing the issue first with the young person about the need to share what they have disclosed with another responsible adult and knowing who to share that information with. Sensitive information would be shared with the person at college with legal responsibility in this area as outlined by local authority Safeguarding Children Boards. In less formal environments the NSPCC can be contacted. It was not my role to take any judgement or action over the information disclosed to me other than to promptly inform the most suitable contact.

Risk Assessing Research

The question of risk in the research environment was difficult to wholly predict or define, given the diversity of environments the research took place in and the unknown qualities of the young people or situations to be encountered. All the research took place in educational establishments with an expectation that Health and Safety guidelines or requirements would be followed. Aside from standard Health & Safety requirements of meeting in a safe, public environment, a willingness to adapt and use the lone working policy, and holding a current CRB, it was difficult to see my research posing any physical risk to participants.

Philosophical risks of challenging preconceived notions and ways of seeing the world were harder to assess. A purpose attributed to education is that of drawing out ways of seeing the world. Given that I hold strong opinions on certain social justice issues I needed to make it clear that my research did not attempt to indoctrinate young people into any partisan political viewpoint (Crick, 2000). The purpose of this research was exploring, listening to and observing young people's political knowledge and understanding through a reflective, critical process.

3.6 Summary

To summarise my interpretative paradigm rests on personal values and principles I hold to be 'true' about the world. Through seeking to reflect greater diversity in the social and political realities of young people my emancipatory stance challenges unjust interpretations, representations or assumptions about young people in society. My data adds to existing empirical evidence (Stradling, 1977; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Lister et al., 2003; Heron and McManus, 2003; Wood, 2009; Henn and Foard, 2011) about young people and their political literacy whilst attempting to counter often inaccurate or simplistic assumptions

made about their political understanding or aptitude. Through endeavouring to find out what supported and what hindered young people's political literacy this research investigated a range of ideas relating to power and ideologies, structure and agency, influence and resistance of and to normative ideals, through a critical, feminist and progressive lens.

This chapter offered my rationale for using a participatory approach with a multi-strategy research design to gather evidence to answer my research questions and provide reliable findings. Participatory research is consistent with emancipatory theories that attempt to seek authentic responses to research questions from communities under investigation. My research project was conducted through a commitment to anti-oppressive and inclusive practices that aimed to encourage cooperation and power sharing between myself and the young people involved; either as participants or co-advisors to the research process, with the latter having greater opportunity for personal development experiences. I discussed my commitment to reflective practice to address problems such as power sharing and bias with an appreciation of the importance of developing critical awareness, not only in myself but also the young people involved in the research.

I justified the methods used at each stage of my research to increase transparency and have explained the limits of my study in relation to the sample group selected and made it clear I have not undertaken research to provide statistical generalizations. Each phase of research was designed to complement the other, to account for any shortcomings and to provide a solid foundation of data to find key themes about the political literacy of young people.

Finally I addressed ethical considerations important to my research approach. I emphasised the debate around informed consent for this particular age group with regards to sufficient understanding and what steps were taken to clearly inform participants about their involvement in the research. This was followed by a discussion on issues of confidentiality, safeguarding and risk that need to be explicitly understood and followed when working with young people in research.

Research in Action: Access, Recruitment and Enabling Participation

4.1 Introduction

The aim of my research was to investigate the concept of young people's political literacy, that is the knowledge, understanding and ability that supports young people's engagement with politics. My research question sought to find out how informed young people thought they were to engage politically as well as identify more about the key sources young people thought influenced or supported them to be politically literate. This chapter provides details about the research process and fieldwork sites before exploring how each of the three areas, access, recruitment and participation impacted on each other during my fieldwork. In this chapter the relevance of my study to wider observations made about the time, space and support young people have to be politically literate and to democratically engage is cemented.

Detailing key features and realities of the data collection process undertaken ensures any claims made for the consistency and reliability of my data are as transparent as possible. Each research method is discussed with a small amount of background about each fieldwork site to provide a clear overview of the data collection process. Once the scale and breadth of the research fieldwork is established I move on to discuss central features of access, recruitment and enabling participation. Considerations about access centres on key differences between the on-line and off-line processes, with on-line data collection adhering to ideas over copyright and fair use rather than seeking gatekeeper permission. The role of ethics and gatekeepers in establishing good research practice is also explored, with a focus on the issue of informed consent.

Issues with recruiting research participants were typical of much social science research. The main problem affecting both off-line and on-line recruitment, was accessing and recruiting the identified sample group. I wanted to access a broad range of typical or 'ordinary' young people from across Cambridgeshire, which is why around half the data came from participants attending vocational colleges, whilst the other half came from a highly rated state educational establishment. In common with all research regardless of where young people were studying, particularly for the first two research methods I could only research in places I was given access to, with participants who were willing to engage with me. As my research moved on-line it was practically impossible to identify or verify where young people were studying or gather any background information as the majority of data was provided by

anonymous contributors that I had no interaction with. The self-selection of the on-line participant sample group is a further recruitment issue to be discussed in this chapter.

This chapter concludes with a discussion about the aim of enabling participation in my research. By using inclusive research methods to answer my research questions and planning the methods to be as interesting or engaging as possible for participants with support from an advisory group of young people, I sought to address hierarchical inequalities between the social status of adults and young people. Which brings me to discuss the effects of structural inequalities upon individuals in terms of social expectations, experiences and opportunities especially the way I saw it affect my own social capital. Here I reflect on the fieldwork issues faced when trying to work non-hierarchically in a socially constructed hierarchal world. I begin the first part of this chapter describing the key features and realities of the research process.

4.2 Research Fieldwork

To recap the methods used were;

- A. A survey to gather quantitative evidence from 200 young people studying in three colleges across Cambridgeshire.

A small group of three 16 year olds co-advised the research project by discussing the survey data and developing Phase II of the research.

- B. Four group interviews, with 10 young people studying or working across Cambridgeshire.
- C. Three on-line case studies that broadened the sample group to include 128 young people from across the UK discussing politics, which included a couple of international commentators.

A. The Survey

For each fieldwork day my table-top display consistently involved two holders containing surveys (Appendix ii), participant information sheets (Appendix v), Anglia Ruskin University pens and colourful sweets. Leaflets about the Childhood & Youth Research Institute were placed alongside a posting box to return the completed surveys. Also on the table was a

clipboard with A4 pieces of paper on it inviting participants to write down any feedback they had about taking part in the research. Two A4 posters were displayed, repeating information from the participant information sheet in brief, especially explanations for why I was interested in finding out about young people's understanding of politics and how much time was involved should they wish to take part.

On each of the fieldwork days I wore an Anglia Ruskin name badge. Although all the colleges operated a visitor entry badge scheme upon arrival, none of these were particularly legible in terms of stating who I was or showed where I was from. I wanted to present as much information as possible to inform or reassure potential participants of my intentions. The face to face strategy also supported my aim of supporting participation for young people who were perhaps not confident or capable of filling in the survey. If I was made aware there was an issue I made it clear that I would support participants' involvement as much as possible. In all three colleges young people frequently questioned me on the content or language used in the questions to check their understanding.

All the colleges had similar procedures for signing in, receiving a visitor badge and being assigned an allocated space. Not one representative in any of the colleges I accessed during my research asked to see verification of my claim to hold a valid CRB that reflected a number of practices. Firstly, good practice was observed as I was positioned in open public areas with staff nearby. Secondly this helped support my expectation that the young people were mature and able to negotiate the terms of their own involvement with other adults. Finally I am pleased to reflect that levels of trust and acceptance between people in society remain that do not always require proof of an official piece of paper to verify.

The following brief discussions highlight characteristics of the fieldwork, including aspects of my relationships with gatekeepers, undertaken in each of the three colleges for the survey in Phase I.

College One

During the first week of term, one week prior to the survey collection dates College One introduced the research to their students through their college email system. For the young people who did read these emails this began the process of informed consent. Information very similar to the introductory letter was emailed out, including my name and the purpose of the research, with the when, where and what participants involvement would entail. It was

arranged I would be available for two consecutive days in between 10am – 2pm, this split strategy was advised by the gatekeeper to include different groups of young people attending college on different days. My presence in College One was viewed as part of an open week theme where different agencies were dotted about locations in the college talking to young people about a wide range of PSHE or career issues.

Upon arrival at College One, the gatekeeper met me, allocated my space to work, checked with me that I had everything I needed then trusted me to get on with the research with very little input from them. The *laissez-faire* approach shown towards me fitted well with my own ideas of young people as active, competent agents (Heath et al., 2007), which allowed them to decide and negotiate their own levels of involvement and supported the idea of freely given informed consent. During the fieldwork two members of staff did stop in passing to look at the display, find out more about the project and were supportive in their attitudes.

At College One I was situated in a busy corridor near the main entrance and near the canteen entrance. On the one hand this gave me a high profile in with people constantly walking past but on the other hand it created difficulties for small groups of young people to congregate by my display when the corridor got busy. Consequently it was difficult to accurately assess how many chose not to participate, deduce any reason for why they chose not to and presented a problem in the likely possibility of skewing any estimates I made as people did repeatedly walk back and forth. Also according to a nearby poster on the wall I appeared to be encouraging students to break one of the college rules by encouraging them to congregate in the corridor!

On the first day, over four hours I received nineteen completed questionnaires. The following day I gathered twenty-eight responses giving me forty-seven responses overall. It did feel there was a general resistance from the majority of young people to engage with me and my research, and I can only speculate as to the reasons why this was so. Discussions with the gatekeeper identified possible effects from the earliness of the term and for some of the new, first-time students it may be more important to fit in with the group they are associating with rather than draw attention to themselves by taking part in something different. Certainly the topic of politics is off-putting for some young people as from comments made some considered it boring or irrelevant to them. However several young people were interested enough in the topic to remain in discussion with me on a range of issues once they had completed the questionnaire.

College Two

The research at College Two took place a few weeks further into the autumn term. An introductory email was sent out to inform young people a week in advance details of the research taking place. The gatekeeper put the same information up in poster format at strategic points around the college. Of the three research sites in Phase I Sixth Form Two was the most prescriptive about the time span I was allocated for my research. I was given one lunch period of an hour and situated in an open-plan computer suite, with a hallway linking to classrooms running around the outside. During the data collection period I was constantly in the company of the lead gatekeeper or another designated staff member who were fully engaged in the recruitment process alongside me. This approach facilitated highly engaged, enjoyable and informative interactions between the young people, the staff and myself.

College Three

Two consecutive days were arranged for data collection at College Three, again to enable young people who attend college on different days to participate. I did not manage to arrange the pre-research email out to the young people prior to the data collection dates as there was ongoing confusion between the gatekeeper and me arising from repeated delays and date changes. Major building work going past the expected completion dates exacerbated continual difficulties in communication with the allocated gatekeeper due in part to their part-time hours, absences and holidays that led misunderstandings and confusion over what had been arranged and when. I found the first officially agreed set date actually fell in spring half-term, which postponed data collection for yet another week.

It was agreed that I could attend for two lunch-time sessions from 11.30 -2.30pm and that I would set up my display on a table in the newly built refectory. I was also welcome to access a common room a short walk away. In College Three refectory I was situated against the wall between some tables, set back away from most of the passing students, which meant I had to take a more proactive approach. This entailed taking information to people around the room and asking groups or individuals if they were interested or not in taking part in my research.

On day one I gathered forty-two responses in the three hours, whilst on day two I collected twenty-three responses by 2pm. I found the common room space was quieter with less people walking about, which was conducive to having lively discussions with some of the young people. Central themes raised during these discussions were the influence of family members

on political interest, citizenship education and issues arising from the political interest statements on the survey. Mature students were a common sight in the college on both data collection days and quite a few showed an interest in what I was doing. Now I move on to a brief overview of recruitment and fieldwork in Phase II, which includes group interviews and my online case studies.

B. The Group Interviews

Despite problems with recruiting enough participants I found the four group interviews were an absolute delight to do. Prompting young people to talk about politics was fascinating and the diversity of experience and the variety of issues participants brought up to discuss was illuminating for my research questions. As with the survey in Phase I the aim was to take a consistent approach to the fieldwork. Prior to the research activities each participant was given an introductory pack with a consent form and background sheet to fill in. Also included in the pack was an invitation to a follow up discussion, which incidentally failed to provoke any further response. Refreshments were provided for participants, all meetings were recorded and I wore a name badge. At the second group interview held at College Two one of the co-advisors sat in as an observer and controlled the recording device. Only on one occasion did a gatekeeper sit in on the proceedings, right at the end of the first group interview at College Four. Apart from these two examples no-one else but myself and the participants were involved in the group interviews.

Each of the group interviews followed a three part schedule (Appendix vi) developed through support and advice from advisory research group. Part one of the discussion began with participants selecting one of twenty-seven pictures (Appendix vii) to prompt a discussion regarding how the picture represented politics to them. The next stage asked participants to reflect on sources that supported their political understanding, making notes on post-its and sticking them under one of five headings. The final stage of research asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with various statements, and then reflect upon why they made that choice.

All the gatekeepers were busy and took a very hands off approach, *'I've given young people information about your research, here is your room, now get on with it'* style. Three of the group interviews took place in colleges, two in class rooms and one in a common room, whilst the informal contact meeting took place in the kitchen of the key participant who had drawn her friendship group together for interview. Here the gatekeeper kindly provided some

refreshments. Three meetings took place at in lunch time periods, one meeting took place straight after the college day at 4pm. To highlight both the consistencies and the diversity of the four group interviews I will now give a brief synopsis of each one, in the order they occurred.

Group Interview revisiting College Two

The first group interview was a lunchtime session in a classroom, July 2013. This was a couple of days before the end of term but the gatekeeper had asked me to wait from my initial request in March until after the exams were over. I set the room up with help from Sam, one of the co-advisors from the research group. He recorded the session and made brief notes. This was the only session he was able to attend. The three activities were set up, refreshments laid out and chairs put out for twelve people. Only one participant out of twelve arrived who text a friend to come and join us as no more participants were forthcoming, even after a sweep of the sixth form by the co-advisor. Whilst we were waiting for anyone else to turn up the young people filled in consent forms and the background sheet. Then we began. The participants took part in every activity and had a variety of discussions about subjects they found interesting. As we had begun a bit later than anticipated a class arrived for their after lunch session before we had finished the last activity, which unfortunately made the planned wind down very partial and rushed. I thanked the participants. The gatekeeper apologised that hardly anyone had turned up and said perhaps we could do something the following term!

Group Interview Arranged Through an Informal Contact

Four out of five anticipated participants turned up for this group interview in August 2013 at one of the participant's house. Due to space restrictions instead of setting up and displaying all three activities at the beginning I went through each a stage one at a time. After the background sheets were filled in and some refreshments taken I laid the photos for stage one out on the floor as that was the biggest space available. The young people chose a picture each and began discussing their reasons for choosing it. Once the all the pictures had been discussed I found it useful to ask for further comments about the picture from the other participants to check or expand on understandings or assumptions. Three of the group were willing to contribute fully to discussions, one remained quiet even after a number of prompts and was happier agreeing or disagreeing with what others had said. This group interview ran to the full allocated time, I was able to do a complete wind down and all the participants, except the quiet one, agreed it had been an interesting exercise to do.

Group Interview, College Four Meeting One

This was the only late afternoon meeting and the only one to be held in a large common room October 2013. I had sufficient time and space to set the room up completely before two participants turned up, out of five expected Student Union members. The participants appeared slightly nervous about participating but after the introduction and once the initial activity started, where they were asked to describe how the picture they chose represents politics to them, the young men remained keen to share their opinions during the rest of the three activities. For the last ten minutes the gatekeeper came and joined us, she contributed slightly to the discussion by questioning the answers the participants were giving about their local MP. This group interview ran to its full allocated time, with a complete wind down at the end. These participants were very positive about the research experience and said it had been good fun to do.

Group Interview, College Four Second Meeting

No participants initially turned up to this final meeting although several were expected to attend by the gatekeeper. This meeting was held in an upstairs classroom, quite a distance away from the large common room a week later in October 2013. After a sweep of the college accompanied by the gatekeeper two young men did agree to take part but a considerable amount of time had been lost in this ad hoc recruitment process, which also had consequences for the room use. Neither participant had been fully briefed beforehand but they both took part in every activity. One of the young people was less confident as he spoke English as a second language but he did contribute to every discussion. This was the shortest group interview due to room availability disappearing at the end of lunchtime. We did manage to get halfway through the third and final activity but had very little time to complete the wind down except to thank them for participating and give them contact details if there was anything further they wished to add.

This fourth meeting was my final successful attempt at running group interviews for my study, even though recruitment discussions with potential locations and individuals continued for some months after, to no avail. Now I move on to discuss the three online case studies, which provide the final set of data for my study.

C. The Online Case Studies

Given the protracted difficulties with recruitment, problems arose with the quantity of rich data I was able to gather to ensure the external validity of Phase II. Although the data from the ten group interview participants was rich in detail there was not the breadth of responses necessary, so at the beginning of 2014 I approached the University ethics panel to amend my research method. To get further evidence of young people's political knowledge and understanding I proposed doing a two month on-line observational study of political discussions young people were having on public forums on the internet. The sample selection criteria remained young people with a slight increase in the age group to 16-21 years of age, but this time without the commonality of geographical location. This signalled a move away from getting young people to directly participate in my research, to instead observing public spaces where young people chose to go on-line and participate in political discussions.

In preparation I monitored a wide range of organisations and sites known for their work with young people. I had email discussions with the longest involved member of the co-advisory group about his thoughts on potential sites, especially regarding his knowledge of the local council youth discussion site (no impact). I explored discussion sites hosted by a range of local councils as well as organisations such as the *British Youth Council*, the *Youth Climate Coalition*, the *Youth Media Agency*, the *Scottish Youth Parliament*, and the national *UK Youth Parliament* which usually had links from their websites to conversations on *Twitter*, *Facebook* or to blogging sites such as *Wordpress* or *Blog*. Sites considered attractive to young people such as *Reddit*, *Myspace*, *Tumblr*, *Buzzfeed*, *Imagur*, and *giffgaff*, a mobile network that runs on forum led support were all explored and monitored for suitability. I deliberately avoided sites associated with specific political parties to try to keep away from bias towards any one particular party although ethnographic studies of young people involved in political parties would be an interesting aspect of political literacy.

As will be discussed further in 4.4 there were a range of difficulties in selecting suitable on-line sites or individuals. Difficulties such as site closures and the impact of austerity on young people services, conversations falling dormant were compounded by finding the correct age demographic with minimal adult contributions or involvement exacerbated by a digital landscape where anonymity is common. Examples of sites I could not use for these reasons included the well-received Hansard Society '*Heads Up*' site being completely closed since 2012 due to a lack of funding, a total lack of representatives for the *UK Youth Parliament*

(UKYP) in Cambridgeshire and no current discussions from young people on the council's 'Youthoria' webpage for. The *League of Young Voters* UK had some good on-line debates on a range of issues but the conversations had been dormant for five months prior to the monitoring period. Organisations such as the *Young Fabians* stated their age range goes up to thirty-five, and sites such as *Reddit* or *giffgaff* have a huge range of ages contributing to discussions yet age information along with gender or location was often missing from on-line profiles and not apparent from pseudonyms used.

In the end I chose the three very different case studies on three different on-line host sites, out-lined as follows. A key characteristic of my case studies being, the vast majority of contributors were in the age range I was seeking for my sample group, although the *YouthDebates* site is open to contributions from 13-25year olds. I also extended the observation period by two weeks, due to a lull in the data during August and the beginning of September, making the observation period run from July 21st to October 10th 2014.

A Member (MYP) of the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) on Twitter

This case study was of an individual sixteen year old male living in a county adjoining Cambridge, who was an elected member of the UKYP. I observed his interactions on worldwide social media site, *Twitter*, renowned for being one of the more political platforms of the largest social media platforms. There were several MYPs that would have been equally good to follow but I based my selection on the variety of tweets he was producing, his geographical closeness to Cambridgeshire and his optimistic enthusiasm for local politics. As one of the other case studies used was a female collective I also included this young man for balance.

Overall the young man posted 82 tweets with anywhere from 0-18 tweets a week, during the 12 week observation period. Each tweet contained up to 140 characters and could display photos or infographics. Twenty-six of the tweets were retweets that is a tweet written by someone else. The key themes the young man tweeted about were his local youth forum, the UKYP campaign *Make Your Mark* or the Annual General Meeting that he attended. There were also a high proportion of community tweets about local events and public service type tweets on behalf of the local police or about train cancellations and replacement bus services. None of his contributions during the observation provoked two-way on-line dialogue with

other *Twitter* users, which meant I mostly excluded the data from further analysis as it was difficult to ascertain intention or meanings beyond the initial tweets.

Powered by Girl

This case study recorded the blogs of 19 young women all aged between sixteen and twenty-one on a blogging site hosted by *Wordpress* (Figure). *Powered by Girl* (PBG) describes itself as “an on-line media activism campaign....to interrupt media sexism in all its racist, classiest, homophobic forms”. Although originally started by an American organisation, *Hardy Girls, Healthy Women* the majority of bloggers during the observation period resided in locations from across the UK. As well as meeting the age sample criteria I selected the group for their productivity, their commitment to addressing media issues and the high content and quality of the blogs they were producing.

Table 4. 2 *Powered by Girl* Contributors

***Powered by Girl, Wordpress* blogging site.**

- Nineteen young women aged between 16 -21. The majority were UK based, with two US contributors
- 25 blogs over twelve week observation period, July - October 2014

The young women produced between 0-4 blogs per week during the observation period, with twenty-five blog pieces overall. Each blog reads like a short essay or review of usually between 3-500words. The majority of the blogs were written by individuals but four blogs had two or more contributors, with two of these having a conversational style. No comments in response to their blogs were recorded on the *Wordpress* site or on *Twitter*, although blogs were retweeted there. I categorised the content of the blogs into five key themes, media, politics, feminism, culture and identity, and domestic violence and abuse.

YouthDebates website

This case study comprised of 109 contributors, both male and female, who made two hundred and eighty seven comments in thirty one threads begun during the observation period. All these comments were found on the newly formed *YouthDebates* website, which was started up in June 2014 by a young person as an on-line space for young people between the ages of

13-25 to debate politics. Since its inception it had two major website overhauls, one five weeks into the observation period when it was off-line for a week, the other overhaul was two weeks after the data collection finished. Each overhaul altered different aspects of the layout, categories and subsections, which were quite complex. At the time of research *YouthDebates* site did not link to any other social media sites from the main webpage but occasionally participants would put links in threads pointing to other blogs or useful information.

YouthDebates had five main categories as illustrated in Table 4.3. Each of these forums had a varying number of sub-forums contained within. The two sub-forums with the most activity were, *International Topics and Chatter* (in *International General Discussion*) and *United Kingdom* (in *Europe*).

Table 4.3. *YouthDebates* Main Categories (July 2014)

<u><i>YouthDebates</i> Main Categories</u>	
<i>International General Discussion</i> ; Announcements, Moderation, Feedback, The Lounge, International Topics and Chatter, Atlantis Senate	
<i>Europe</i> ; United Kingdom, Ireland	<i>North America</i> ; US, Canada
<i>Oceania</i> ; Australia, New Zealand	<i>Miscellaneous</i>

Table 4.4 illustrates the two sub forums monitored prior to the case study selection, namely *International Topics and Chatter* and the *United Kingdom* with the amount of threads begun in each to give an idea of the scale of information that was on the site. The three most popular sub forums in the UK forum were all suitable regarding the topics they discussed, as well as the *News and Current Affairs* sub forum in *International Topics and Chatter*. Other sub forum topics appeared suitable but had very few contributions meaning there was not enough data being generated, such as *Youth Politics* or *British News*.

Table 4.4. *YouthDebates* Sub-forum Monitoring (July 2014)

<u>Sub Forum Topics</u>
Total amount of threads in each topic prior to the observation period given in brackets
<i>International Topics and Chatter</i> - Sociology and Philosophy (194) News and Current Affairs (140) The Bonfire (75) Political Ideology (40) The Environment and Science (32) Historical Politics (27) The Politics of Sport (24)
<i>United Kingdom</i> - Religion and Equality (95) British Party Lounges (95) Education (66) The Economy (43) Immigration (43) Scottish Independence (33) The Military + Foreign Relations (21) British General Discussion (18) Public Services and Infrastructure (18) The EU (16) Youth Politics (8) British News (6)

The Education sub forum was selected from the twelve subsections in the main *United Kingdom* forum. It was the third most popular in the category for viewings and contributions after Religion and Equality and British Party Lounges. Education was chosen because of the relevance of the topic to my research, for manageability of data, to maintain focus on the UK and importantly because there was a likelihood that contributors would be from the target sample age range due to still being in the educational system.

Comments made in the education threads or information in personal profiles where completed did suggest a high proportion of contributors were aged between 15 and 21, attending school, college or University at the time. Between 0-6 threads were begun in any one week. Table 4.4 illustrates the different forum categories as they looked at the time of selection. Out of the 109 contributors overall to the Education sub-forum just under half (51) only made one or two comments in this sub-forum during the observation period. The other 58 contributors made anywhere between three and twenty two comments. This illustrated a core group of 18 young people who were engaged with the subject on a fairly regularly basis.

Table 4.5 Distribution of comments by *YouthDebates* members in *Education* sub forum.

<i>Number of Comments</i>	<i>Number of Commentators (Overall 109)</i>
Under 3 comments	51
Between 3-10 comments	40
Over 10 comments	18

Themes found in the *YouthDebates* education sub-forum broke down into the following six categories.

- Exams and Assessment
- Curriculum Reform
- Education Culture/ the Learning Environment
- The Governance of Education
- The Purpose of Education
- Education Fees

These initial headings were only a guide as threads did not always stay on the original topic and there was overlap between different topic areas, for instance two threads that began about curriculum reform included discussion about the government's role in making changes. Now this chapter moves to issues I had with access and recruitment.

4.3 Access to Research

In the methodology chapter (3.6) I identified key ethical principles necessary for ensuring good quality research with young people, including ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding and risk assessing the research environment. Even after ethics submissions were approved by the University ethics panel, written permission from gatekeepers was part of the required criteria for reaching ethical approval and necessary before research could take place. As I moved onto the on-line observations this particular criteria altered, although informed consent, data protection and confidentiality remained relevant issues. Access to the on-line forums selected was a far more straightforward process than the face to face research, depending as it did on a fair use policy being in place, either in the terms of service or similar policies of each host website.

Fair use policies commonly state that use of copyrighted material, in this case the contributions people make publicly on-line, do not require the copyright owner's permission to use if they are used, as I wanted to use them, in a transformative, factual and educational way. Therefore access to the on-line observation sites was direct, relying on my ability to identify suitable forums with live conversation from young people in the sample group age range that were considered online public forums with fair use policies. Interaction with on-line gatekeepers was anonymous and only occurred through the initial rules, policies or terms of service provided by each website.

Working with gatekeepers

For three years gatekeepers were an ever-present feature of my ability or otherwise to access groups of young people to take part in the face to face methods for my study. From my initial attempts in summer 2011 until I amended my research method in June 2014 (to go on-line to collect data), seeking permission through a trusted adult in young people's lives was an ongoing ethical consequence of wanting face to face interactions with young people to find out answers to my research question. Overall thirty community or educational establishments were approached, usually through an introductory email or letter, as well as several face to face approaches to community based groups or statutory and volunteer agencies working with young people. All of who were filtering my access to the intended sample group. Without written permission from a gatekeeper there was no access.

Negotiating access was a time consuming process reliant on good levels of communication between myself and a wide range of people, such as principals, heads of departments, secretaries, teachers, lecturers, student support workers, youth support workers and volunteer coordinators. Staff working in community settings and educational institutions with young people in Britain, abide by a raft of legislation to ensure the safety and well-being of the young people in their care (NSPCC, 2012). The impact of this on staff attitudes and behaviour cannot be underestimated and part of my approach to gain access was to clearly situate myself as a competent, trustworthy professional (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 80). The primary goal for building the gatekeeper/researcher relationship was to build levels of trust and communication between us to enable potential problems or situations to be dealt with effectively and within legal expectations. I found that establishing working levels of credibility between me, the unknown researcher and the person who would ultimately be responsible for my presence in the college required careful planning to create a good first impression.

Of course there were practical difficulties with maintaining good communication between people that had never met before, with different expectations or priorities. Quite commonly there would be no return communication from staff who were initially contacted or there would be mixed messages from a range of people until a gatekeeper was assigned. A lack of communication or mixed messages were constant issues throughout my attempts to access the first five colleges for the survey in Phase I and throughout my attempts to access participants for Phase II. All the establishments I contacted were busy dealing with perpetual day to day demands of students and staff, and circumstances or people changed quite regularly. I was very aware that my research priorities were an additional, often unwanted demand on the gatekeeper and young people's time. All I could do was be clear from the outset about what the research involved and how it might be seen to be of benefit to participants.

Conflicting needs between researchers, gatekeepers and subsequently the young people required maintaining a considerate and well-balanced approach at all times. Expectations that I held over the value of my research often appeared to contrast with the professional values or expectations that gatekeepers attached or had attached to their roles. Unsurprisingly my experience of setting up this particular research project found that confident, well-established gatekeepers were better placed to support my aims, whereas the less-established gatekeeper had to repeatedly seek further permission from someone else about decisions reached. Of the four colleges I successfully accessed one assigned a Head of Department to gate-keep, whilst

the other three assigned student support service staff to facilitate my research. In my case as complete outsider to all of the colleges I visited, I had no control over who my gatekeepers would be, and without an insider network it was difficult to identify in advance which gatekeepers were best placed to facilitate the progress of research.

As my research progressed it also became clear that the attitude and support of gatekeepers was a fundamental driver to levels of my interactions with students. Mainly this happened through validation of my role in the college before I went in to collect data, signposting young people to when and where the research was happening and helping to inform young people about what the research entailed. Therefore the amount of data I was able to collect relied not only on the initial relationship I built with gatekeepers to be allowed access to young people in their establishment but also on implicit relationships already existing between the gatekeepers and potential research participants. This is perhaps best illuminated over the issue of informed consent that I discuss now.

Informed consent

As identified in 3.6 a key aspect of valid research is the freely given consent of participants to participate in the research. Every piece of literature I produced to inform gatekeepers and participants about my study outlined the idea of informed consent in the clearest terms possible. The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix v) clarified that all data would be treated anonymously and participants would not be able to be identified. I stated that involvement in my research was entirely voluntary and it was for each individual to choose to participate or not, without feeling pressured. I was confident that all the young people in the various college and community settings would have the competency to choose their own level of engagement with each particular research method, once given enough information to reach their decision, without the need for parental permission. Indeed a few participants in the research setting would be eighteen or over with no question as to their ability to give consent, unless they were considered to be vulnerable adults.

It was notable that having a fully involved gatekeeper and support staff in College Two resulted in the highest engagement of participants, with 97 surveys completed during one hour, which was also the shortest time period taken for survey data collection. It was definitely the most focused survey data collection day. However a clear problem arising from this approach was that in a couple of instances the inclusive, encouraging attitude of the staff did appear coercive rather than informative. Beyond my contact with the gatekeeper

and providing the participant information sheets (Appendix v), I had no way of knowing if all staff were fully aware of the research requirement of informed consent. In several instances there appeared an implicit expectation from some of the staff that young people would unflinching respond in a positive manner to an adult in authority asking them to take part in the research. A situation that reflected a focus on achieving the adult-led request rather than allowing enough space for young people to freely make a considered choice about their involvement in the process. A situation that somewhat undermined the idea of informed consent given without reservation or restriction.

At times I had to clearly reinforce that the survey was not compulsory and participation was up to the individual to decide. I did observe a group of five or six young people, as well as a couple of individuals choosing not to be involved in the research but overall the majority of young people who came into the hallway, were encouraged to come into the computer suite by staff they knew and to take part, which they did.

At every other face to face fieldwork setting although I felt supported by gatekeepers in terms of having the time and space to work in, I was very much on my own during the data collection period, both for the survey and group interviews allowing me to give young people the time and space to decide whether to be involved or not in the research. With a notably higher refusal rate. Only during the final group interview session, where potential participants had agreed to take part but failed to turn up did the student support officer attempt to recruit participants with me, very much on an ad hoc basis. This brought up issues with recruitment that I discuss in the following section.

4.4 Recruiting research participants

Off-line recruitment

The 210 young people aged between 15 and 21 recruited, who chose to take part either in the survey or a group interview for my off-line research were notable for both their diversities and similarities (see page 3 of Appendix iii). The majority of participants were white and came from or lived in Cambridgeshire, but I spoke to participants from Suffolk, Eastern Europe, Asia, Brazil and Germany during the course of my research. Young people with disabilities were not particularly prominent in the group interview sample group but a small number of partially blind, autistic or dyslexic young people did take part in the survey. More

young women took part in the survey (n=112) than young men (n=88) but the group interviews attracted 7 young men to 3 young women. There was a mix of young people taking either vocational courses or A-levels, with only two young people known to be working attending one of the group interviews.

During recruitment informal discussions with gatekeepers were useful for providing depth and contextual information about my potential research participants and speculating about their possible motivation, ability or otherwise to participate in my research. One conversation highlighted that in the first few weeks of term there may be a real reluctance of young people to stand out from their peers and have the confidence to get involved in my research, which may have impacted on the low response rate in the first college I ran my fieldwork in. Out in the wider community potential gatekeepers spoke of the young people either being in crisis situations if they worked with them as an organisation, with no time available for personal development issues. Whilst another gatekeeper in a local youth club held the perception that the young people they were working with already had enough commitments to the group they were in.

Apart from difficulties with gatekeepers preventing access to young people in their charge there were four intertwined and outstanding problems with recruiting participants off-line that had an impact on my ability to recruit young people to take part in my research. These were, a widespread perception the young people held over their personal lack of political knowledge, a common lack of interest in politics, problems with literacy skills, and a strong perception that there was not enough time either in the timetable of the college day or in-between life events to participate.

1) A lack of political knowledge

“I don’t know anything about politics” was a frequently received reply from young people during my face to face attempts to get them involved in my research. The group interview data reinforced just how widespread this perception was amongst the young people of my sample group. Upon receiving this reply I would reply that was alright I was trying to find out what people thought about politics and if people did not know anything about politics to find out why that was. For some young people this reassurance was enough to encourage them to

take part, whilst others would claim that they were really not interested, either in politics or in undertaking my research.

2) A lack of interest in politics

This led to the second observation that some young people would not engage with me or my research because of commonly held, negative perceptions about the subject matter.

Frequently young people in this group said they thought politics “*was boring*”, and from the scrunched up, frowning expressions given by some of the young people, the very suggestion of politics was distasteful to some of them. There was no motivation displayed by these young people to take part in my research rather they sought to actively avoid any further contact. How many of the young people in this politically uninterested group would not engage with my research because of the following reason is not possible to know and conclusions can only be speculative in this case.

3) Problems with literacy skills

Using a face to face strategy was an important part of promoting inclusivity in my research methods, especially with the hope of being able to support less able or confident participants to take part. Three young people with literacy difficulties were identified in College One during the fieldwork, although there were further issues with how at least three of the discarded surveys (3.4.3) were filled in, in terms of legibility or ability. The first was a personable 18 year old man who said he could not read at all, so I read out the survey questions to him and filled in the form with the answers he wanted recording. The second was a young woman with an angry attitude as we discussed the reasons for the survey, she did go onto partly fill in the survey, as I read some of the questions out to her but she was clearly exasperated with having to deal with the terminology being used. The third young person took one of the surveys but her carer who was following behind informed me that this particular young person was unable to complete the form due to the learning difficulties she had.

There was no way of knowing how many young people refused to participate in my research due to poor literacy skills or learning difficulties. Looking at the OECD literacy figures available (OECD, 2013), the UK is 22nd place in the world for literacy rates. This figure has slipped down from 14th place since 2009. The estimate is that there are 8.5million UK adults

with the numeric capabilities of a ten-year old. The impact of poor literacy on political literacy cannot be overlooked.

4) Time and life events

Exams and the school timetable clearly prevented young people from taking part in my research. It is true that initially this information came from various gatekeeper perspectives but subsequent interactions with young people in the field and the experiences of my participation group strongly backed this view up. Perhaps best illustrated by my informal attempt in one of the colleges to find participants after no-one showed for a pre-arranged group interview meeting. Out of over a hundred potential participants who were approached, the overwhelming majority said they were unable to participate due to prior timetabling commitments they had that day.

Even when potential participants had already expressed an interest in taking part many of them still failed to attend arranged meetings, at both lunchtime meetings or after the college day had ended. One young woman said she didn't often use the email she had given me as a contact after several weeks of me sending her emails attempting to meet up. Another agreed to meet up then said life events had become too pressing for her to attend. The co-advisers in the research group were also a case in point, who were a friendship group from the same school when recruited, before going onto three different colleges at the end of the summer. The transition from school to college proved too much in terms of their commitment to the group and only one co-advisor was able to stay the course. Even so revision and exams became a huge pressure on his time and ability to attend meetings.

On-line Recruitment

On-line recruitment brought a different set of recruitment problems to the foreground, namely being able to meet the sample selection criteria and being able to observe rich enough data specifically produced by young people. Part of the reason for approaching colleges and sixth-form schools for research participants had been to access high numbers of young people in the suitable age range, which was initially 16-19 but extended to include a small number of 20 and 21 year olds. Moving on-line meant I had no way of knowing if people were who they

said they were as most respondents used made-up user identities. Two other issues when I searched on-line for suitable discussion sites to observe were closed or dormant sites or else sites that were predominantly adult-led and adult-created content. First I give a brief outline of the three case study sites chosen before outlining the three key problems I had with selecting research participants on-line.

Selecting three on-line case study sites

Given the problems outlined in this section it was evident that the three on-line sites eventually chosen were primarily selected for having young people all engaging with or discussing politics for the observation period on-line. This means the sample is self-selected and notable for displaying the characteristics I was looking for. The three sites were *Twitter*, *Wordpress* and a website called *YouthDebates* that provided three different types of textual data, tweets, blogs and discussion threads. Only the *YouthDebates* site consistently provided discussions with a variety of contributors, although a couple of the *Wordpress* blogs were done in an interview discussion style with two or three contributors. Disappointingly the MYP's tweets failed to start on-line discussions with other young people even though it was clear he was frequently discussing politics with local young people in his community regarding the National Youth Parliament or initiatives for his local youth forum.

Anonymity

Young people are often avid users of social media, spending an average of seven hours a day online yet this is predominantly for communication, social and recreational ends (Linne, 2014:435). However publicly accessible, online environments are populated with anonymous contributors who could be of any age or background. Anonymity, which is important for providing protection for people online always brings the associated risk that people are not who they say they are. Anonymity proved a real difficulty in being able to select suitable case studies to meet the basic sample selection criteria of researching young people aged between 16-19 years old.

Dormant sites and discussions

Potential sites such as *The League of Young Voters*, both UK and European, *The National Youth Parliament on Facebook*, as well as the local the Cambridgeshire council site called *Youthoria* all had potentially interesting discussions in their on-line forums. However with anywhere between a five month lapse for new contributions or minimal interaction of five or

six posts the discussions had moved elsewhere. The Hansard Society ran a particularly good political discussion site for young people called *Heads Up* for several years but this had closed down several months before my observation period began.

Adult led or created content

I found several prominent social media sites, *Tumblr*, *Imgur*, *Reddit*, *giffgaff*, *Facebook*, were either too image based or too diluted by adults with regards to selecting young people from the intended sample age group. Whilst it was clear, usually from self-disclosures of age or school attendance that there were a number of young people contributing in these social media forums, there was a great deal of adult initiated content, which was not suitable for the parameters of my research sample group.

Other sites such as the *UK Youth Climate Organisation* (18-29) or youth wings of various political parties, such as Conservative (under 30), Liberal Democrat or Labour (*Young Fabians* under 31) through to more niche parties such as the Greens or the UK Independence Party (UKIP) all welcomed young people within a broader age range than what I was seeking. After consideration I decided against accessing party political sites as they may have introduced too much formal political bias into the data from young people as well as potentially too much adult led content.

4.5 Enabling Participation

Participation strategies

Several strategies were employed to enable good levels of participation in my research. Aside from using the most suitable methods of research to answer the research question my initial preference was to use face to face research methods to better engage with the sample group. The small co-advisory group was established with the intention of including young people as far as possible in the role of co-researchers. Both of these strategies worked with variable success although I did not reach the most inclusive degrees of young person instigated research (Figure 4.1:54). Possibly unavoidable within the parameters of a PhD as I had set the preliminary agenda. Aiming for high levels of interaction to create the best participation opportunities for participants as possible (Sapin, 2009) was not only strategy for inclusivity and participation but also a guard against assumptions I held about young people and politics.

Meeting with the co-advisory group over a six month period gave me a fuller understanding of their experiences of political understanding and engagement in Cambridge. The knowledge and experiences shared by the co-advisors layered over the survey data and strengthened the internal validity of my study. From having no knowledge of the UK Youth Parliament in Cambridgeshire through to issues such as bullying or political decision making the co-advisors were frank and interesting on a range of topics. The co-advisors helped ground my study with the preliminary data, point out anomalies and develop the next phase of research, preparing, running through and reflecting upon the interview schedule and activities. Sam noted that being involved had been “*a stimulating and interesting experience*” that he reflected had been useful for developing skills, both for his college work and as work experience.

In the field I used skills such as active listening and observation to promote an inclusive, anti-oppressive approach to encourage each individual to participate, *if they wanted to*. Good communication about what was expected from participants was available prior to the research in several formats (poster, leaflet and gatekeeper knowledge) and necessary throughout every interaction with young people. I greatly enjoyed discussing the parameters of the research, alongside finding out what young people thought about what I was doing and their experiences and opinions of politics. Several young people who participated in the group interviews said they had enjoyed the experience and discussing the topics raised. Fun is an overlooked but key aspect of getting people to participate, along with providing refreshments!

The idea that young people could participate in my research as research participants or as active co-creators of knowledge was not without challenges. Building voluntary relationships with young people without the support of an effective youth work team and minimal resources was even more difficult than I had anticipated it being. Furthermore the curtailment of youth work in Shropshire that had led to me moving 150 miles away from my community was being mirrored in Cambridgeshire. The narrative of austerity had led to mass redundancies in youth work and the low morale of any remaining staff greatly inhibited my ability to access ready-made groups of young people meeting up in Cambridgeshire. Bringing me neatly to what I did find was an effective factor in enabling participation, the influence of social capital.

Social Capital

It was notable that two of the strongest, most successful connections I made with young people in getting them to participate in my research came through the small amount of social capital I had built since moving to Cambridgeshire. Both connections occurred through relationships with friends enabling access to young people that I hadn't known previously, which provided two components of Putman's (1995) view of social capital namely social values (especially trust) and social networks (especially voluntary associations). One connection led to the largest group interview with four participants taking place, whilst the other connection involved the 16 year old who was integral to setting up the co-advisory research group.

Social capital was inherent to all relationships with gatekeepers but the emphasis came through trust and obligation once they had been asked to help me. It was difficult to maintain quite superficial relationships with gatekeepers and keep them active in any way without feeling like an annoyance. There was not a lot I could provide beyond the research experience for the young people in return for their help. The more established friendship links gave more potential for informal follow ups in the community that were not just focused upon my research.

Time and space to participate

Already recognised as a problem with recruiting off-line research participants, time remained an issue throughout the fieldwork. Often combined with a lack of resources, usually a lack of space, these were key factors in discouraging participation or even curtailing it. From being located in a fast moving corridor with my survey or waiting for a refectory to be renovated through to two out of the four group interviews being cut short due to classrooms needing to be used by other groups, logistical problems continued to thwart the best plans I could make. The impact of external forces on the co-advisors lives, especially from family, peers and education commitments and change, was illustrated regularly through the group's ability for all three participants to meet up at one time. There were even notable lulls in on-line participant's activity.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter the fieldwork process has been presented in detail and I have reflected upon the ways ethically negotiated access to the research sites. Even when the same research method or research site was being used there were practical differences with where I was situated in colleges, timetable demands, variation in gatekeeper involvement and levels of engagement from a diverse range of young people, which all had an impact on the research experience. Even with the on-line research the different formats of each site established immediate differences in the data collected, with complications arising from sites being updated and changed halfway through the data collection period, as well as inevitable problems with internet speeds and access.

The importance and influence of gatekeepers to the research process cannot be overstated. I had difficulties with getting a good balance of communication with gatekeepers all the way through the first three years of research, from the first of the colleges approached until months after my final group interview. Much of the differences experienced in data collection were underpinned by the levels of communication between the gatekeeper and myself as well as their status and relative autonomy in the college.

The issue of informed consent illustrated the risks of working with other people especially in terms of meeting ethical expectations, especially when working with people I had never met before. The comparative freedom and autonomy gained with on-line research, when access to proceed was reliant on fair use guidelines was a complete relief after the ongoing complexities of working with individuals, where I was continually seeking permission to access groups of young people or trying to coax more information from people in order to meet up or get feedback.

The issue of recruitment, especially with my second research method of the group interview became extremely de-motivating and frustrating. Even though difficulties with recruiting participants' are not unique to my research (Robson, 2002:251) I do think the choice of subject matter was clearly off-putting to quite a number of potential research participants. As became evident during the group interviews widespread and negative perceptions young people held about politics and their lack of political knowledge did prevent some young people from participating in my research. With some young people saying the topic of politics was too boring before refusing to participate. A situation that can only be exacerbated by the fact that in 2012 there were still young people unable to read by the time they left

school. All of these issues were compounded further by limited time available outside of the exam/assessment/lesson time-table that was difficult to confront.

Moving on-line brought a different set of recruitment problems to the fore with anonymity, adult led discussion sites and dormant discussions all posing problems for meeting my sample group requirements as much as finding the right type of data. However it was a relief when my research process felt more autonomous and less pressurised without gatekeeper involvement and the constant negotiating for space and time.

Describing how I enabled participation in the research runs a path between perhaps thinking it was a fabulous experience for all involved to being pessimistic about the unavoidable status of an adult attempting to steer young people's meaningful involvement in a project I had initiated. Idealistic expectations held from youth work practice about the usefulness of young people's involvement in my research, being as much for them as for me, were knocked down somewhat by austerity and academic expectations of the originality of this study being my own work. Nevertheless the notion of social capital highlighted the importance of connections between people based on trusting relationships that helps get things done. Although it was clear that limits on resources, namely time and effective support networks had a big impact on my ability to put my research into action the way I had imagined it.

How Young People Understood Politics

Apathy, “is a far better description for our collective attitude to youth disengagement than it is of young people themselves”. Georgia Gould, *Wasted*, 2015:48

5.1 Views on Politics

Attempting to find out how informed research participants thought they were about politics initially meant trying to find out what politics meant to them. This chapter establishes key perceptions found in the data about what politics meant to research participants from the associations they made. Untangling three discrete topics of politics, media and education from the data was a complex undertaking as all three intersect and overlap in a myriad of ways to comprise the public sphere. As group interview participant Rosa philosophically established, “*politics is everywhere*”. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data drew out two central ways of discussing politics, which I categorised as either formal politics or informal politics, with key themes in both categories.

The first part of this chapter deals with three key themes associated with formal politics, especially the frequently found phenomenon of political uncertainty amongst research participants. The data shows how political uncertainty was usually held in relation to knowledge about formal politics and having enough knowledge about who to vote for. The group interview data was particularly rich in this regard although the survey data is used to illustrate the gap in formal political knowledge. Taking that social constructions of social phenomenon are established through convention, perception and experience (Gergen, 1999), I consider ways in which perceptions of uncertainty concealed young people’s actual political knowledge, engagement or interest, and typically did not accurately reflect participant’s political knowledge or understanding.

The next theme regarded the widespread unfavourable perceptions held across all the data sets about politicians on both local and national levels. The negative effects of top-down policies on research participants’ lives were rarely mitigated in the data by any recognition of any positive aspects of formal politics. Issues over respect, recognition or representation in regard to formal politics are presented here. Finally a brief analysis of the third theme of ‘*politics is change*’ is introduced. I show how the theme of change was experienced and expressed by one young person to illustrate the deep rooted nature of antipathy. Politics is

change is a reoccurring theme and is found in the following findings chapter associated with educational changes participants were experiencing (6.5).

The second part of this chapter regards the place of informal politics in research participant's perceptions, for which themes appeared on both micro and macro system levels (2.10). That is themes found for informal political issues were experienced in the immediate micro-environment such as discussing politics with friends or family, issues in local or on-line communities or developing personal identity. Or else in macro terms that considered wider social, educational and cultural influences, stereotypes, and feminism and intersectional influences of class, gender, race and age.

The first theme gathered together quite disparate perceptions to show that through the choices research participants were making in their lives the personal was experienced as political. The second theme of personal agency was closely aligned with the first theme and showed the diverse range of political action that was being taken by research participants in their lives. These findings illustrated the porous nature of the binaries I use to explain my findings, especially between public and private spheres, and formal and informal politics.

But first to the central finding in the data regarding the widespread prevalence of uncertainty with regard to formal politics.

5.2 The Prevalence of Uncertainty

Characterising political uncertainty

A key theme in relation to formal politics was the prevalence of uncertainty over political knowledge found in the data. This was not only observed within the sample group of research participants but in many of the young people who would not participate in my research because they stated they didn't know anything about politics. Potential participants alternated the commonly found expression "*I don't know anything about politics*", with many remarks along the lines of "*politics is boring*". Taken at face value these responses did not reflect a highly informed or motivated citizenry and could easily lead to a conclusion that the young people I approached were not at all informed or interested in politics.

Although the phenomenon of uncertainty over political knowledge and understanding appeared across every data set, it became especially pronounced from interactions with the

group interview participants. Richer data was drawn not only through discussions with participants but also from background data I gathered as shown in the following table (Table 5.1). All names provided are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants. All but two of the participants were attending one of two colleges in Cambridge at the time of interview, Mollie was looking for work and George was in work. As well as showing age and gender Table 5.1 illustrates the political experience of participants, where participants thought they were in relation to the typology of engagement (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000), and which picture they chose that they could discuss as representing their view or understanding of politics. Also provided is information about political activity, whether participants would vote in the next general election, if they agreed or disagreed with votes at 16 and if they knew who their current sitting MP was.

Table 5.1 Group Interview Participants

<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>J</i>
<i>Male/ Female</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>CE</i>	<i>Political Experience</i>	<i>TYPO</i>	<i>Picture</i>	<i>Active</i>	<i>Vote GE</i>	<i>Votes @16</i>	<i>MPs</i>
Rosa (F)	17	✓	Westminster	EI	Hoodies. Politics is everywhere	✗	✓	✗	✗
Ellen (F)	17	✓	Westminster	EI	Renewable energy	✗	✓	✗	✗
Mollie (F)	17	✗	Local youth council	EI	Homelessness	÷	÷	✗	✗
Leon (M)	17	✓	Westminster School council	EI	Youth Parliament 'getting your word across'	✓	✓	÷	✗
Tom (M)	17	✓	School Council	EI	Newspapers and the truth	✗	÷	✓	✗
George (M)	20	✓	None	EI/DU	Junk Food	✗	✗	✗	✗
Karl (M)	17	✗	Student Union	EI	Guided Busway	✗	✓	✗	✗
Sadiq (M)	17	✗	Student Union	SI	Big Ben at Westminster	✓	✓	✗	✗
John (M)	16	✓	Tweeting	EI	World, countries	÷	÷	✓	✗
Lennie (M)	16	✓	None	EI	Youth Parliament	÷	÷	✓	✗

Key

A) Pseudonym of participant and gender
 B) Age
 C) If Citizenship Education was received at school
 D) Reported political experience
 E) Self-selected typology (White et al., 2000) Emerging Interest (EI), Selective Interest (SI), Don't understand (DU)
 F) Picture chosen to explain politics to rest of group (First 9 pictures in Appendix vii)
 G) If considered self politically active
 H) If intended to vote General Election 2015
 I) If agreed with votes at 16
 J) If knew who local MP was.

Symbols ✓ yes ✗ no ÷ ambivalent answer

From George repeatedly saying “*I don’t know anything*” with embarrassed laughter, as the research was introduced to his group, through to the following conversation between Rosa and Ellen, political uncertainty was consistently declared by the majority of group interview participants. The conversation between the young women progressed from reflections upon the usefulness of political discussions with friends and family held at the dinner table through to how learning about politics had made it more difficult to know which party they could possibly vote for.

Ellen: “*But I have no idea, since doing politics I thought I’d know who to vote for but I don’t know even more*”.

Rosa: “*Yeah, exactly, doing politics (as a subject) is really strange, it..., actually cuz now that I’ve looked more into it, yeah well now I’m like oh well I really like some of their policies but that’s just really nasty so I wouldn’t want them to be in power, so instead of making me know who I want to vote for it’s actually made me...*”

Ellen: “*More confused...*”

Rosa: “*Yeah*”.

Political uncertainty about political parties was repeated by these two participants during questioning over voting intentions in the next general election, with Ellen saying “*I want to but I don’t know who to vote for*”. A viewpoint that was shared with five out of the ten group interview participants who gave responses from simple “*I don’t know*” answers through to “*I don’t really understand who or what I agree with*”. Even with this uncertainty some of the participants said that they were still expecting to vote in the next general election, an issue discussed after the gap in formal political knowledge is explored.

Political uncertainty about political parties was raised again later in the discussion when the two young women were asked if they thought they were politically active,

Ellen: “*I was talking about it for work experience because I want to do something politics related so I wouldn’t want to work for one [political party] yet because I don’t know which party I would want to belong to...*”

The responses given by these two young women showed strong association with political uncertainty that was found across the group interview data. Eight out of 10 participants clearly expressed doubts over their political knowledge or understanding at various points

throughout the group interview discussions. Reinforcing this finding, data from the survey highlighted a gap in a particular type of political knowledge, which is where this discussion moves to now.

The gap in formal political knowledge

To begin with the survey data (Appendix iii) showed a high proportion of the sample group with enough knowledge to correctly answer questions about democratic principles and processes (Table 5b). Around three quarters of respondents were aware of the meanings of basic political terminology such as democracy, referendum or constitution. Furthermore statements about human rights and equal opportunities also received high and positive levels of responses in the survey. For instance one hundred and seventy young people, which was well over three quarters of respondents, agreed that *‘with rights come responsibilities’* and a similar amount disagreed with the statement that *‘there are no need for rights as we live in a fair society’*. These responses indicated a strong base of political knowledge, interest or understanding over democratic principles and processes by the research sample group.

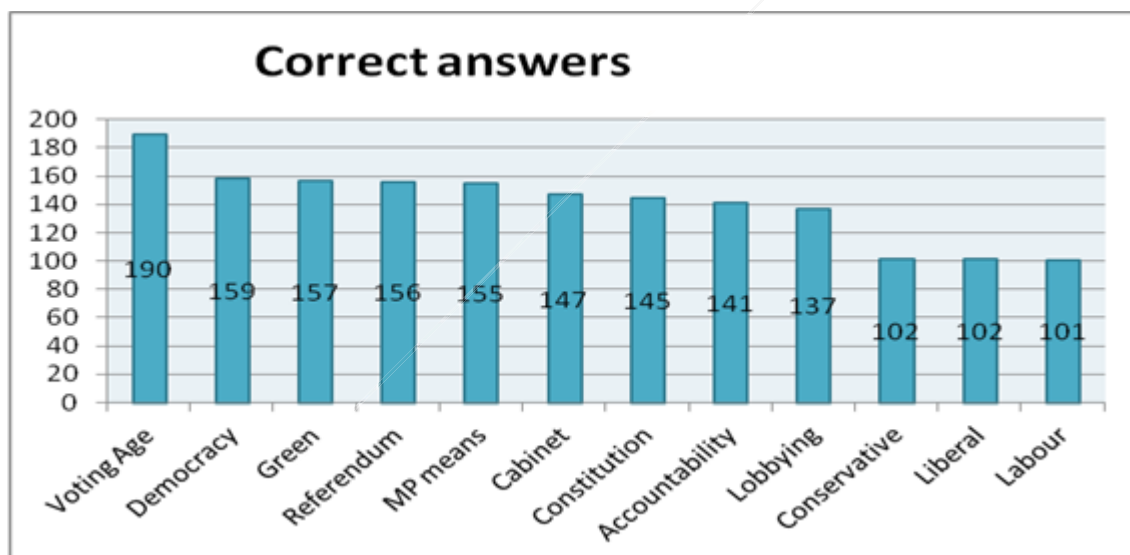


Figure 5.2 Correct Responses to Survey Questions

It was where the survey questions turned to the association between political parties, traditional political ideologies and the representativeness of MPs where young people's political knowledge notably declined. Responses shrank from three quarters of respondents being able to give correct responses to questions, to only half the sample group able to link the three main political parties with the corresponding traditional political ideology. The anomaly here was when respondents were asked to associate Green Party politics with

environmentalism, which well over three quarters of respondents could do. Responses about political ideologies were used in a chi-square test that LSE suggested the political knowledge gap was clearly associated with a lack of understanding and knowledge of the three main political parties' ideologies (See Appendix iii, page 12). Furthermore whilst well over half the survey respondents claimed to be looking forward to voting in the next general election, the majority of respondents (n=167) claimed they did not know or disagreed with the statement that their current MP represented them well. Only 31 respondents agreed that their MP did represent them well.

Whilst the survey data showed widespread political uncertainty of research participants was often held around formal party politics and representatives in Westminster, responses about local and national politics indicated participants were more interested in Westminster politics rather than local politics and wanted to have more influence upon decision making in Parliament. Mirroring a broad trend found across the Hansard Audit lifecycle (Hansard Audit, 12, 2015:38), which recorded a decline in over 18s wanting to be involved at a local level in politics over the last decade.

The gap found in the survey data of research participants not knowing what political parties stood for was linked to broader perceptions around voting that became apparent through discussions with group interview participants.

The effects of uncertainty on voting

If we understand political uncertainty was especially strong in association with participant's knowledge around formal politics, it was interesting to see how perceptions compared between ability to vote versus the expectation to vote in a general election by the group interviewees. Already Rosa and Ellen came to their unforeseen conclusion that despite having actively chosen to 'do' politics at college they felt like they knew less about politics than before they started learning. With a wry laugh before commenting, Ellen said, "*the more I find out the less I know*". This uncertainty over political knowledge led to contradictory perceptions about the ability to vote in the next general election. Rosa said that she would vote now if she could (at 17), yet she went on to say that she had known absolutely nothing about politics at the age of 16 and a bit later in a discussion around the best age for voting "*I think at the ages of 16, 17 you just don't have enough knowledge to be able to do that (vote)*".

Although Ellen said that she wanted to vote in the next General Election and had taken an active interest in learning about politics and political issues at college, uncertainty was expressed about not knowing who to vote for. This theme was repeated by Tom, George and Sadiq, who all expressed that they didn't know who to vote for, with Sadiq saying he would look into it more and find out at the time (of the next General Election in a years' time) as he didn't currently know what the political parties were doing. Sadiq phrased the choice he had to make as being the difference between voting for a party that would support him or for a party that would say they would support him but then not do anything. Implying that his choice would depend on who he thought he could trust.

Despite frequently expressed difficulties with political uncertainty around political parties, and despite not knowing who to vote for and why, half of the group interview participants reported that they would expect to vote in the next General Election (Table 1 column H). This view was also held by a majority of survey participants, who said that they intended to vote in the next General Election. Yet Lister (Lister et al, 2003) identified how for some young people not voting due to uncertainty over what or who was being voted for was seen as a responsible choice. An example of using critical consciousness to reach a decision and further discussed in 7.3 regarding political uncertainty.

The perception of political uncertainty was not just associated with an individual's political knowledge about formal politics, and their consequent ability to vote. There were also implications for how they viewed the knowledge of their peer group, especially in relation to the question over the best age to be allowed to vote. Views from group interviewees (Table 5.1, column I) mirrored the majority view from the survey data, in saying the age of 18 was the most suitable age to vote. Reasons given about young people in general as not mature enough, sensible enough or ready for the responsibility of voting before this age. The majority commonly assumed that other young people were not bothered or interested in voting. John said that although he knew a few politically minded teenagers a lot of his peers were "*undecided or haven't thought into (politics) much*". This perception was often seen influencing discussions about what age young people should be allowed to vote.

The majority of group interview participants thought that lowering the voting age to 16 was unnecessary and would reflect badly on the age group. Mollie said "*I'm 17 and I still don't understand...in general a lot of people don't understand what is going on at 16*". Rosa said "*I just think there has to be a cut-off point somewhere*" and she thought that 18 year olds

were capable of representing the views of people younger than them. Whilst Ellen suggested “*it would reduce legitimacy because 18-24 are the lowest voting people anyway*”, referring to the youth vote (18-24), which is already consistently the smallest voting turnout by age group figure (Butt and Curtice, 2010). The logic being that increasing the number of young people allowed to vote would increase the number of non-voting young people.

Leon was not really convinced and said he thought younger people should only get the vote if they were properly educated for it, “*it just completely depends on the education they are receiving*”. Whilst Mollie thought if education in citizenship was through Religious Education (RE) lessons then it was less likely you would know what was going on, as pupils would not pay attention in RE to any topic being taught. The topic of citizenship education is picked up again in Chapter Six as part of research participants’ perceptions of the wider public sphere.

In practice the view held by many research participants that young people are not interested, bothered or sensible enough to vote was not supported by young people’s voting patterns seen in the Scottish Referendum in 2014. Early estimates of the referendum, where 16 and 17 year olds were given permission to vote indicated that not only were overall voter turnout numbers high, but nearly 75% of 16 and 17 years olds were thought to have cast a vote on the future of their nation (Baxter, Tait, McLaverty and McLeod, 2015). Unlike England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland teaches citizenship education across all subjects. Furthermore the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is based in Scottish Parliament building, Holyrood, which allows for direct access to elected adult representatives. Unfortunately my data does not show providing good support and genuine opportunities for people to engage with politics increases the likelihood of young people to be more engaged with politics however CELS research (Keating, Benton and Kerr, 2011) did find a link between better citizenship education opportunities and increased political participation.

The widespread impact of political uncertainty upon research participants’ self-perceptions and how they viewed their peers provided a self-perpetuating picture of politically uninterested, incapable young people. Yet this finding did not reflect the realities of research participant’s political interests and capabilities that were also found in the data. This was particularly the case when differences between research participant’s perceptions about their political knowledge and their actual capabilities were recognised.

Differences between perception and capability

The responses of the research participants in the second group interview provide an especially clear example of the difference between perception and capability. Rosa and Ellen repeatedly drew poor conclusions about their political literacy and displayed an undercurrent of passiveness and doubt regarding their political understanding or agency but this was not the full story. The perceptions these research participants had about themselves were contradicted by interactions I had with them during the group interview discussions and could also be countered by assumed benefits of their social position. Both young women were clearly literate, able to put their points of view across on many occasions and able to critically reflect upon what I was asking them. Together these participants chose to talk about the importance of green energy production for a sustainable future, how politics is everywhere in society, not just found in Westminster and how cynicism about politics can be a real hindrance to political understanding. Incidentally this latter point reflected findings from a 2008 London School of Economics study (Dean, 2012: 371), which found that cynicism was the most important factor in preventing people from voting. Both young women fully contributed to prompted conversations about sources of political knowledge and their education in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

Furthermore in terms of social advantages, both young women attended a prestigious college in Cambridgeshire, considered beneficial for future outcomes in education, employment and future political engagement (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009; Hansard Audit 10, 2013:90-93). When participants were asked about their previous political experiences, both of these young women said they had visited Parliament at Westminster with the college, with only one other group interview participant saying that he had also visited the Houses of Parliament with his college. Not that visiting Westminster can be considered by any means the only possible advantage in learning about politics, but the practical advantages conferred by visiting sites of government is a useful addition in the development of political engagement and understanding.

As is evidenced throughout this thesis, these were not the only examples of research participants being critically aware about issues that were interesting or that held particular relevance to them. There was also evidence of research participant's discussing and being reflective on a range of issues, accounting for other points of view during discussions, and good levels of active involvement in politics, both in local communities through youth

councils, forums or online in a wide variety of national campaigns. Widespread political uncertainty over formal politics was certainly not often reflected in research participant's actual capabilities, be they actions, skills, knowledge regarding informal political experiences or discussions about issues with the public sphere.

Therefore the difference between self- perceptions of political uncertainty against the actual capabilities of research participants appeared quite pronounced. Furthermore according to the typologies offered by White et al., (2000), outlined in 2.9, nine of the ten group interview participants claimed to have an emerging interest in politics (Table 5.1, Column E). Professed political uncertainty was not usually an accurate reflection of research participant's actual political knowledge, interest or engagement.

The second key theme found in the data regarding formal politics were widespread unfavourable perceptions of politicians and their policies, which will be discussed next.

5.3 Antipathy towards Formal Politics

The second major theme found within the data about formal politics were adverse and critical perceptions of politicians, of which there is a long history in Britain. Evidence of a Scot observing the '*bitter and distrustful attitude of English common people*' towards the aristocracy (Hill, 1991:19) was recorded as early as 1614 in the ferment before the Civil War. Young people's disenfranchisement, disengagement and alienation from politics remained clear themes found in more current literature (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; O'Toole et al., 2003; Hartas, 2011; Henn and Foard, 2011). Mair (2013) used the term indifference to describe the gradual decline in citizen engagement with conventional politics that has appeared across all established democracies. A deep seated aversion or antipathy was ascertained from research participants numerous reflections on the topic of formal politics.

Therefore it was not wholly unexpected to find from across all data sets that research participants did not know who their local MP was, did not agree they were well represented by their MPs, and did not agree that adults could make the best decisions for them. Anecdotal evidence that the three main political parties have lost ground with voters, and problems with knowing who to vote for and why were clearly evidenced in the data. These findings were compounded by numerous examples of poor behaviour from both local and national politicians identified or experienced by research participants. With adjectives such as

aggressive and argumentative commonly associated with the behaviour observed in Westminster and lying over tuition fees especially associated with the Liberal Democrats. Karl's observation was quite clear, "*I think the Lib Dems screwed us over to be honest...they were for all kinds of students...but they stabbed us in the back*". It was extremely rare to find any positive comments about politicians or about changes for the better from their policies realised in communities. The perception from many research participants was that politicians did not represent or respect young people.

Westminster: politicians and their policies

In the on-line case studies, government and policy was a frequent topic of debates and discussion. Twenty out of thirty-one threads on the *YouthDebates, Education* sub forum regarded issues with governance either through policy changes to exams and assessment, curriculum reform, or issues with finance and will be discussed in more detail in the education chapter. The disillusioned mood with Westminster politicians and policies was reflected in many of the *Wordpress* blogs. In '*Being an MP is not for me*' the 16 year old *Powered by Girl (PBG)* blogger expressly wrote about Parliament being a straight, white, middle class '*man's world*', which is '*doing a pretty awful job*'. From the lack of diversity in politicians and sexist terms associated with female politicians in the press such as Blair's Babes and Cameron's Cuties viewed as "*demoralising, demeaning and downright disgusting*", through to needing to know the right people or being a social drinker so as to be considered '*one of the guys*'. The young woman was vocal in her cynical disenchantment with Parliament's ability to be genuinely representative of her and her needs.

Other problems were identified. The Government was accused of inaction in the introduction to *We Deserve #SREnow* that explored the need for accessible Sex and Relationship education (SRE) to be taught in schools. In 2009 I took a small group of young people to Westminster to lobby their Conservative MP at the time on this very subject and it is difficult to argue against the accusation of inaction. Although in the Government's defence a motion calling for mandatory SRE in schools made very slow progress through the House of Commons it was voted down by the House of Lords in February 2014, and voted down again in the House of Commons in 2017. This topic is re-visited in the subsequent findings chapter on education in the public sphere, 7.4. Government inaction was also identified in relation to discrimination against women from the national tabloid media, especially in regard to the *No More Page Three* campaign. One 21 year old PBG blogger asserted that "*these pornographic*

images are not harmless, nor are they just 'banter'. They compound on real women's wellbeing, safety, behaviour and education" The failure by Government to show strong leadership was seen to undermine progress in eliminating harmful prejudices against women.

These problems highlighted the associated issue of research participants feeling that the Government did not listen to them. *Girl Guiding* research (Girls Attitude Survey, 2015) underpinning the proposed *Girls Matter* manifesto for change found that over half of 11-21 year old young women felt that they were not listened to by government. The manifesto was a significant call for change from politicians by the *Girl Guiding* charity; for politicians to listen, to take positive actions to support girl's development in schools including modernising SRE, "*so all young people can make informed decisions and stay safe*" and also called for better female representation in Parliament. A lack of inaction gives the impression that needs are not being listened to or acted upon. As the next example illustrates great harm can arise from disrespecting or ignoring young people.

The piece '*Abuse Doesn't Exist in a Vacuum; Rotherham is Not About Race*' regarded the failings in Rotherham over more than 1,400 cases of child sexual abuse, whereby agencies established to protect children failed considerably in their duty of care. Rotherham police, social care and local council would not believe victims (some as young as 11) of abuse seeing the children as unreliable and complicit in their own exploitation. The PBG blogger discussed the Jay Report (2014) that found damaging classist and sexist stereotypes held by senior staff at these agencies about the children, many of who were in the care system, reinforced the problem. The PBG blogger wrote that "*the scale of abuse in Rotherham unmasks the toxic misogyny and classism that intersect to create an environment in which underprivileged girls can be raped then held in contempt by those meant to help them*". The blogger identified widespread, cultural levels of assumption and prejudice had allowed male violence against women and children to continue unchecked for sixteen years in Rotherham (Jay, 2014).

Off-line responses from participants remained similar in outlook. There was a blanket of '*no*' responses to questions about local MP's in the data, when research participants were asked if their MPs were representative or accessible. When asked, not one group interview participant could tell me who their MP was (Table 5.1, Column J) and comments were made about a lack of visibility and confusion between who local and national representatives were. The only positive recognition of a politician in the group interviews was for Boris Johnson, at

the time London Mayor, who Leon and Tom identified as “*quite a good guy, funny*”, or an “*extremely likeable guy*” with no further comment about his achievements or policies as mayor. Incidentally blank looks were also common from research participants in regard to any mention of the *National Youth Parliament* initiative, which the majority of participants had not heard of, prior to being asked about it. Unsurprising news perhaps, with no sign of improvement as Cambridgeshire lost 11 of the 12 participation workers who supported informal learning opportunities for young people, such as the *National Youth Parliament* initiative due to the severity of council cuts in 2011. Shortly I present a case study about Mollie’s perceptions of politics and the theme of change to illustrate how deep antipathy over politics runs.

Perceptions that research participants had about local politics did not improve much, although there was one glimmer of positive recognition, which is where the discussion moves to now.

Local politics

Young people from the sample group claimed a greater interest in national politics than local politics, which was in contrast to trends in the adult population during this period, which put local politics marginally ahead (Hansard Society, 2015). Off-line group interview participants’ perceptions were not particularly inspired by their experiences of local councils. Sadiq said “*I don’t think it makes that much difference if you approach them by yourself*”, he went on to discuss the need for high status in the community or collective action of many people to be able to have any influence with local councillors. His discussion partner Karl pointed to the tedious processes of local councils, going through “*stage after stage trying to get to the top*” waiting for a decision to be made that was very off putting to the public’s participation.

In another group interview Tom spoke about being part of a school project attempting to paint and tidy up the local park. Members of the school project contacted their local councillor who was “*a load of rubbish*” as she failed to take them seriously and support them, “*she had pretty much forgotten about us*” was his resigned conclusion. Ignoring constituents has a similar effect to not listening and in this particular case the project failed to go ahead that was not a positive experience for Tom of engagement with politicians. Unlike Rotherham the issue here of young people not being taken seriously by adults held no particular discernible harm for the young person involved, despite generating feelings of anger or frustration. However the ongoing harm from a failure of Government at a local level to

meaningfully engage with the research participants damages perceptions of engagement and hollows out democratic principles of equality and inclusion.

The much maligned, over budget Cambridgeshire *Guided Busway* was the only clearly positive local council decision identified in the data. This was where Karl spoke of the positive impact of the *Guided Busway* on his life, his family and the immediate environment. Karl considered that provision of the *Guided Busway* had made an overall positive impact on his life as he lived fourteen miles out of Cambridge and it had improved his ability to access to college and work opportunities. It also meant his family did not have to have the expense of running a car, which in turn took pressure off local roads renowned for congestion and was better for the environment. In terms of a successful policy outcome, this story illustrated that very occasionally research participants did see and value positive aspects of political action by politicians but in the main policy experiences that were elicited for my research were all found to be negative.

This slim yet rich snapshot of data about the research participants' perceptions of formal politics, combining high levels of political uncertainty and mistrust is of course not the whole story about their understanding of or engagement with politics. Determining the relationship between a citizen's autonomy and the states authority was rarely conclusive, much less a simple case of being able to identify a single cause and effect. There were likely to be numerous links in a chain of experiences leading to an outcome than one single binary explanation, which is where this chapter moves to now.

Politics is change

The theme of change in relation to politics was mentioned frequently in the data, both in regard to formal and informal politics. To illustrate Mollie's perception of change I use Lukes three dimensional view of power (Clegg, 1989: 3) as a basis towards understanding citizen engagement with politicians in formal politics. In brief Lukes (2005) describes a first dimension of immediately apparent behaviour that involves a second dimension of interpretative effects of any resulting action from the behaviour, which also tries to account for any apparent third level motivation or influence that may be hidden.

The immediately apparent level in this particular participant's life was where group interviewee Mollie showed concern and frustration as she described the effects of social welfare policy changes (what is commonly known as the 'bedroom tax') threatening the immediate security of a disabled family friend with a risk of homelessness from not being

able to pay increased bills from having a spare room. According to rules governing housing benefit the two children, a boy and a girl of the family were still young enough to share a bedroom not to have one each. Mollie was unhappy “*because if the government didn't keep changing the housing benefits then they would be able to stay in and you wouldn't get made homeless*”. Also distressing her were the effects of unfair sanctions for not attending interviews, which seemed to affect people that she knew. Mollie showed high levels of advocacy and understanding in this interaction about the effects of government policy on people she knew that indicated good levels of procedural knowledge or political competency.

Yet later in the discussion Mollie appeared to contradict herself when talking about things that hindered her political understanding saying “*You see all the interviews with MPs ...or the Prime Minister and stuff they say they are going to do, all these things to help but they never seem to get done. So like when you see them on the TV, they say things and then when they don't get done it's like what's the point in saying it?*” Although this initially appeared as a contradiction between too much change versus no change at all, a second level understanding made it apparent that this young person interpreted social policy changes as having both detrimental and ineffectual impacts on her life or in her community.

Any third level understanding of citizen's involvement with politics has to be able to account for the contrast between how Mollie perceived politicians in the public sphere (ineffective) with her own lived experiences of their actions (detrimental), which in this example did not come across as a positive or useful experience for her. Commonly the data showed Westminster politics were experienced as a type of politics that was remote from research participants' lives in terms of influence, often felt unfairly punitive to them, and ignored the consequences of policy decisions on the participants lived experiences. Supporting Youth Citizenship Commission (2009:6) findings that young people do not believe that politicians and decision makers care about what they think.

The theme of change was also found in the data regarding the following theme of informal politics but as I will show, differences in first level understanding (according to Lukes view of power) largely relate to who is perceived to hold the power in political situations. The category of informal politics demonstrated ways in which the research participants were engaging and developing their political understanding, which is where the discussion moves to now.

5.4 Informal politics on the micro level

The three interlinked themes discussed in this section are the themes of the personal is political, political action, with the theme of political change evidently associated with both themes. Already the theme of change has been considered in relation to formal politics and the predominantly negative connotations that affected participants' lived experience. Here the idea of change related to personal political engagement including the idea of being able to change things, which came across strongly from across the data sets with regard to informal politics. Individuals gave a myriad of examples of political interest and engagement with a variety of issues that held particular relevance to their lives. The data showed strong association by many of the research participants towards active political engagement in their lives.

Informal politics reflected the place of politics in research participants' lives that were discussed across the data, both on and off-line. Informal politics is used as a catch all term here to describe any political activity undertaken by research participants outside of the formal elected party political system as it currently stands in Britain. This can lead to some ambiguity between formal and informal politics, especially in relation to other aspects of the public sphere such as education or the media.

The 338 research participants, many of whom had expressed uncertainty about their political knowledge or understanding, displayed various levels in varying degrees of interest or involvement in informal politics. Within Bronfenbrenners' system-based ecological model of engagement (Greig and Taylor, 1999:31) informal politics can be conceptualised through either micro level informal politics or macro level informal politics, whilst also recognising a fluidity between categories to account for the dynamism and movement in people's lives with the meso-system level. Key to following explanations about informal politics was the self at the centre of the experience or activity, and reflections that were made about the individual's relationship to the experience.

These examples show a diverse wealth of political activism, debate and discussion existing both on and off-line, with on-line case studies showing political engagement was often a combination of both on and off-line activities rather than a straightforward binary of either or. A situation reflecting the complex layers of possibility found in hypermedia environments (Alvermann, 2004:79). Several clear examples of this were established through the *Powered*

by *Girl* contributions, especially by the top three contributors who were involved in on-line petition campaigns such as *No More Page 3* and *We Deserve #SREnow* as well as off-line activities with either *The Emily Tree* or as members of *Advocate* a national panel of girl-guiding members.

The personal is political

The theme of the personal is political ran through the micro-system level of politics concentrated in two broad sites, one being the off-line environment of family, friends, school or college, or they were found clustered in on-line communities. From political discussions with friends during sleepovers or with families around the dinner table at home, through to learning about and discussing politics across all lessons at college, or developing and sharing ideas around personal identity and sexuality online, research participants considered variety of wider political issues through their informal political experiences. Various sub themes ran through this micro-system level of research participants' lives, such as equality, empowerment, encouraging collective understanding, using their voice and making a difference.

One such discussion on *Powered by Girl* involved two 16 year old women talking about their use of make-up. It was interesting to read different levels of political consideration about such a simple, everyday act and to see how they constructed wider shared meanings and understanding through their experiences. Various wearing make-up was seen as meeting expectations of conformity to fit in with their peers, "*I think I went with it more to fit in than because I actually enjoyed wearing it*", or to be seen to make an effort about one's appearance to impress boys or friends. Although the latter was described as part of a judgemental, double edged balancing act where not making an effort could lead to scorn from the boys for being too ugly or '*not worth the effort*', yet making an effort ran the risk of receiving abuse such as you were a fake or a liar, or being judged as "*ditzy/vapid/slutty*". The bloggers did see through experimenting with wearing make-up there was the possibility of subverting normative expectations with creative expression rather than using make up to follow prescribed social expectations, "*I paint my face with lipstick and use turquoise eyeliner to give myself freckles...I'm much less interested in trying to look pretty than I used to be...*", although the latter was admittedly more often done by the young woman in private rather than in public spaces.

Another personal political discussion was in the blog *gender//queer//free*, where the author spoke about having the freedom to learn about and define her sexuality and sense of self online. This young woman contemplated how she perceived gender constructs as fluid and not fixed with her identity being something that was emerging from what she was reading about. The blog was experimental in tone with recognition that the act of defining who she was “*can actually be beneficial to lots of things; to self-esteem, friendships, love affairs and confidence*”. Both of these blog examples illustrated expression of ideas including equality, compromise, difference and empowerment, which showed critical and creative thinking from participants. Both are considered integral attributes to being a politically literate person (Crick, 2000).

Political Action

Political action was a strong theme that emerged from the data with a diverse range of informal political activity that research participants were involved in. In the group interviews, informal sites of political learning were most commonly identified as the home and college. With family discussions useful for helping ideas develop even when family members did not all agree with each other. Research participants would occasionally provide evidence of political thinking by other family members, such as Ellen illustrating her parents’ cynicism about voting, saying “*I think my parents don’t really vote. I think my Mum likes the Green Party but she thinks it is pointless voting because the Green Party never gets enough votes, so she doesn’t really bother*”. This view had not stopped Ellen from choosing to take political subjects at college and wanting to be involved further in political activity, when she had figured out which political party she wanted to support.

Often the data showed that the style or content of formal politics was copied by informal political action or challenged through informal political expression. Informal politics such as student unions and local youth forums mimicked formal political structures with elections and formally established rules and regulations to maintain their legitimacy. Half the group interview participants were actively involved as Student Union representatives in the colleges I visited, or as members of local youth forums or school councils. Clear parallels and associations with traditional politics were made on-line too. Table 5.3 shows key organisations on-line research participants were involved in, such as *Girl Guiding*, *The Emily Tree*, the *National Youth Parliament* and various campaigns these organisations were running

such as *Girls Matter*, *Make Your Mark*, and *No More Page 3*. The *Make Your Mark* campaign obtained a record breaking 970,000 votes from young people across the UK in 2015 (Afflick, 2015), not far off a hundred thousand more votes than the previous year to democratically choose policies for the next youth parliament manifesto. Alongside these opportunities were various on-line petitions supporting youth services or sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools, which involved thousands of young people beyond my research.

Table 5.3 Key sites of informal political activity for on-line research participants

<i>The National Youth Parliament</i> campaign <i>Make Your Mark</i> encouraged young people to vote for topics for inclusion in the 2015 youth parliament manifesto
<i>The Emily Tree</i> encouraged young women to engage with formal politics, giving practical off-line opportunities for public speaking or linking up with MP's and other campaigning groups.
The <i>Girl-Guiding</i> organisation compiled an eight point manifesto for change, from consulting thousands of members, to lobby politicians in the run up to the General Election 2015, for positive change for young women
The <i>YouthDebates</i> website also ran the <i>Atlantic Senate</i> for online participants to take key positions in a democratic political structure (developed by a young person for young people to use).

Blurred lines were especially prominent within the on-line contributions to my research, where the mixing of the public and private spheres were clearly seen. Previous examples shown by the *PBG* blogs, such as the politics of defining sexuality or political choices around wearing make-up that were personal to the contributor(s) but posted as part of creating shared understanding and support. Other examples on *YouthDebates* raised mental health issues in regard to the consequences of government policies in education, as causing 'unnecessary stress' for participants, which mirrored concerns by group interview participants. Using on-line spaces to discuss personal issues, sharing and expressing concerns relevant to the participants observed, was a key characteristic of every on-line case study.

Off-line there appeared tension over participant's perceptions of their political involvement or engagement. Even with good levels of political activity identified from the data only two

group interview participants clearly thought that they were actively involved in politics (Table 5.1, column G) and from the descriptions given this involvement was centred in micro-systems. Leon agreed that he was politically active, saying, *“I think if you’d asked me this last year I would have been in the same place (disagree) as the others but since being at college and doing the units on Government obviously I understand it (politics) a lot more and I’ve been getting a bit more involved now”*. He described this as being part of army cadets and watching the news or reading newspapers. Whilst Sadiq valued regular conversations he had in the family home, discussing politics on local, national and global levels as well as recognising his student council role as a political activity. Both young men were engaged with exo-system political influences but neither appeared actively involved in party politics.

Other group interview participants failed to connect activities they were involved in as political activity. Although Karl had discussed attendance at a local youth theatre for furthering his political knowledge, he didn’t include, recognise or reflect this or his involvement in the Student Union at college as political activity, saying *“I don’t usually involve myself in, like, discussions....I wouldn’t say I’m very knowledgeable about politics”*. Tom also disagreed as he saw political activity as something for the future, possibly as part of his job as a graphic designer. Rosa claimed an interest in politics but informally and internally rather than doing things outwardly to change other people’s views or show her views to other people. Saying *“I don’t vote. I’m not a member of a political party or pressure groups or anything”*. Ellen stated that confusion and her lack of understanding about politics prevented her participation. Whilst Mollie had mentioned her local youth council as *“not really interesting”* going on to say *“I don’t really have much interest in national or international (politics)”*. Responding to the statement if they agreed they were politically active five of the group interview participants clearly disagreed, with the other three giving ambiguous answers.

The responses illustrated problems with how research participants self-reported their experiences, giving partial or incomplete versions of events and not recognising local activities in the same way as formal Westminster politics. Attempting to connect political uncertainty and recognition of personal political activity is not the point here, rather recognition that the self-reported perceptions of political activity were not fully accurate. That many of the politically uncertain young people who took part in my research did not make connections between their informal political activities and political activity highlighted a perception gap between formal and informal politics. Perhaps resting on tensions between

informal politics as experienced by the self, against formal politics viewed as happening to other individuals or communities. Many of the examples provided were useful for illustrating categorical binaries, such as formal, informal, private, public, to pinpoint areas of discussion however results or impacts often merged or overlapped, illustrating the complexity, intersection and intricacy of politics.

5.5 Informal politics on the macro level

A broad range of sub-themes were found in the macro system level category of informal politics about overarching social beliefs, principles and political philosophies. Most frequently observed through data from social media channels in their clearest expression but glimpses from the group interview discussions too. Social and cultural issues such as the need for a social security system in Britain, how repeated stereotypes and limited representations of women in the national media encouraged a poor social environment for women's mental health, or debates over the purpose of education and potential routes for reform are three macro system level topics covered in more depth in the next findings chapter. Ideas and opinions about environmentalism, socialism and human rights had weak associations made in the data but contributed to the breadth of macro influences discussed by research participants.

This section particularly focuses on the ways young women interpreted and developed their ideas about feminism, which is a subject typically persisting on the margins of mainstream political discussion in the public sphere. The use of social media by young women to develop, create and explore feminism continued a long tradition that has relied on art and literature to provide women with a voice in society (Pollock, 2003). The *Powered by Girl* bloggers created and shared literary content that perpetuated key ideas in feminism such as intersectionality to discuss the socio-economic effects of class, race and gender in various forms, as well as ideas over equality, oppression and power, to promote and develop shared meanings and understanding together.

Several of the blogs tackled the idea or movement of feminism, the negative way it is often portrayed, either in belittling *Tumblr* comments about 'man-hating, ugly feminists', the misconceptions about what drives the fear of using the '*f-word*' as a personal descriptor, or else by examining class, race and privilege issues within the movement. The latter used Latitude festival as an example of the largely white, middle-class background of key proponents of feminism in British society one PBG blogger wrote "*I don't think we can*

expect to engage a majority if we are solely being represented by a relative minority", going on to question why more diverse voices were not being represented or amplified in the national media. These young women worked through what feminism was perceived to be with what feminism meant to them creating rich descriptions of what may be described as the fourth wave of contemporary feminism.

Observing a *"hesitance to label themselves as a dreaded feminist"* in young women the blogger raised issues over humanism, sexism, racism and homophobia that had helped her understanding for the need for feminism. According to her view of feminism the movement provided a platform for challenging injustice and inequality to benefit everyone not just a few. Further critiques of social media came as another blogger confronted key *Youtube* figures for allowing a culture of bullying or abuse to continue on their platform, largely through the silence of users and community leaders on the issue. Speaking up about the *Youtube* abuse the young blogger illustrated her primary point being that only by speaking up could the situation change, with *"no public discourse, no change"*. Echoing problems found in the Rotherham abuse scandal blog where inaction over injustice was seen as *"deeply rooted in our attitudes and establishment"*. These bloggers interpreted and used feminism to advocate for fairness and end discrimination.

5.6 Summary

While the prevalence of uncertainty found in participant's responses was clear, establishing what is contributing to that uncertainty is less clear. Responses illustrated the problem was more complex than just being a widespread lack of political knowledge, especially over formal politics. This chapter explored the effects of political uncertainty upon participant's ability to vote responsibly as well as upon their intention to vote and their readiness to be active in politics. Political uncertainty was found to tie into perceptions research participant's had about their peer group's ability to vote. All of which pointed to political uncertainty being a key barrier in how politically informed research participants thought they were.

The second finding regarding formal politics was the overwhelming mistrust, dislike and frustration shown towards the political elites on both local and national levels. Levels of antipathy were high research participants' responses. Politicians were charged with not being representative of anyone except the old, straight, white men in Parliament, for being argumentative, aggressive liars, and inactive on policies that could make a difference to

young people, as well as disrespectful by not listening to and ignoring young people. The list was long and uncomfortable reading for those it applied to. Research participants did not have much positive to say about local or national politicians and their policies so it was notable on the rare occasion when good things were said or recognised. Widespread discontent with current political processes (Power, 2006) and leading political actors was the over-riding narrative from research participants.

The beginning of this chapter highlighted many young people appeared unwilling to participate in my research at all. It would be exceedingly speculative and erroneous to blame this unwillingness as a direct correlation of the effect of my topic area but neither can the overwhelmingly negative perceptions research participants held over politicians and politics be ruled out as a barrier to young people's participation in my research or indeed upon their future participation with formal politics. As the next chapter opening quote suggests (Valery, 1937:127) maybe exclusion is the point.

Fortunately levels of informal politics as they were found and discussed across the data went some way to rectifying this rather negative situation. Recognising a difference between a self-proclaimed lack of knowledge and actual levels of political understanding or political involvement showed strong differences between perception and capabilities. The depiction of political uncertainty cannot be taken at face value. My findings illustrated a situation that despite high levels of political uncertainty, research participants were interested in politics, wanted to learn more about politics and were involved in a diverse range of politics that *were accessible and relevant to them* in different ways.

From micro level decisions to go to college and learn about politics or be a student union representative, through to the wealth of political activity on-line, it seemed I only touched upon a fraction of the multitude of ways research participants were practicing informal politics in their day to day lives. Separating macro-system levels of informal politics from research participants' experiences was more difficult as stereotypes and ideologies were often discussed or learnt about in relation to the micro-system level. Nevertheless feminism, environmentalism and basic tenants of conservative and socialist political ideologies were used by research participants to make sense of the world around them. Illustrating a connection to politics by research participants indicating the myth of apathy is a distraction from what is occurring.

The evidence gathered showed good use of the internet by research participants to link up and get collectively involved with political issues. The issue of feminism was an excellent case study in this regard. Although it was impossible to accurately assess how widespread overall on-line political involvement by young people was at the time of observation, due to the anonymous, transient, fragmented nature of the internet. Also because of overlaps between formal and informal, or private and public spheres, with personal issues having just as much political value for some people as national campaign issues or successes.

Furthermore it was obvious that the on-line data I collected during twelve weeks was just a very small sample of the concerns, issues, reforms and activities that young people were involved in on-line. Each on-line case study could have been a whole study in itself to find out more about young people and the ways they engage with politics. Investigating all 78 sub forums of the *YouthDebates* site or observing the 285 MYPs social media output on *Twitter* could have gleaned more data than one researcher could realistically manage. Within the three month case study period the amount of young people involved in three of the largest on-line campaigns, *Girls Matter*, *Make Your Mark* (969,992 votes by young people in 2015, UKYP Campaigns web page), and *No More Page 3*, even accounting for overlap of participants, numbered in the many thousands.

To conclude, claims of political uncertainty were generally held about Westminster politics with a great deal of political interest and activity happening much closer to home. Social media use looked to be closing the gap between public and private spheres, for a majority of the research respondents.

How Young People Viewed the Public Sphere

Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.

Paul Valery, *Tel Quel* 1943

6.1 The Public Sphere

This chapter regards the second part of the research question which sought to find out what sources of political information were useful or otherwise to young people to support their political understanding. Here I examine findings related to two aspects of the public sphere that bear some responsibility for educating citizens in a democracy, the mass media and the education system.

Mass Media

In our socially constructed world mass media has a hugely important exo-system level influence, wielding a very particular if difficult to pinpoint power in shaping political understanding. Any investigation into how politically informed young people thought they were had to account for diverse influences of the ever expanding public sphere people live with. The language of human rights indicates an ideal benchmark for what young citizens might rightly expect from the public sphere in regard to political information. Amongst the thirty articles in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child (UNCRC), the following two hold particular significance for young people's political literacy in the context of this chapter.

- *Article 13 the right to access good quality information*
- *Article 17 the right to access information that is useful not harmful*

Three key themes identified from the data in relation to research participants perceptions of the media were representation, trust and bias. Over three-quarters of survey responses about the best sources of political information involved media of some sort, which provided an overview of political sources used, however answers were often too vague to draw stronger conclusions from in this area. Group interview data and on-line blogs from *Powered by Girl* provided the deep description presented here. The theme of public representation in the national media raised two areas of discussion, namely representations of women and more general representations of the public and people with disabilities in the national media. The *Powered by Girl* bloggers were illustrative of a larger group of women “fighting for space in

a corner of the internet” looking at issues affecting women in society mostly ignored or maintained by mainstream media channels. The bloggers critiqued aspects of the national press for continuously presenting damaging portrayals of women that they linked to wider problems with women’s participation and representation in politics as well as high levels of violence and abuse towards women in society (EVAW, 2010). Whilst group interview participants led discussion over how poor and disabled people were portrayed in the media that contradicted with participants lived experiences or understandings in their immediate communities.

Themes of trust and bias are discussed in relation to media output in the public sphere. Research participants recognised that the media was both a help and a hindrance in understanding different political issues and drew attention to difficulties they experienced with getting suitable levels of political information. Although trust and bias are two discrete themes in media analysis (Street, 2001) the themes were so closely entwined in the data that it became impractical to discuss one without referring to the other. This section illustrates how problematic a lack of trust over information in the public sphere could be for undermining the research participants’ political knowledge, whilst acknowledging that the ability to recognise bias is not necessarily a bad thing when encouraging critical thinking in politically literate citizens.

Education System

The other exo-system level impacting on research participants’ political understanding was the education system. Key themes found in relation to the topic of education were: the governance of education, curriculum reform and citizenship education in school. Three further themes generated from the data were education funding, exams and assessment and education culture. For manageability and focus theses are incorporated where necessary into the first three main themes. Differences with the Scottish and Welsh educational systems were raised on one occasion each by participants but generally discussions did not distinguish between different regional areas of education in the UK.

The main sources of data used were the on-line discussion threads from the education forum on the *YouthDebates* website and the *Powered by Girl* blogs. However differences between on and off-line data established widespread problems with citizenship education and survey data is mentioned to highlight the comparison.

The theme ‘governance of education’ takes a central role for discussing education as it reaches into every other theme. Whether talking about curriculum reform, citizenship education, exams and assessment, finance, or education culture, the theme of governance appeared particularly relevant to on-line participants. Discussions during the observation period were often but not exclusively focused on policy decisions made by Michael Gove, the outgoing Secretary of State for Education at the time. Following this the theme of ‘curriculum reform’ illustrated a multitude of thoughts and ideas regarding reform of the current curriculum in schools. An often expressed expectation was that the purpose of education was to equip participants for the ‘real world’, with a distinct emphasis found in the data regarding the need for better sex and relationships education (SRE) in schools. Of particular interest was advocacy for improvements to life skills teaching including debating, problem solving, critical thinking, politics, economics and finance that would support the political literacy of young citizens.

The final theme of ‘citizenship education’ became notable for illustrating researcher bias through the research questions asked during the off-line fieldwork. Questions about citizenship education were asked to gauge the experiences and perceived effects of formal citizenship education on participants’ political literacy. This data contrasted with data from the on-line *YouthDebates* education forum that found complete omission of the term citizenship education during the three month observation period. Central aspects of this on-line-offline comparison are the focus of the citizenship education section.

But first this chapter considers the issue of representation in the media and I establish how research participants were disappointed or frustrated with how they perceived the national media narrowly and selectively portrayed certain groups in society.

6.2 Media representations of the public

Harmful representation

Although difficult to ascertain a simple cause and effect between poor media content and the political uncertainty found in the data, this section provides deeper context about the different ways research participants thought they were being informed about the world around them. Article 17 states that ideally young citizens have a right to access information that is useful not harmful to them. This section reveals how research participants highlighted what they

considered the harmful effects of information found in the public sphere usually produced by the national tabloid media. This was best exemplified in the on-line data presented by a small group of female bloggers on the *Wordpress* site *Powered by Girl*, who took issue with the ways parts of the national press represented women on a daily basis.

During the observation period over half of the 25 blogs in total discussed problems with the representation of women in the public sphere. Four of the blogs directly supported and discussed the *No More Page 3* campaign; *Chasing Rupert Murdoch* described the author's attempts to directly lobby the owner of *The Sun* newspaper, *Work Experience at The Sun* described a dispiriting week of school work experience at *The Sun*, whilst seven bloggers contributed to *We Support No More Page 3*, a piece detailing their concerns with the outdated practice. The final blog of the four, *Could This Be the End of Page 3*, discussed Rupert Murdoch questioning the place of Page 3 in his paper (which took another three months of campaigning for Page 3 to end in January 2015).

Another 3 blogs discussed sexist portrayals of women MPs in the press. *Heads They Win, Tails You Lose* discussed how women could never win as part of critiquing the 'heads they win, tails you lose' approach the tabloid media constantly took in shaming and belittling women. Whilst *Cabinet Reshuffle*, *Same Sexism* and *Being an MP is Not For Me* (as mentioned in 5.3) regarded how aggressive, patronising press reports were off-putting to women's participation in politics.

Three further blogs questioned the effects of prejudice and stereotypical responses to victim blaming. *Abuse Doesn't Exist in a Vacuum; Rotherham is not about race* concerned unbalanced media reporting about child sexual abuse in Rotherham reflected in individuals in the institutions supposed to protect young people from abuse. Widespread cultural attitudes meant senior adults in police, social care and the local council preferred to blame 11-15 year old girls for their own abuse rather than taking action to prosecute the adult men who were sexually abusing and trafficking children between British cities, over at least a fifteen year period (Jay, 2014). Whilst *Youtube and Sexual Abuse* looked at sexual abuse within the online *YouTube* community that the author thought was greatly exacerbated by people not speaking up on the issue of older men 'preying' on 13-17 year old women. *Drops of Hope* concerned gradual changes to how the American National Football League that historically down played the domestic violence and sexual assault allegations of its players but now

pressure to act meant six month suspension or an outright ban for players accused of domestic violence.

The final three blogs challenged wider representations of women in the media. The Girl Guiding campaign, *Girls Matter* (Girls Guiding UK, 2015), described lobbying political representatives and institutions in the UK to meet eight calls for change to improve social expectations and increase positive representations of young women in Parliament and the media. *Thoughts From Latitude – Feminism, Class Politics and Checking Your Privilege* discussed the class politics of feminism, perceiving where feminism did exist in the national media it was predominantly white and middle class raising issues of inclusivity and diversity amongst representations of feminism. Whilst *Women in Film* discussed film production from an American perspective and how representation of diverse and complex female characters was limited by a lack of women in producing and directing this cultural medium, a perception which also holds true in Europe.

The overriding theme emerging from the 13 blogs outlined, in relation to the national media and popular culture, were descriptions of extensive social problems associated with sexist, demeaning representations and violent, unchallenged treatment of women. Social problems that research participants thought encouraged or maintained the exclusion and marginalisation of women from the public sphere. Now this discussion details problems the bloggers identified with female representation repeatedly propagated by certain parts of the national press.

Challenging Media Sexism

The *Powered by Girl* bloggers wrote about media sexism and made it clear exactly how representations of women in the national press were a problem for them. Explaining for instance why they wouldn't want to be involved in politics; distinguishing Westminster politics as an exclusive white, boys-club with a heavy drinking culture underpinned by an aggressive national press full of stereotyped clichés about women's participation in politics. Where women were either described as babes and cuties belonging to whichever male Prime Minister, or in unflattering terminology based on their looks and what they were wearing, rather than being portrayed as autonomous political actors with their own agency and ideas. The *Powered by Girl* bloggers persuasively argued that being a woman in politics was customarily treated as a superficial, sexist joke by the national press.

The Daily Mail and particularly *The Sun* newspaper were identified as problematic by the *Powered by Girl* bloggers for continually objectifying women rather than being able to value or recognise women's achievements as newsworthy. Such as the reporting of the cabinet reshuffle, "*The Daily Mail did their absolute best to patronize and insult women calling the reshuffle a 'catwalk'...*" or in response to Page 3, "*I believe that the day Page 3 does not exist will be the day people begin to view women more as human beings who deserve respect, not sexual toys to provoke and abuse*". Highlighting the over-riding media narrative of repeated messages, rules and norms encouraging wider cultural practices and expectation over women's purpose being to serve, entertain, support and maintain other's needs (Limage, 2001), rather than be recognised in their own right.

The continual sexual objectification of young women on page 3 of *The Sun* newspaper was something that the *No More Page 3* campaign successfully coalesced many people over including several of the *Powered by Girl* bloggers. Described as an outdated, disrespectful portrayal of women by *No More Page 3* campaigners, which effectively obscured and undermined all other achievements women may have attained on any given day. The flashpoint for the campaign commencing was an article about Jessica Ennis winning gold in the Olympics for Britain being superseded by a whole page picture of a young woman just in her pants. Eventually pressure from the well-supported campaign stopped the forty-four year old, daily practice of *The Sun* prominently displaying a full page picture of a semi-naked woman in its pages (narrowly defined as white, young and able-bodied). Although there remain problems with the disrespectful way women are presented in that particular newspaper.

In various ways blog authors spoke about how they were keen to see positive change from both the press and Government. These were potential changes in cultural production from the press and stronger leadership from Westminster politicians to address the effects of classist, racist and sexist assumptions about women perpetuated in the public sphere. Changes that recognised the harmful, limiting effects of the hyper-sexualisation of young women upon society (Coy, 2009; Papadopoulos 2010) affecting mental health, confidence and self-esteem. The young female bloggers connected what they considered old fashioned, misogynist, insulting, disparaging, patronising, oppressive and demeaning representations of women in parts of the British media with a broader lack of respect for women in society and for permitting a wider culture of male abuse, violence and bullying that was found both on and off-line. It was clear that the 19 bloggers were representative of a much wider group of

women in society, the *Girl Guiding* group alone represented the opinions of several thousand young women for the *Girls Matter* campaign, whilst the *No More Page 3* campaign gathered 215,000 signatures for the petition by 2015, although a unknown proportion of these signatories would have been supportive men.

The issue of female representation in the national media was clearly an important issue for these young women to write about. Even in decline *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* remain the most popular daily selling papers with 1.7million (*The Sun*) and 1.5million (*The Daily Mail*) copies sold every day. With *The Daily Mail* far outstripping all competitors online, reaching 14.4million average daily browsers. Yet narrow representations of women in the national press was not the only issue about representation for research participants, further concern was shown over the ways more vulnerable members of society were portrayed in the national media, which is where discussion moves to now.

Demonising publics

A tendency for ‘othering’ or the demonization of the poor in society is increasingly associated with media and Government practices (Haylett, 2003; Jones 2012; Valentine and Harris, 2013). The problem of media representation of vulnerable publics was established early on in the second group interview discussion. These research participants were eloquent in their dislike regarding what they perceived as unfair media representations of the public in the national press, summarised as the public always being shown to be in the wrong and negative representations of vulnerable people on benefits. Participants spoke about the tangible unfairness of a media agenda that seemed to be, as Tom put it, “*slapping the public in the face*”. He went on to say “*they’re ever so keen to highlight all the bad things what we’re (the public) doing wrong but never so keen to highlight what they’re doing wrong*”.

Tom also took issue with negative representations in the media of poor and vulnerable people in society and the way people on benefits were portrayed, where there was a lack of understanding from the people who were writing the stories about why people might need benefits. As the discussion moved on to talk about a disabled family on benefits, Tom spoke about how he understood there was concern that some people might cheat the system as people on benefits are “*always portrayed negatively...but the majority are in need of the benefits because there is no other way to live*”. Leon agreed with him and sagely observed that going onto benefits “*could happen to anyone*”.

Other young people in the discussion group agreed with Tom and gave examples of friends and family who were severely disabled and suffering as a result of callous government policies. Leon was annoyed that his mum's cousin who was a double amputee (lost both of his legs), was still having government assessments to see if he could walk and check if he still needed to claim benefits, saying "*to me, I mean that's just stupid*". This moved the discussion onto the negative impacts of the bedroom tax on disabled people and their families that also raised concerns about a family friend of Mollie who was worried about the risk of homelessness from benefit cuts

Research participant's observations illustrated that their lived experiences were very different to leading public sphere narratives in the media about vulnerable or disabled people where value judgements' rather than understanding about people's lives were regularly made (Valentine and Harris, 2014:84). Politicians were mentioned alongside journalists for not understanding the reality of people's lives or the impact of top down policies on communities. Leon said "*the Government in my view aren't looking at the everyday person*". The chasm between real, worrying, life altering issues faced by disabled friends and family being neglected, in favour of a preponderance of harmful, sensational reporting about benefit cheats was addressed by a report from the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU, 2008). The report examined the role of the media in explaining poverty and made clear that whilst public attitudes cannot be solely attributed to the influence of mass media the media does have a pivotal role in reinforcing ideas about poverty. A role, according to the report that was frequently seen to focus on framing debates around the failings of the undeserving poor rather than exploring the causes or consequences of poverty.

Taken together the harmful narratives over representation that research participants relayed in discussions and in the on-line blogs were illuminating for several reasons. Firstly the concerns were not necessarily specific to young people as a discrete group or necessarily about harmful representations of only young people in society. Research participant's concerns were inclusive and reached across age boundaries, often transcending class, race and ability barriers. Secondly participants were not impressed by the unfairness inherent in media portrayals of vulnerable people and were frustrated by the gap in understanding shown by those with authority and responsibility in the public sphere about why people might need to be on benefits, or how children cannot be regarded as complicit in their own abuse, or how being a woman could be represented by more than a narrow definition of sexuality.

The corrosive harm arising from the objectification of women in popular culture has been found to affect ideas over women's competency (seen as less than competent) and being considered less human (Heflick and Goldenburg, 2009). As well as studies showing the impact of stereotypes on political knowledge when women are perceived as the other (McGlone, Aronson and Kobryniewicz, 2006). The Sex and Power report (Centre for Women and Democracy, 2014) illustrated that women are far from reaching parity with men in positions of authority across political institutions in the UK. A continual reinforcement of social norms that constantly disparage women's contributions to the public sphere are at the very least unhelpful and in terms of women's mental health, confidence, well-being and aspiration, actually quite harmful to recipients (Papadopoulos, 2010; Girls Attitude Survey, 2015)

Finally hostile, ignorant representations in the public sphere set a poor example that were repellent and off-putting to some of research participants, several of whom explained how this had or would prevent their further participation in the political sphere. An active choice to not be involved in such an abusive arena cannot realistically be classed as apathy, rather it is more like self-preservation.

Yet problems with the way key media outlets promote political understanding did not finish with negative portrayals of vulnerable people in the media. Research participants also identified trust and media bias as key issues that impacted upon their ability to be politically literate, which I discuss now.

6.3 Trust and Media Bias

The idea of being able to trust the media to tell the truth in whatever story was being produced, was a theme often discussed in tandem with the influence of bias upon the media's ability to tell the truth, hence the dual approach of this section. A quick overview of the data regarding useful sources of political information led to two observations providing useful background information to underpin the media related findings discussed here.

Firstly the source of data had an impact on what was considered an important source. Survey participants were more likely to report sources in the public sphere for gathering political information from rather than recognising the influence of immediate personal relationships in their communities. Whereas qualitative data from the group interviews identified much

stronger associations made with the micro influences of day to day relationships, such as friends, family and college for participant's political understanding. Although media in the public sphere appeared the primary political information source from the survey data the richer data from the group interviews showed the importance of the immediate micro-system level environment. These differences in the data were possibly advanced by the method of data collection i.e. the brevity and speed of survey responses rather than being given time to reflect and co-create knowledge with peers in dialogic settings.

Secondly the data showed the BBC was trusted much more as a source than the national print media. The BBC maintained a not entirely uncriticised but highly regarded place in many research participants' political information gathering. In group interviews participants conveyed trust and understanding about the BBC, with the expectation that the BBC would meet the public service remit entrusted to it of informing and educating, as well as entertaining the public. The implications from both conclusions upon political uncertainty are discussed during this section.

The link between trust and bias

Although trust and bias are considered two discrete categories of media analysis research respondents often linked the terms together as different sides of the same coin in attempting to explain problems with the sources they used for political knowledge. The central topic here was the strong association research participants made of bias within the national press affecting their ability to trust the stories produced. This issue was found to a much lesser degree in association with broadcast media and was weakly associated with teachers, petitions, and in social media.

If we consider this discussion against four potential types of bias set out by McQuail (Street 2001:20), as the first two being overt partisan bias and propaganda bias that are easier to see, in terms of clear support for political parties, recommendations to vote or the reporting of stories that help readers generalise about certain groups in society. With the remaining two types of hidden bias, namely unwitting bias and ideological bias, which are harder to see resting as they do on hierarchies of values, hidden assumptions and value judgements that appear as the 'norms' in society. Obviously, as Street points out, it is difficult to categorically prove what was intended by each definition as the audience comes to view or read media production with their own set of assumptions, values and judgements (2001:22).

Previously examples of bias were prominent in discussions about representation of the public in the media, with clear propaganda bias existing in media stories towards benefit cheats that research participants found unfair and are backed up by recent research (Scottish Poverty Information Unit, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014). It would be more difficult to similarly categorise the objectification of women as propaganda bias as the representation often appears more subtle and depends a great deal on how further representations are omitted or hidden. It could be argued that unwitting bias introduced by long-established, male dominated newsroom cultures is reinforced by ideological bias over stereotypically assumed roles of women as a class in society, would perhaps better describe the types of bias shown towards female representation in the tabloid press. Although as already stressed ideological bias is much harder to categorise as a great deal depends on the perspective and values of the viewer.

From discussions research participants were having there were expectations that despite the issue of bias in reporting research participants wanted to be able to trust the sources they used to get political information from, which is where discussion turns to now.

Contrast between perceptions of BBC and Newspapers

The data showed that the BBC was by far the most commonly trusted, referred to single organisation, respected for unbiased or fairly unbiased news and providing balanced political information by research participants in the group interviews. The BBC was considered “*a main source of information*” for Tom as he suggested “*it is not particularly biased*”. Ellen conveyed the view that she preferred BBC news to newspapers because newspapers only gave a partial view of what was going on. This view was reinforced by Leon who said the BBC was “*better than certain newspapers*”, and was a “*centre party organisation*”. He also went onto to speak of the BBC having a public education role and therefore provide balance in reporting. Karl stated that he preferred to read local papers as he could relate better to what was happening in his area, although he went on to say he did watch BBC news as there were usually things he could agree with on there. This statement illustrated a level of cognitive bias towards his choice of political information. These responses from across different group interviews illustrated the selection of ways in which participants repeatedly gave positive responses about the BBC. These demonstrated high levels of trust in the BBC to report on issues much more fairly than the partisan newspapers were seen to.

The comment by Leon, calling the BBC a “*centre party organisation*” was a way of saying he thought the BBC were balanced somewhere in the middle of the political parties. The expectation that the BBC is impartial, based in some neutral area was also mentioned as being part of the public broadcasting remit recognised by other research participants. A Cardiff University study (Berry, 2013), partially funded by the BBC, and undertook a major content analysis from 2007 and 2012 to look at claims of the BBC’s impartiality. The findings showed that any political coverage was dominated by the Labour and Conservative political parties, with the incumbent party always receiving more coverage than the opposition, with more space overall provided for Conservative voices. The study claimed that “*the BBC tends to reproduce a Conservative, Eurosceptic, pro-business version of the world*” (Berry, 2013). The prevailing narrative set by the BBC can help to normalise expectations and behaviours in society with the problem of any unwitting or ideological bias being hidden from view or accepted because that is how things are. Widespread acceptance of the BBC as the least biased, most trustworthy source of political information in society helps disguise the impact of any hidden bias.

Levels of trust held in broadcast media were generally missing from perceptions about the national press. Although newspapers held one of the top positions in the survey as a useful source of political information for research participants they were far less trusted than broadcast media, with the main reason given that newspapers were biased. The gap between perceptions of broadcast and print media repeated similarities from the Phillis report (Dean, 2012:343) that found only 6% of adult respondents cited newspapers as a fair and unbiased source of news compared to 70% for television news. It was interesting that whilst newspaper stories were claimed to be much less trustworthy by research participants for my study they remained a frequently referred to source of political information.

Problems that connected trustworthiness and bias in newspapers for research participants were indicated by comments that the truth is often missing or only half a story is being told. Ellen spoke about feeling excluded by the national media as “*we’re always like a little bit outside what is going on*”, and “*we need the truth but we’re not quite getting it*”. Newspapers were considered useful for raising awareness of current political issues but were deemed to only give a partial view depending on whether they had left or right wing bias. Tabloid newspapers were seen as especially problematic by some group interview participants, and yet not by others; Sadiq said he preferred to read his news (in *The Sun*) rather than listen to “*the bad stories on television*”. Whereas Ellen said “*newspapers other than The Sun*”

supported her political knowledge although she spoke about the value of understanding different political views from right or left-wing sources. Further discussions raised the problem of bias associated with media ownership that newspapers could only print what they were allowed to.

More general claims about problems with sources of information came from participants who spoke about a close relationship between government and media, with Sadiq picking up that many news stories appear to be based in London giving a predominance of London-centric news stories. Rosa spoke about how she thought the widespread cynicism found both in the media and in individuals hinders people's political learning, and she thought people who complained all the time were actually less knowledgeable. Other potential sites of media bias included online petitions that reflect the instigators subjective viewpoints, and bias shown by teachers in lessons. A particular example given was of a very religious, Religious Education teacher that George had experienced when he was at school.

Overall group discussion participants had various levels of critical awareness over the political role of media and were often able to express how the views or opinions the media espouse are partial. Even with the BBC reporting holding a more esteemed social position. These views mirrored findings from the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement (2009:19-20) that found the adult public have issues with the negative way news is reported in the media, especially with tabloid news reporting that was actually thought to hinder political understanding. Despite recognising profound issues over trust, honesty and bias, group interview participants saw media news as both a help and a hindrance to understanding politics.

Considering the issue of trust is important in relation to political understanding. Who can or should citizens be able to trust for impartial, balanced reporting on important social issues? Mass media organisations are often the most socially prominent conduits between Government information and citizens, although not the only influential content producers as think tanks, PR firms and pressure groups also have prominent roles here. Nevertheless it is important to recognise that the media and politics are not two wholly separate entities, in fact in terms of elites they are tightly meshed together. The revolving door between politics and industry, where politicians are employed by corporations in executive positions is clearly visible between media and politics. High profile examples such as Andy Coulson (*Sun* editor) employed as David Cameron's communications director until his resignation over phone

hacking, or George Osborne's Chief of Staff, Thea Rogers, who previously worked with the BBC, with Osborne's long term friend James Harding currently Director of News and Current Affairs at the BBC work against a backdrop of numerous politicians such as Boris Johnson or Simon Danzeck writing well paid columns in newspapers and currying favour with political journalists from the BBC and beyond. The effects of these tangled relationships upon a citizen's ability to access unbiased, impartial information that they can trust in the public sphere is mostly beyond the remit of this study but cannot be ignored.

The Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS, 2013) acknowledged that both media and government have an integral role in informing young people about current political issues in a relevant and informative way, which is just as necessary for political literacy as the education system. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter the basic requirements for meeting UNCRC Articles 13 and 17, would be that information in the public sphere is of good quality and not harmful to young people. A useful start in this regard would be clearly acknowledging any inherent bias yet balance and clarity are not how politics and the media are often perceived to work, as illustrated by the perceptions of research participants' for this study. In fact the problems identified by research participants over representation, trust and bias potentially undermine Article 13 and 17, as well as misinformation, obfuscation and fabrication being rife in the public sphere (Osborne, 2007; Alexander, 2012; Dean, 2012) that is not conducive for properly informed citizens. Although I do not claim a clear link between certain types of reporting in the mass media with the prevalence of political uncertainty found in the research sample group responses, it is clear that deficient information, deliberate misinformation and reporting from the government and media hinder good levels of political understanding amongst citizens.

6.4 Media Literacy, Post-Leveson

Good quality, well researched, political information that states the bias it contains does exist in the public sphere, even if it is not always immediately apparent from mainstream news reporting where this information can be found. The research evidence showed the micro system level environment was thought to be extremely useful for expanding research participant's political thinking and the learning they were doing through association with different types of informal politics.

Critically unpicking what is going on with the information presented to them is part of a citizen's development of literacy skills be they political literacy, media literacy or scientific literacy. Who is telling the story and why are they telling it in the way they are? So when it came to issues of truth and bias in the public sphere it was valuable to observe research participants in the group interviews displaying a critical awareness about different processes underpinning the media and reflecting upon pressures in the public sphere that affected what was produced.

Group interview participants identified a range of factors they had to consider about news reporting both print and broadcast media. Tom spoke about newspapers not being 100% accurate in their reporting due to political control over what was allowed to be written. He was not impressed with this saying that he thought the public should be told the truth, *"we're not kept in the loop sort of thing, and we're always a little bit outside what's going on"*. Leon identified that newspapers had left and right wing agendas which he considered, *"does cloud it a little bit because you don't know who to believe"*. Leon went on to say that in his opinion the public were more trustworthy to listen to than the national media as they knew the truth of their own lives better. Ellen noted *"some of them (newspapers) are politically biased so it's harder to understand you're seeing it from one person's point of view rather than a general one"* making it hard to judge if it was the view of one person or a broader reflection of what was happening, she recognised that unless a contrast was made with other viewpoints the truth was difficult to see. Ellen concluded that she thought bias was something that hindered her political understanding. All these research participants were able to critically assess and reflect upon the news reports they read or watched. In general these participants identified newspapers as partisan and following a particular agenda that was not always clear at the outset.

Agenda setting

Considering who gets to frame the prevailing narratives in society and how they do it is also an important part of understanding why young citizens might think themselves so politically uncertain, in an age of increasingly available digital political information. My research touched on research participant's levels of understanding regarding the deeper levels behind media and political culture but why with so much information available was there so much political uncertainty? My research did not pinpoint the problem lying with research

participants who were attempting to increase their political knowledge and understanding. Rather the circles kept coming back to the producers of knowledge in society.

Given ‘public interest’ arguments rolled out by the press when restrictive legislation is proposed, whereby the fourth estate attempt to establish themselves as part of the separation of powers that holds government to account on behalf of the public, something appears amiss. Given the huge amounts of money paid to public broadcasters for the right to inform the public, what could be undermining the political confidence of young citizens?

Well documented studies show the impact of framing or agenda setting (Street, 2001; McCombs, 2005) by broadcasters on public opinion and often what is omitted is just as important as what is reported. An extensive study from Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005) concluded that whilst news media (especially TV news) are probably not responsible for the decline in people’s political participation they are not doing much to resolve the issue either. The study regarded how media news portrays public opinion and noted in the preface that the idea of citizens in society has been eclipsed by the notion of consumers and consumer confidence that are much more frequently portrayed (2005: ix). A prevailing narrative of instrumental reason concealing democratically responsible citizens behind a highly funded, aggressively pursued consumer culture. Arguably a democratic citizenry requires a clearer prevailing narrative on the rights and responsibilities it has, rather than being directed down a narrow neo-liberal pathway to consumerism. The problem of unwitting or ideological bias from agenda setters becomes apparent again. The prognosis for established media channels to provide better information than they currently do, is not particularly promising in the light of the recommendations from Leveson being ignored, which is where discussion moves to now.

Post-Leveson

Addressing the issue of political uncertainty found in the research participants responses with the regard to the media is only one part of the political literacy equation. Other actors in the public sphere have responsibilities towards educating citizens, yet problems with requiring media outlets in the public sphere to provide good quality information that is not harmful for citizen’s remains difficult to resolve for several reasons. Invincibility and power are associated with corporate behaviour in society, if something makes money it is difficult to effectively challenge any underlying unethical behaviours. The success of the *No More Page Three* campaign took place against a backdrop of an increasingly hyper-sexualised environment that shows little sign of abating as the selling of young women’s bodies appears

very profitable. The harm identified by research participants through negative reporting about women or disabled, poor and vulnerable people remains a less than ideal situation for citizens in what is supposed to be a mature, established democracy. Research participants did not perceive these types of representation as accurate or portraying the ‘real world’ as they knew it or even wanted it to be. Yet change by those with the power to do something positive is at best imperceptible, and more usually resisted or ignored.

Furthermore there remains little recourse from bodies set up to oversee an accountable press. Even after a thorough investigation of the culture, practices and ethics of the press (later extended to broadcast and social media) by Justice Leveson (2011-2012) following illegal phone hacking by journalists for the tabloid press and the termination of the ineffectual Press Complaints Commission (PCC). Leveson recommended an independent regulatory body to replace the PCC, which is now known as the Independent Press Standards Committee (IPSO) but critics (Cathcart, 2012:9) remain unconvinced this industry backed and populated body can effectively regulate the British press. Leveson was worried that his recommendations would not be followed, even as continuing to allow the press to regulate themselves has repeatedly been shown not to work.

Yet my research was partly built on evidence established by young citizens expressing themselves and participating in challenging or creating media content through social media platforms, all of which have significantly multiplied since the turn of the millennium. With a range of tools at citizens disposal ‘*a culture of convergence*’ is possible (Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012:5), transforming how media narratives are experienced and crucially interacted with. Citizens can be producers as well as consumers of knowledge in society, which is flattening out traditional hierarchies of power. The *Powered by Girl* collective were not only countering mainstream narratives on Wordpress but were linked to *Twitter* and *Facebook*, *Tumblr* and *YouTube*, whilst reaching out to other organisations with the similar aims online such as *The Emily Tree* or *Girl Guiding*. Members of the group were involved with campaigns such as *No More Page 3* and calling for better *#SREnow* in schools. All this activity both on and offline was focused on furthering a positive future for young women in society.

Routes for collectively challenging powerful vested interests continue to open up on social media with new citizen platforms complimenting pre-existing non-governmental organisations, such as *38 Degrees*, *Change.com* or *Avaaz*. Collective, direct action outside of

predominant media channels has been seen to effectively challenge government or media outlets on important issues from preventing the selling off of woodland, drilling in the Arctic, or trying to end women paying tax on sanitary products. The difficulty is maintaining the challenge in the face of powerful lobbyists and vested interests over issues such as fracking or secretive legislation like Transatlantic Trade and Intellectual Partnership (TTIP) that undermine societies that wish to be run democratically. The public sphere may be difficult to tame but citizens as producers are definitely challenging and altering the hegemonic media landscape.

Now this chapter moves onto the other exo-level influence in the public sphere, regarding research participants' perceptions and characteristics of the education system in supporting political literacy. Section 5.3 illustrated the theme of mistrusting political elites and widespread sense of disenchantment or frustration with formal politics, and this remained in evidence through discussions over education, which is where the education discussion begins.

6.5 The Governance of Education

The governance of education strongly emerged as a theme in the data about education with clear engagement from online participants discussing the impacts of government policy on their lives. My research found plenty of evidence of bottom-up challenges to top-down policy. Online research participants who contributed to the *YouthDebates, Education* sub forum, made considerably more negative comments about politicians and the policies being experienced at school and college than positive comments. Even research participants who claimed they were Conservative supporters (the main party of the coalition Government at the time) made critical comments and expressed disappointment with the direction of education policies they were experiencing. Very small pockets of support and understanding towards government were found but the prevailing narrative from *YouthDebates* commentators was one of frustration and disappointment with the changes they were having to deal with.

The best example of dissatisfaction and exasperation was one thread (17 comments, 12 likes) that directly asked '*Was Michael Gove as bad as he was made out? What do you think of his policies?*' Apart from two participants who made sympathetic comments about the minister the majority of the 17 participants were less than complimentary. From the succinct '*I disliked him and his policies*' or he was '*just an idiot that had no idea what he was doing*',

through to more sustained criticisms. *'Absolutely awful,...his changes made things worse. I have to do 20 exams at the end of next year now', 'He (Gove) went against all research in the education field and back to what his education was like because he did well out of it', 'As a Tory I DETESTED Gove. His backward thinking policies have damaged a generation'*. Gove was criticised by research participants for spending more time cosying up to Rupert Murdoch than nurturing a generation of learners, for the removal of the January exams that increased the summer workload and for creating a stressful system that is alienating for young people with learning disabilities who often do better with assessment based work rather than exams.

The thread instigator excused Gove as being a *"tad too passionate"* saying *"none of us know how hard it is to be an education minister"*. This was in support of comments made by another participant who wrote *"I don't think people fully understand how difficult it is perhaps to try and create the perfect education system"*. However the same instigator set up another quite lively thread (16 comments) that questioned why ex-teachers were not employed as Education Ministers for their insight and experience of the profession and there he was not as complimentary about Gove's abilities. As suitable people were suggested for the education minister's job dislike for Gove and his policies re-surfaced again.

Frustrated and annoyed perspectives by participants continued across threads with *'ill thought out'* *'backwards changes'* applied to the cessation of *'Speaking and Listening'* that lowered grades for students halfway through the year or regarding the implementation of *the Statutory Participation Age* (a Labour initiative that raised the statutory school leaving age to 18. Further comments about aging infrastructure, a lack of teacher investment with the new freedom to hire unqualified teachers and tuition fees in relation to *'lying Lib Dems'* painted a broad picture of dissatisfaction. There were not many positive comments found about the impact of formal politics upon the education of participants on the *YouthDebates Education* sub forum.

The theme of exams and assessment showed views that were more evenly divided in discussions providing different sides to the issue. Those in favour argued that exams were useful for making them work harder and keeping them focused. Exams were seen by some as good preparation for University and the fact that they were universally implemented across the country made them fair. Assessment and course work was considered vulnerable to outside interference and the personal opinions of the teacher.

Whilst those less in favour of the exam system argued for less emphasis on exams overall as education seemed to be just about passing tests and meeting required standards rather than learning about life. Participants said that exams were a memory test rather than a test of understanding or analytical skills and being tested over one hour for a year's work put people under ridiculous pressure. Depression, stress and suicide were mentioned in relation to exam pressure, with Finland being mentioned for having a renowned education system with no exams.

Research participants appeared politically informed by their experiences on a range of issues to do with education policy and the impact policy changes were having on their lives. Even when policy changes were attributed to the current government rather than the previous administration who had brought in the changes. Evidence of critical reflection came from some participants but they remained anonymous on-line so no further conclusions in relation to age, gender, socio-economic status could be reached. Nevertheless discussions enabled at least two functions for participants, as they were able to share collective symbolism of what they thought education should do or mean, and compare it with how they were actually experiencing it, along with their peers. Ideas over the purpose of education were shared and this reflective cooperation helped achieve the process of education (Gergen 1999:18). Reflections on individual experiences of education developed wider understanding amongst participants about the impact of decisions upon peers beyond their own experiences.

The following discussion emphasizes how policy changes could be considered a good thing by participants, illustrating critical thinking about their circumstances rather than necessarily being a bad thing as raised in 5.3.

6.6 A Curriculum for Life

Online the key theme of curriculum reform took several guises and contained further sub-themes, with discussions about core subjects such as Maths and English, and a lively thread discussion about languages and regional accents. My focus was on finding out more about how politically informed young people thought they were, therefore this section identifies what research participants wanted to be better informed about, with regard to their political understanding. The first area of discussion was identified through examining the data for emphasis and silences, where there was emphasis from the young people on subjects that could be loosely gathered under the umbrella term '*a curriculum for life*'.

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)

If the regularity of an issue appearing in the data denoted the importance of an issue to research participants then on-line the subject of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) was a key area for curriculum reform. A thread on *YouthDebates* education forum questioned the age at which sex education should be taught, which received the most comments of any thread during the research period. But the subject was also mentioned by the *Powered by Girl* bloggers and linked to a wider *Twitter* based campaign, *We Deserve #SRE now*.

With 26 contributors to the *YouthDebates* SRE thread and 5 *Powered By Girl* bloggers raising the issue, a considerable amount of on-line research participants offered their opinions about the inclusion of SRE on the curriculum. Many gave a range of compelling arguments for why and when they thought they needed this important part of their education. Reflections on what SRE had been received in school raised comments such as insufficient, not taken seriously enough in the UK and for being focused on biology rather than taking a more holistic view. Research participants argued for an improved curriculum to support their skills to have healthy relationships in what some of them considered to be an environment overlaid by violent, hyper-sexualised entertainment industry. A desire for better SRE raised important issues for participants over the need for teaching on consent, responsibility and respect in schools. Comparisons were raised with how SRE is taught in Holland that is more extensively from an earlier age.

Education for the ‘real world’

Alongside calls for better SRE, five out of the 31 discussion threads on the *YouthDebates* education sub forum regarded the need for more practical education in schools. Contributors identified the need for life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving or debating to be developed and the teaching of ‘real world’ subjects, including government, politics and economics. Notably at no point during the three months was citizenship education specifically mentioned in any one of the on-line case studies, which will shortly be a point of discussion in the next section on citizenship education.

One *YouthDebates* thread asked “*Does the British Education system serve its children well?*” The thread instigator led the discussion by saying “*Government and politics is not a compulsory subject, not offered at A-level yet we are expected to vote at 18*” they went on to point out a (perceived) lack of current affairs knowledge in young people and that there was no practical knowledge of tax, mortgages, APR or how other “*money stuff works*”. One

response mentioned the Welsh Baccalaureate including a section on politics regarding democracy and current issues the Government is dealing with.

Another part of the practical education debate was the assertion that education needs to be “*more practical and more relevant to jobs and the real world*”. During data analysis a key word frequency search found ‘work, jobs and career’ were the fourth highest group of words mentioned 117 times in the education forum (for contextual comparison the most frequent group of words were exams, assessment, test and GCSE mentioned 227 times).

The discussion about better SRE and improved life skills education reached beyond my research. Young people across the UK lobbied for changes to the current school curriculum with a campaign called ‘*Curriculum for Life*’ repeatedly selected since 2012 by *National Youth Parliament* representatives (Afflick, 2015), with the topic voted in again at the 2015 annual sitting. The ‘*Curriculum for Life*’ campaign calls for better citizenship education and PSHE in schools for young people.

Research participants, (along with thousands of young people across the UK as part of the National Youth Parliament) repeatedly asked for better education ‘for life’ including politics, economics and sex and relationship education. Even so there was an unwillingness or inability in the on-line responses to recognise citizenship education as is currently implemented, as being the means of filling some of that gap in knowledge. This chapter now moves to discussing the impact citizenship education had on the off-line research participants.

6.7 Inadequate Citizenship Education

Poor perceptions of citizenship education

The next finding illustrated continuing problems with the implementation of Citizenship Education in schools in England. Despite being a statutory subject on the national curriculum since 2002, citizenship education was held in poor esteem by the majority of research respondents who received it. This view was a strong association made through the data, with over half the research participants who had received citizenship education not rating the experience highly. Just as concerning was the fact that over half the off-line research participants had reported that they did not receive any citizenship education at all. That was

over three quarters of survey and group interview participants with a poor or non-existent experience of the subject.

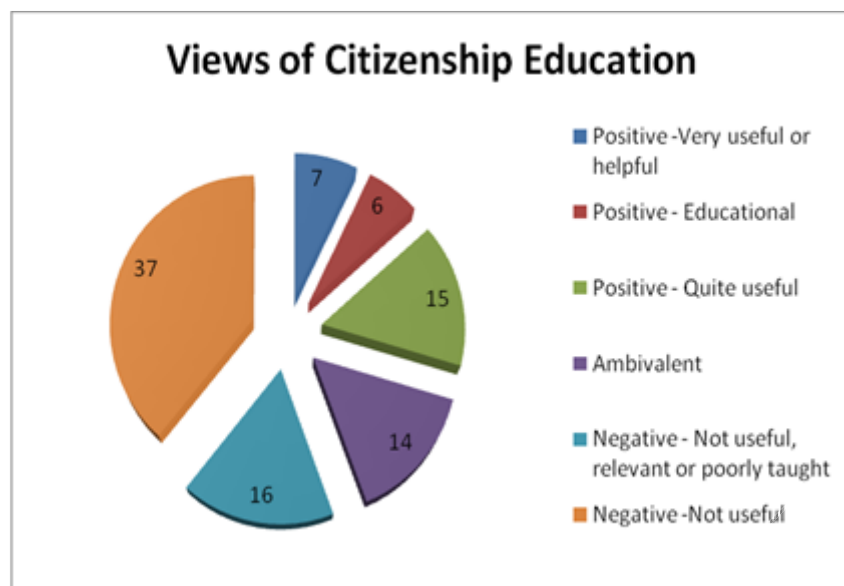


Figure 6.1. Survey participants' views on Citizenship Education

The survey data (Figure 6.1) showed that citizenship education seemed inaccessible and futile for a large proportion of research participants. Just over half the survey sample group (n=102) claimed to have received citizenship education with over half (n=53) of these reporting that the subject was not a useful experience for them, applying adjectives such as useless, pointless and rubbish. One 18 year old male wrote citizenship education was “*pointless, it was mostly religious education and it wasn't useful*”. Whilst a 15 year old female was not happy with the subject giving the cryptic answer, “*it makes you think about things in a bad way*”. Furthermore as the following table shows, survey participants who had received citizenship education were more likely to be in the higher score range.

Table 6.2 Citizenship Education and Survey Score Grouping

<i>Politics Survey</i>	<i>Average or above score</i>	<i>Below average score</i>
Total Participants (n=200)	116	84
Had Citizenship Education	72	31
No Citizenship Education	45	53

Table 6.2 indicates how many participants said they received citizenship education or not and the scores they received for the *Understanding Politics* survey. Of the 116 participants in the average or above score range, 72 said they received citizenship education, with 45 saying they did not receive citizenship education. Of the 84 participants who scored below the average score 31 said they had received citizenship education, with 53 saying they did not receive citizenship education.

The evidence presented here cannot claim a direct correlation between a person receiving citizenship education and their subsequent levels of political literacy. However the data did show that participants who did receive citizenship education were more likely to achieve a higher score than those who did not receive citizenship education.

Poor experiences of citizenship education were the only associations made by participants about the subject in the group interview data. Although seven group interview participants claimed to have received citizenship education (Table 5.1, column C) it was only mentioned twice as a source of political knowledge and both times it was referred to in a negative way. Mollie commented that her secondary school citizenship education was actually more of a hindrance as a source of political knowledge, saying no-one took the lessons seriously or paid attention in the lessons, “*Teachers in school don’t really help a lot, they sort of explain it then leave it at that*”. George agreed saying his experience of citizenship education was marked by poor teaching of the subject.

Whether such poor perceptions of citizenship education from other research participants were due to the subject being combined in the school curriculum with other subjects such as Religious Education or Personal, Social, Health Economic education (PSHE), or even as work experience was not clear from the majority of responses. That there were problems for some pupils at school being able to recognise citizenship education as a discrete subject area when they did receive it is a strong likelihood raised by the findings. Poor perceptions may have also been held for the reasons Mollie and George gave, such as because pupils did not pay attention to which lesson they were in at the time, or claims that teachers did not explain the subject well enough. Overall the combined responses from the off-line data sets made it very clear that citizenship education was not recognised by or thought to be sufficient in any way for the majority of young people I researched.

Positive experiences of citizenship education

There were a handful of encouraging responses to questions about the usefulness of citizenship education received at school. Twenty-eight young people from the 102 survey participants who said they had received citizenship education did take a positive approach to the subject and thought it had been taught well or considered that it was very useful to them. One respondent praised citizenship education for getting her “*to think differently and see a different point of view*”, whilst another (female 17) said “*it has told me how to vote, about the government, what I could do as a citizen and how to be a good citizen*”. Another 14 responses were ambivalent about the subject and what had been learnt from it, these responses were best summed up by one 17 year old female who explained, “*Some of them (lessons) were very insightful, whereas some seemed a bit of a waste of time*”.

Omission of citizenship education from online education discussions

Attempting to establish what sources of political information were useful to research participants invariably led me to investigate the perceived impact of citizenship education on research participant’s political literacy. Yet the distinct emphasis and silence observed between off-line responses about citizenship education with the on-line responses was evident. On-line citizenship education was not mentioned once during the 12 week observation period. Even as on-line research respondents were keen to discuss curriculum reform in relation to the subjects they received in school and often wanted a practical range of skills taught, citizenship education was never explicitly acknowledged.

The comparison with off-line and on-line data showed both variance with how the content of education was conceived of and discussed by research participants in the on-line observations, as well as distinguishing citizenship education’s overall lack of impact with the off-line research sample group. Good citizenship education has an important role to play in supporting young citizen’s political knowledge and research has shown it can have positive reverberations throughout young peoples’ lives (Tonge, Mycock and Jeffery, 2012; CELS, 2015) but young people have to have access to the subject and have it taught properly, in the first place. My findings illustrated a continuing gap for 210 young people from various schools across Cambridgeshire who largely failed to receive statutory citizenship education, even before the quality of the experience was raised.

6.8 Summary

Attempting to find out what sources supported research participants political literacy was never going to be easy. My study is sociological and interpretative and therefore values and prioritises research participants' interpretations, experiences and expectations about the sources they used and the issues raised. Participants' perceptions of the media illustrated all types of bias in media production could be identified. As unfair and misleading representations of certain groups in the press were challenged by participants it is difficult to disagree with journalist Peter Osborne's (2007) that the British press make society a '*meaner and more unpleasant place*'.

Observing research participants' attitudes towards unfair and judgemental stereotyping of groups of people in media stories showed a broader critical perspective was taken. Tom's choice of the tabloid press picture to best describe his views on politics in the group interview indicated the prominence of media in politics to some young people. Harmful and divisive representation of marginalised groups in society continues despite increasing awareness of issues and increasingly persistent challenges about these representations. Unfortunately the hope borne by the Leveson inquiry in demanding better press regulation to reign in the excesses of the industry has not seen Government action to achieve the recommendations.

Problems of trust and bias established in the data showed critical literacy from participants in response to a range of issues and that participants recognised hidden or deeper issues behind media production. This research does not prove a direct correlation between research participants taking part in informal political activities (5.4 and 5.5) and their burgeoning critical thoughts. Yet the fact was that many research participants were found to be thinking critically about the media they consumed and had questions over the quality of media production. How representative of the wider population these young people are is beyond the scope of my study.

The young people I researched were aware that it was difficult to get full or adequate depictions of political situations. The group interviews and feminist blogs on the *Wordpress* site were especially fruitful in this area as young people critically evaluated common media sources of information. These blogs were a mine of information about young women's perceptions of the way the media serves them as a group and demonstrated how some young women were actively organising to challenge overriding sexist representations of women and girls in the national tabloid press. The national media must bear some responsibility for

politically informing citizens to at least a basic standard, including but also beyond the required channels of public service broadcasting. An expectation of good quality, not harmful information should not be beyond the reach of these organisations with such power and influence in society.

Correspondingly research participants actively discussed how the education system could improve on the *YouthDebates* forum. Many of them were experiencing the direct consequences of political decision making in their lives. Even as a self-selected sample group, that is young people who wanted to discuss politics in one form or other in the different forums it was rather unpleasant to realise the chasm between intended policy consequences and actual policy consequences. That experiences were recounted as detrimental and stressful is of concern.

Interestingly researcher influence upon off-line participants, whereby asking a particular question meant I was setting my own agenda, made for an interesting comparison with the on-line case study findings. The on-line case studies illustrated strong interest and demand from research participants for subjects that can collectively be framed as a '*curriculum for life*'. That is a holistic education teaching young people practical, useful subjects and skills, such as critical thinking, debating along with subjects, such as politics or economics. The data showed sex and relationship education received especially high levels of support and discussion during the research period, with issues such as consent, respect and responsibility that illustrated the maturity of participant's views on this 'embarrassing' topic.

The general lack of recognition research participants showed towards citizenship education in the off-line data was reinforced by the total omission of the subject on-line, even in a forum wholly dedicated to the UK education system. It is extremely unfortunate that the majority of young people questioned did not think they were getting anywhere near a credible citizenship education experience and the majority of those that did say they received citizenship education thought it was a waste of time. Supportive political education is essential for citizens in a mature democracy. The lack of statutory citizenship education, combined with an obvious gap in research respondent's formal political knowledge, further undermined by the way media or news sources report issues, means difficult questions remain over the political resources available to young citizens. Even to ensure they are adequately informed to vote at the very least.

The Age of Uncertainty

7.1 Key Themes Raised

The previous chapters explained my research in relation to existing research, provided a methodology for gathering and understanding the data, given a reflexive account of my fieldwork and presented clear themes that emerged from the data that helped to answer how politically informed research participants thought they were. This chapter reflects upon substantive issues arising from my research in three areas, namely the prevalence of uncertainty that was found especially in relation to formal politics, what might be termed the alleviating consequences of research participants' political agency or engagement upon that uncertainty, and how my research highlighted the importance of an accountable, transparent public sphere for informing citizens in a democracy.

To begin I consider salient features of the current social and economic context, which lie beneath research participant experiences, viewing society through the lenses of generational inequality and the intersectional nature of diversity before addressing the characteristics and implications of the political uncertainty of research participants as found in the data. Taken at face value the high levels of political uncertainty displayed by research participants indicated they did not think that they were particularly informed, especially with regard to formal politics. How reflective the claim of political uncertainty was in relation to an individual's political knowledge was not successfully measured in a statistical sense. Nevertheless the data strongly suggested that uncertain responses given by participants did not usually or often reflect the broader political knowledge, ability or experience of participants. Here I consider the personal, socio-economic or cultural influences that could have affected research participants' uncertainty over politics.

Notable in the data were widespread claims of political uncertainty masking good levels of political interest, understanding and knowledge, despite a gap over formal political knowledge. Leading me to consider how research participants engaged with society to develop their political knowledge, learning or active citizenship experience, despite any uncertainties they held. From widespread use of technology in the private sphere through to choosing different opportunities in the public sphere to be politically involved in, research participants knew about and engaged with a wide and varied range of political issues that were of interest to them or directly relevant to their lives. Traditional dichotomies about

public/private spheres and informal/formal politics show the breadth of research participants' activity in developing their political learning given the choice or opportunity to do so. Before I contemplate how boundaries between these particular dichotomies have blurred (Crick, 2000; Lockyear, 2008; Yarwood, 2014: 19) to illustrate how political behaviour and active citizenship have moved beyond the expectations of formal politics.

Finally discussion moves to interlinked problems with representation, trust and bias regarding sources of political information in the public sphere and the potential impact of these problems on uncertainty. My research determined perceptions of systematic problems with the national media in Britain, especially with the ability of the tabloid press to represent all levels of society inclusively and fairly. The extensive distrust and disillusionment found regarding formal politics combined with problems with the national media's ability to report 'the truth' remains problematic for any society that claims to be democratic (Alexander, 2010; Leighton, 2012). I consider the matter of truth whilst reflecting upon the atypically high levels of trust placed in the BBC, and why this source in particular might be believed to be a more unbiased or impartial source of political knowledge. Difficulties research participants found over truth and bias in the mass media link to the gap over formal political knowledge and highlight the importance of citizens developing critical literacies to engage with the public sphere. As well as illustrating the need for transparency or accountability in what political information is produced by media industries.

This three pronged approach helps give a flexible and inclusive account of the complex nature of uncertainty, with the variances of experience it hid and the barriers that need overcoming if society is to see improvement in the type of politics we are capable of.

7.2 Young people and politics

As group interview participant Rosa neatly put, "*politics is everywhere*" and politics can be seen to affect all levels of daily life in society. In 2.8 I discussed how society has a marked tendency to view young people in stereotypical ways that either see them as a problem to society in some way, as something to be fixed or else as something to be protected. Common narratives that see policies acting upon rather than along with young people to find solutions (Graham, 2004; Warwick et al., 2010). To further understand the ways in which politics affects young people's lives it is useful to view politics through two related lenses, one being the lens of generational inequality, and the other being the lens of diversity.

Generational inequality includes how social resources such as education, work, housing and health care are experienced by different, albeit by not entirely homogenous age groups in society. I use commonly used categories to denote generations with the proviso that given dates are uncertain and unsettled. The Baby Boomer generation, those born in the aftermath of World War II up until the 1960s had access to free education and healthcare, there was a general feeling of job security often termed a 'job for life' with a guaranteed pension. Pay was seen to rise with productivity. Generation X circa 1960s to 1980s began to experience the political winds of change that heralded the arrival of neoliberalism, 'yuppies' and the decline of consensus politics. Where a job for life was no longer seen as achievable for many and the average wage, along with pensions and flat-lined in the Great Regression (Ruccio, 2011).

It has been the Millennials (aka Generation Y, circa 80s and 90s) and Generation Z who have borne the brunt of austerity, with collapsing job security (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995) against a rise in self-employment or zero-hours contracts, tuition fees and a lack of affordable housing. A recent report from the Intergenerational Foundation (Leach et al., 2016) analysed 13 social and economic indicators to assess how the position of young people across Europe has changed between 2005 and 2014. The authors found a slow and consistent decline in the prospects for young people across Europe, not just in Britain, with increased poverty, unemployment, and an increasing pay gap as the cost of housing rises. Furthermore hazards associated with the risk society (Beck, 1986:22) such as the effects of anthropogenic climate change or pollution are now experienced on a global scale rather than being confined to national boundaries (International Panel on Climate Change, 2014:8).

The lens of diversity accounts for the way further differences in class, BME, disability, gender, sexuality, and regional variations have an impact on a person's ability to participate or belong in society. The consequences of living in stressful conditions created by poverty, poor housing and insufficient nutrition combined with inadequate educational opportunities or experience of the care system can have life-long outcomes (Gordon et al., 2000; Field, 2010). Shortly I present research from Kellet (2009), which has shown how socio-economic factors can inhibit a person's confidence to participate. In Chapter 4 (4.4) I raised concerns over the social competencies beyond my sample group, citing research that showed a falling national literacy rate (Cole, 2016, Kuczera et al., 2016), which suggested nine million people of working age in Britain have low literacy or numeracy skills. With 16% of working age adults having a disability that can include learning disabilities (Office for Disability Issues, 2014). Whilst not being able to read or write does not preclude someone's political

participation, the complex, jargon filled world of formal politics relies on understanding convoluted processes, procedures and traditions, which exclude potential participants easier than include them.

Poor literacy levels and the ability to take up active citizenship can be further exacerbated in individuals by the intersectional effects (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) of age, social class, gender or ethnicity. Examples could be the association of the working classes with poor educational attainment (Commons Select Committee 2014). Over 170,000 pupils were in secondary schools rated as inadequate by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in 2013/14, which was an increase of 70,000 since 2012 (OFSTED, 2014). Whilst BME are over represented in those excluded from school (Osler and Starkey, 2005). Research by Strand (2013) highlights that educational achievement cannot be framed in exclusive terms of ethnicity, gender, social class as there are substantial interactions between different factors. There is no one size fits all explanation for the trajectory of people's lives but patterns that hinder high achievement are often set in motion early on.

Obviously poverty related stresses, exclusion and misrepresentation are not the total sum of young people's engagement with politics in Britain since the 1990s. Nor can every young person's experience in society be regarded the same, however key issues have got progressively more difficult for Generation Y and Z to negotiate as I have outlined here. With an appreciation of how uncertainty affects the younger generations in ways not experienced by Baby Boomers and less intensely by Generation X, I move onto address key features of the prevalence of uncertainty as it appeared in the data.

7.3 The Prevalence of Uncertainty

Finding such widespread claims amongst the research participants over their political uncertainty raised several issues for discussion here. Explaining the complex dynamic of widespread political uncertainty against a varied range of attitudes and behaviours displayed, required balancing a number of variables against possible or likely outcomes. Why were so many of the young people I researched claiming to be so politically uncertain and were these claims accurately reflecting what they knew about politics? In identifying common characteristics to help explain the uncertainty found amongst research participants it was useful to consider the impact of individual qualities that potentially affected uncertainty, whilst simultaneously recognising structural parallels found across responses. One thing that

became clear from the data I gathered, was typically claims of uncertainty over politics did not accurately reflect an individual's actual political knowledge or critical abilities. Especially if we consider politics defined by the Greek roots *politikos* 'of, for or relating to citizens' rather than narrowly referring to formal, centralised systems of governance that exercise power over citizens lives. The following discussion begins by considering a key explanation for the uncertainty found, that of self-confidence, before considering the effects of gender on uncertainty. Following this, the structural issues of education and politics are taken into account with some concluding thoughts about the effects of uncertainty on political behaviour.

Accounting for Uncertainty

Establishing why there was so much uncertainty amongst research participants uncovered a number of potential reasons that varied from individual to individual. As I did not directly ask participants why they thought they were so politically uncertain I can only deduce what was going on from observations made in the field and limited amounts of background data. Furthermore individual qualities could not be taken in isolation from the interrelated range of socio-economic or cultural factors that impacted on an individual's political confidence, knowledge and competency. Factors that were difficult to measure and draw conclusions from in a small sociological study such as mine.

That the phenomenon of uncertainty over politics was found in individuals who went onto express knowledge about political matters that were relevant to them was common for the majority of the group interview participants. Only once did the claim appear to back up a reality with George who was repeatedly adamant that he didn't know anything about politics. This young man was the eldest group interview participant who was in work with no further education and claimed poor experience of citizenship education at school. George displayed a complete lack of confidence in his knowledge, it was difficult to get him to contribute to discussions, and he found it hard, if not impossible to conceptualise what politics meant to him through the first pictorial exercise. George was embarrassed and uncomfortable speaking up in the small peer group on any of the discussion points. Whilst it would be erroneous to make assumptions about George's political knowledge based on his lack of engagement, his complete lack of confidence was notable and it was this lack of confidence that greatly inhibited his ability to participate in the discussions.

The personal attribute of self-confidence and the effects upon basic literacy has been associated with socio-economic circumstances (Kellet, 2009), whereby school children (11 years old) from poorer backgrounds were seen to have had far less opportunity to practice private confidence in their abilities before showing public confidence, such as speaking up and expressing an opinion. The author found children from affluent backgrounds exuded a proficiency with reading and writing, and were able to show a public confidence in their abilities that appeared missing from the poorer cohort. Due to restrictions in the amount of socio-economic background data I gathered, most of the information about my research participants' rested upon educational evidence such as the college attended or the level of study reached rather than any fuller data such as family income or social grade.

Uncertainty around the subject of politics was found across the data in young people attending all types of colleges. In most cases, aside from the clear example of George's uncertainty, and Lennie whose first language was not English, which made his responses quite restrained or cautious, claims of uncertainty were not followed by a lack of procedural knowledge (Stradling, 1977). Otherwise it was difficult to locate further well-defined, measurable differences in uncertainty over politics with regard to self-confidence, except rather tenuously for gender difference.

Explaining uncertainty over politics through potential gender differences in political knowledge remains a contested area. Certain studies have shown men to be more interested, active or confident in their political knowledge than young women (Cigogani et al., 2012:564; Henn, 2013). Whilst other studies look at the way knowledge and gender are constructed and assessment of these constructions may mean males hold an advantage (Mondack and Anderson, 2004). Banwart (2007) found a lack of confidence was a likely factor in young women's self-reported low levels of political knowledge whereas young men would typically self-report higher levels of political knowledge. Regardless of what was actually tested to be known by participants. Further studies showed gender differences were only confirmed in relation to types of political participation (Eckstein et al., 2012) whereby young women would typically choose unconventional political activities rather than more conventional forms of political involvement chosen by boys. With Smiler (2009) identifying the role of schools in transmitting "*socially held values of gender appropriate behaviour*", whereby gender stereotypes such as passivity in girls and assertiveness in boys, are reinforced by social expectation in the school environment that will impact on social behaviours.

My study illustrated mixed results. That the *Powered by Girl* bloggers experienced gendered expectations at school as a double bind was clearly evidenced in the data (5.4) yet a gender gap was not particularly in evidence from the group interview participants in my study, which were 7/3 male/female. The least obviously confident, least politically interested participant was a white working class male. However the only two participants who did display some measure of confidence in the discussions about their developing political knowledge were two young men, Leon and John. Whilst the survey data (88/112, male/female) showed young men more likely to get a higher score than young women in response to the survey questions, the type of educational establishment attended or previous citizenship experience had a more significant impact on the survey score results than gender. The evidence I collected does not allow for stronger conclusions between the issue of political confidence and gender to be made.

As established in the findings chapters (5.3 and 6.4) research participants of both genders displayed mature levels of critical thinking and were able to advocate for and understand other people's viewpoints. Two of the key components of political literacy (Crick, 2000; Douglas, 2002). My data showed evidence of male and female research participants having both factual propositional knowledge alongside procedural knowledge that is the competence to build on and use knowledge to identify and generate positive change (Stradling, 1977).

The issue of uncertainty as it relates to self-confidence and gender difference does not exist outside structural inequalities of society. The next part of this discussion moves on to the roles of the education and political systems in maintaining uncertainty over politics, despite structured attempts to increase the political literacy of British citizens in England and Wales, since the turn of the millennium.

The Educational System

At the beginning of my investigation into the political literacy of young people I was interested in finding out more about how the sample group viewed their citizenship education. However expecting that the young citizens I researched were receiving a basic political education through citizenship education in England appeared misguided. Even though citizenship education was introduced as a statutory subject to the National Curriculum in 2002 (Jeffs, 2005; Keating et al., 2010) and my research occurred a decade later. The research participants were mainly aged 16-18 and should have received some form of citizenship education throughout the final five years of their secondary schooling. Yet my

findings raised concerns over the majority of research participants being doubtful as to whether they had received the subject at all, and where they did say they had received citizenship education, participants largely remained unconvinced as to its efficacy. None of this appeared good news regarding the education system's ability to support or develop participant's political literacy.

My findings about research participant's experiences of citizenship education were disappointing even whilst acknowledging how recent the addition of the subject is to the national curriculum. Research into the impact of citizenship education on young citizen's political engagement showed a significant positive impact on political understanding and engagement (Tonge, Mycock and Jefferies, 2012:599). Although these researchers also picked up on wider problems with citizenship education, over a lack of focus or consensus with what the subject is supposed to or able to provide in school. Several reports over the lifetime of the longitudinal study on citizenship education (CELS) (Cleaver et al, 2005; Keating et al., 2010, 2011) strongly made a case for better investment in citizenship education to increase accessibility for pupils and support in raising teaching standards in the subject, which is often hidden in PSHE or religious education lessons without dedicated, trained citizenship teachers. That advances in this area have been difficult to secure has not helped the implementation or status of citizenship education on the English and Welsh curriculum.

Yet the data showed research participants were clearly and consistently demanding changes to the national curriculum, calling for more practical education for their health and well-being. As a contributor to *YouthDebates* put it '*education should be made more engaging and encourage critical thinking rather than fact regurgitation*'. Proposed changes included skills and knowledge for citizenship responsibilities but the focus from young people in my study was very much on receiving better Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). The appearance of SRE as an educational concern for young people might not have immediately apparent links to citizenship education and political literacy, and indeed the subjects do not have to connect. However as soon as ideas around identity politics, human rights or political literacy are raised links between the two subjects such as respecting other people's opinions, the ability to advocate for others, being tolerant of others opinions that differ from your own and respecting diversity, links between the subjects become easier to see (Crick, 2000). I am not suggesting that these two broad and complex subjects would be taught together, what is important in this regard is that schools are allowed to create an environment where the

development of critical thinking and competencies necessary for political, media or scientific literacy are nurtured and developed alongside the practical education that young people require for their safe transition into adulthood. Government recognition and action over citizenship education and SRE would prioritise a wider range of social development issues in school, rather than leaving it as an aside to student support.

Young people, and in this particular case it was not just the research participants who were able to provide data for my study (Papadopoulos, 2010; EVAW, 2010; Girl Guides Attitude Study 2016), identified pervasive problems for many young women not being or feeling safe in society. From regular verbal harassment and sexual bullying in school, on-line or on the street from adult males (Bates, 2014) widespread abuse (Jay, 2014) through to problems with consent, coercion and violence, are too often based on persistent and harmful stereotypes of what it means to be male or female. Young men are not immune from issues of abuse, bullying, poor body image, anxiety and depression either. Therefore the strong arguments made by research respondents for comprehensive SRE to be taught in school require effective, immediate action by Government. Surely young people can receive better access to resources or information to develop their skills to deal with issues around sex, relationships, respect, responsibility and consent. The ability of Government to hear and respond to citizens appeared especially vital in this area.

The Political System

The education system was not the only structural difficulty seen to have an impact on research participants' uncertainty. In attempting to establish how accurate claims of uncertainty were it became clear from the data was that the uncertainty expressed was usually held in relation to self-perceptions over knowledge or experiences of top-down formal political systems on local and national levels. The type of politics that research participants were excluded from (Douglas, 2002:13) or that they felt ignored by (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009; Gould, 2015: 48). From all the group interview participants being unaware of who their MP was, poor experiences of local councillors ignoring school projects, and the impacts of poorly thought out policies threatening communities through to criticisms found online citing the neglect and harm identified across various government agencies in Rotherham or the stressful impact of educational changes on pupils, the prognosis for formal politics was not positive. Uncertainty existed especially where participants could not predict

that any concerns they had on a particular issue would be heard or acted upon by those making the decisions.

It was clear that uncertainty over politics was held alongside a great sense of frustration, powerlessness or disillusionment with state systems of authority. What Stoker (2013) identified as a slow-burning alienation amongst British citizens was found in the widespread opinions, shown by both on and off-line research participants, who illustrated various levels of dissatisfaction with the one way, inaccessible, top-down system that purported to represent the people it makes decisions about. Not listening, ignoring constituents, discriminating against marginalised groups of people in society (Jay, 2014) and ineffective action to support and protect citizens were common complaints levelled at politicians and employees of Government.

Since UNCRC 1989 youth participation strategies largely focussed on the right to speak on decisions that had an impact on people's lives, as recognised by Article 12. A right which does require the response of listening in return, in order to be successful. Coleman argued that not listening is a form of violence (Coleman, 2005), identifying the right to speak was fought for throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, whilst now the fight appeared as citizens needing the right to be heard. Top-down politics affected research participants' lives in a myriad of ways yet there appeared little recourse for reciprocity between the governed and the governors. The effects of this exclusion or marginalisation was described by the Power report (2006) as when it came to politics "*people feel as if they are eating stones*". The relationship between governors and governed has been fraught with tension in Britain for centuries and the current prognosis from research participants perspectives remains bleak.

There is considerable overlap in the practices of the education and political systems as politicians and civil servants in the Department of Education increasingly quickly introduce policies they would like schools and colleges to implement (Coffield, 2006). Regardless of this closeness there are real issues with how well parliament is understood by the public. Since 2004 the annual political engagement audit reports from the Hansard Society have monitored different aspects of the political literacy of the adult British population. Fox and Korris reflected on the knowledge gap found over politics and Parliament (Hansard Audit, 2013), finding that 47% of over 18s wished that they had learnt more about politics and how democracy worked whilst they were at school, with 31% recognising the need for all citizens to receive better information and education about politics. In spite of that citizenship

education has remained in a precarious position over the last decade (Grimes, 2011; Tonge, Mycock and Jeffrey, 2012), especially with Westminster politicians responsible for the implementation of the subject. Supported by reports from the conservative think-tank *Centre for Policy Studies* who criticised Ofsted, amongst other things for concentrating on healthy eating and citizenship education at the expense of basic subjects (Sergeant, 2009). The report illustrates conformist resistance to moving away from traditional practices of education that a number of research participants on *YouthDebates* argued do not adequately prepare them for the 'real world'.

To conclude, here I will discuss the implications of uncertainty upon political perceptions and subsequent political behaviour. Especially in regard to research participants' views on voting, their perceptions about the abilities of slightly younger peers and the concept of rational ignorance. Firstly voting was seen as an acceptable responsibility of the transition into adulthood, and despite the expressed uncertainty and problems with knowing who to vote for and why, research participants largely anticipated voting in the next General Election. Even so the majority view from research participants' held that under 18s were unable to vote sensibly or maturely, until at least as Leon and Ellen established, pupils could receive a better education in preparation. Research participants expected that they would be ok to vote but their peers were unable due largely to immaturity or a lack of knowledge. How accurate the negative perception of their peers was difficult to demonstrate.

However if the idea of rational ignorance (Caplan, 2008) is employed, that is if there are limited benefits to knowing about politics as there is poor scope for influencing the outcomes then it may be a more rational decision not to bother and deal with more immediately pressing concerns, such as relationships, options or exams. This level of reasoning was employed by Sadiq and Tom as they anticipated needing to know more about politics in the future when they were 18 and needing to vote or the usefulness of this knowledge in the workplace rather than needing to know much about formal politics at the time of research.

7.4 Political Engagement

Politically Active Participants

Unpicking the effects of uncertainty on how research participants did politically engage was complex. On one hand I could speculate that the problems I had with recruitment were down to the off-putting nature of my subject, that in general young people are just not that interested in politics, not that they are just unwilling to be involved in research studies. I could further surmise that the phenomenon of uncertainty would be an effective brake on young people getting involved in political activities. Research participant Ellen explained how her uncertainty prevented her from knowing what to do for work experience, “*because I don’t know which party I would want to belong to*”, and Sadiq saw this as a problem with knowing who to vote for.

Yet there was a strong contradiction between research participants expressed uncertainty and the diverse range of political agency and engagement disclosed during the research. That is claims of uncertainty over political knowledge, often combined with poor recollections of citizenship education at school, did not necessarily stop research participants from being interested or involved with a wide variety of political activities. In a comparative study between 2002 and 2011, Henn and Foard (2011) recorded overall increases in young people’s interest in politics and the 2010 General Election, although less than three quarters of participants had said they intended to vote.

As already shown in 5.4 and 6.2 off-line and on-line research participants made use of a wide and varied range of political opportunities across the public sphere; through choices made in further education to study politics or government, or through their involvement with student bodies, political advocacy groups or social media forums to express views or opinions, which taken altogether showed a great deal of political engagement and activity going on.

Of course political activity on-line was to be expected from on-line research participants who were expressly chosen and observed for their interest in discussing and debating politics on the three internet sites established for the purpose. *Twitter*, *Powered by Girl on Wordpress* and *Youth Debates* are largely perceived as on-line political social media forums. From personal identity politics, to reflection on national events or challenging the impact of government policies on their lives research participants showed a wealth of political engagement on-line. Even so, the tentacles of on-line political involvement reached out into the off-line world too, with *Girl Guides*, the *National Youth Parliament*, and the *Emily Tree*

all holding activities and events that potentially reached thousands of young people across the UK. One of the *Powered by Girl* blogs discussed direct action of three young women lobbying the proprietor Rupert Murdoch as part of the social media *No More Page Three* campaign. The campaign had a strong off-line presence with regular weekend protests outside *The Sun* offices in London.

Whilst good levels of political activity were shown by the off-line participants in both on and off-line arenas. From involvement in Student Unions, youth councils or forums and other local community groups as well as choosing to take political subjects at college, reading about or discussing politics with family and friends, through to on-line activities mentioned such as signing petitions or posting political tweets on *Twitter*. Activities that all support the development of political literacy and political understanding.

The significance of recognising bottom-up, informal political activity as politically important is part of challenging claims of political apathy so often associated with young people. Yarwood (2014:18-19) discusses the new and multiple spaces where citizenship is created, challenged and performed, describing these spaces as boundary-less to account for “*global flows of people, ideas and information*”. Traditional dichotomies viewed in binary or opposing ways, of private and public or informal and formal politics, traditionally practiced in site specific places, although useful terms for defining features of the public sphere, appear inadequate to accurately describe the political interest, agency and engagement of the research participants.

As with discussions over mental health or autism, single binary definitions lack the ability to explain the complexity and movement of what is really going on, and the idea of a spectrum would perhaps best describe how the research participants’ were experiencing politics. Reflecting the typologies in 2.9, at one end of the spectrum little political interest, engagement or knowledge would be apparent, especially with people who may have severe learning disabilities and the inability to conceptualise abstract concepts outside their immediate experiences, whilst at the other end of the spectrum political interest, engagement and knowledge would be consistently high. It is probable that the majority of research participants exist somewhere in a changeable middle, whereby political interest, engagement and knowledge develop in relation to variable experiences and events throughout the life course. Research participants cited national events such as the 2010 general election and the Olympic Games 2012 as two events that increased their political understanding, and

numerous other examples showed the impact of everyday discussions, lessons, information or experiences that had an impact upon an individual's political literacy.

Integrating private and public spheres

The data showed research participants using the opportunities technology gave them to blur distinctions between the private and public spheres. Different social media platforms were used by research participants to find, read, watch and discuss issues with other people with similar interests creating a multi-layered media environment (Alverman, 2004; Hoechmann and Poyntz, 2012) that allowed supportive networks to be built and information to be shared. Private, personal politics about feminism, sexuality or thoughts and opinions about make-up use were just as easily discussed with peers on public forums with people from across the world as political topics such as bullying and abuse, mental health issues, the representation of women in the public sphere or the impact of educational policies on young people's lives.

On-line deliberation by research participants over hidden bias and ideas for government or policy reform were practically found on a weekly basis, for the three months of observation and included personal politics. A strong example were discussions about sex and relationship education (SRE), which showed research participants re-framing and redefining current debates in education to include an issue of importance to them. Unfortunately SRE continues to be a frequently neglected, ignored or misrepresented issue in the public sphere. Repeatedly blocked from being a statutory subject by adult institutions both the House of Lords in 2014 and House of Commons⁴. Without wishing to oversimplify the issue as a generational divide, the machinations around SRE illustrate a disparity between what the young participants in my study identified as important to their personal private circumstances, against the priorities of the elderly, in this case unelected, public law-makers in Westminster. Improving SRE goes well beyond the wishes of young people in my sample group, and pressure from advocates of all ages calling for statutory SRE for young people, have included the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2015), and continues at the time of writing (Baird, 2016).

⁴ Post thesis submission. On the 18th December, 2016 five House of Commons Select Committees, including the Women and Equalities Committee called for Justine Greening, the Education Secretary to make SRE statutory subject. On 23rd January, 2017 Parliament debated and voted yet again against legislation to provide statutory SRE in schools. However March 1st 2017 Government announced it *is* to introduce statutory SRE.

It remains difficult to quantify how representative my research was in terms of overall population. According to figures from 2014, in the UK 76% of adults (16+) were shown to use the internet every day (Office for National Statistics, 2014), with a high percentage using the internet to buy goods and services (74%). Those aged 16-24 used the internet more than other groups for social networking (91%) or gaming (68%), whereas those aged 25-34 used the internet more for goods, services and associated information. Email was the most common activity, with less than one in ten adults creating websites or blogs on the internet, although use of websites and blogs with this group was frequent. Allowing for these indications it is likely that my research is only indicative of a small proportion of young people who chose to deliberate politics online.

However I was able to evidence a great deal of movement on the meso-level (Greig and Taylor, 1999) between public and private or informal and formal spheres of operation, which makes unpicking the exact nature of what is occurring difficult to see. Again the importance of the '*politics of everyday life*' (Crick, 2000; Yarwood, 2012), or what my research classified as informal politics, to developing and maintaining political literacy cannot be overstated. Further links made to participatory rights and responsibilities (Lockyear, 2008) established through the UNCRC (1989) and practically used in communities on a number of levels help to illustrate the range and significance of informal and private politics to the public, formal sphere.

Although Lockyear (2008) identified ideas about the public sphere being a meeting place of equals using reasoned debate with the private sphere being identified as hierarchical in nature, my research illustrated the flattening or levelling power of the internet. Social media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Wordpress* or *YouthDebates* were able to level communication or power hierarchies by allowing access to potentially *nearly* everyone. (11% of people reported not being able to afford the internet or the equipment to use it (Office for National Statistics, 2014). An early observation about *Twitter* in my personal use was the amount of people with disabilities who were able to put forward their views and experiences, people who would customarily have limited contact or representation with the public sphere due to severe physical limitations from their disabilities. Furthermore *Twitter* gives the public direct access to many public figures, politicians, media moguls and academics who choose to have on-line accounts. Even acknowledging these platforms are set up and maintained by organisations who have the final word on what is and what is not acceptable the potential to communicate non-hierarchically has increased exponentially through social media.

Recognising the importance of informal, personal politics is not a new concept. Equalities and disability legislation (Equality Act, 2010) as well as the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2010) have forced the inclusion of the rights of all members of society for when legislation is created, rather than meeting the needs of a select few. Still problems repeatedly appear over how to increase recognition of issues, especially with those elected or paid to represent the populace in making legally binding decisions for society. Social media is an accessible, inclusive tool for citizens, increasing access for citizens to hold the Government to account, instead of relying on conventional third-party routes of national media outlets or party politics.

7.5 Functions of the Public Sphere

Deliberative politics

In looking to find out more about political literacy I wanted to find out more about useful sources of political information for young people and whilst my research found a wide range of sources of political information that research participants used, two key problems with the public sphere appeared persistent. One problem was the low levels of citizenship education research participants had received at school, as discussed in 7.3, or else there were ongoing problems regarding wider access to good quality political information participants felt they could trust in the public sphere, with the BBC holding an atypical role in the following discussion. As explained in 2.5 I subscribe to ideas about deliberative forms of democracy that prioritise collective reasoning and decision making (Warren, 2002), which obviously describe an ideal situation rather than the current realities of power relations between state and citizen in the public sphere despite varied efforts from both camps.

The public sphere as conceived by Habermas (1973) developed from ideas of 19th century coffee houses where political affairs were discussed by the male bourgeois, which illustrate the limited foundations of contemporary public political communication. Nevertheless ideas about public discussion and deliberation on matters of political importance in the public sphere have long been considered necessary for legitimising democracy (Stewart, 2001; Erickson and Weigard, 2003:8) yet the practice of politics often appears overwhelmingly top-down and exclusionary with insufficient reciprocal or accountable communication being evident (Alexander, 2008). Stewart (2001:139) rightly maintains that there are further problems with how private corporate bodies have come to appropriate dimensions of public

authority, which to some extent demonstrates problems with the role of mass media in politics.

Massively expanding, increasingly literate populations, the advent of the internet and mass communication along with technological advances have significantly changed what is possible in the public sphere. Increasingly the 'zone of mediation' (Crossley and Roberts, 2004) between the state and citizens, comprised of people holding political influence and private individuals be they subjects, citizens or consumers has been altered. Although as my research shows the zone of mediation may not have altered enough. Nowadays citizens may expect politicians to recognise and register public concerns on issues of public importance, as the scope for being able to do this has greatly increased, and despite efforts from certain MPs to improve public engagement (e.g. Goldsmith, 2011; Allen, 2014) blockages with the processes or expectations of power remain to thwart democratic participation.

Accountable Talk

In 2.5 the seven principles of accountable talk were discussed in relation to deliberative democracy. If research participant's perceptions of political information in the public sphere were compared against the underlying principles of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008) and accountable talk (Alexander, 2010) that regard *collectivity, reciprocity, support, cumulation, meaningfulness, criticality* and *purposefulness* as essential for developmental learning, it was clear there were problems with political information in the public sphere.

The problems of misrepresentation raised in relation to the portrayal of women or vulnerable people on benefits in the public sphere were unsupportive to research participants' understanding of the world, often meaningless or inaccurate in relation to participants' experience of issues, as well as divisive and uncritical of any wider context or deeper meanings. Any meaningfulness or purposefulness it could be argued would be in overt propaganda bias aiming to set harmful divisions in society rather than promote deeper understanding of fundamental issues of women's rights, disability or poverty. Pretty much a failure of a function of the public sphere to inform citizens of all ages of their rights and prepare them for their responsibilities (Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012)

The public sphere not only suffered from the uncritical assumptions and biases promoted by national media but were perpetuated by a lack of government regulation or educational

support. The pejorative language of scroungers and shirkers in relation to people on benefits and with disabilities has been encouraged by government campaigns (Garthwaite, 2011; Eaton, 2012; Briant et al., 2013; Valentine and Harris, 2014) that focus on the out of work and fraudulent benefit claiming. Little to no action has been taken over the Leveson report recommendations into the culture and ethics of the press (Cathcart, 2012).

Alexander convincingly illustrated problems that the *Cambridge Primary Review* had with the Labour Government using tactics of dichotomy, derision, myth and meaningless to undermine the review's findings and misrepresent participants (2008:108). A wide body of findings were rejected, and Alexander concluded this response was neither collective nor reciprocal. If a body of respected academics are unable to make their points understood or realised through deliberation with government it does not bode well for people with less standing or influence.

Whilst it was evident that the government and media authorities were being directly challenged by bottom up, social media co-ordinated, citizen action that involved a small cohort of research participants it remains exasperating that the myth of apathy in relation to young people persists (Whitehouse and Bloom, 2014). My study is not alone in finding research participants using social networking methods to politically participate or civically engage (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2014), be it on or off-line. My data provided many examples that defied commonly expressed views of non-voters as apathetic, unconcerned or uninterested individuals (Zengotita, 2005; Whitehouse and Bloom, 2015). Adjectives such as alienated (Stoker, 2012), frustrated, disillusioned (Mair, 2013), disenfranchised, indifferent, disappointed or disaffected (Hartas, 2011) would perhaps better describe the situation of research participants not knowing who to vote for, especially given the difficulties in getting trustworthy, clear or reliable information from the public sphere. Or else not wanting to vote for representatives that are not able to represent them, from the possibilities that are on offer, or else whose choice will be unlikely to win in an election given the unfairness of the 'first past the post' voting system. It was estimated that around 5 million voters in the 2015 General Election have no official representation from their vote (Electoral Reform Society, 2015).

I noted (5.2) that reservations about voting for parties or politicians that participants disagreed with or that they felt did not represent their views echoed findings from Lister (2003) that concluded that non-voting could be seen as a responsible choice for some

citizens. The legitimacy of the traditional two party political system in Britain has been questioned and found wanting on more than one occasion now (Swift, 2002; Mair, 2013), as Stoker reports (2006) it is really politics that needs to change. Ten years ago the Power report (2006) found that apathy was a myth in regard to political engagement with the general public being a lot more engaged than they were given credit for, and my findings strongly support this conclusion.

Trusting the Public Sphere

In wanting to find out more about what young people thought regarding how informed they were for political engagement I attempted to find out what sources of political knowledge were useful for young people. Rather than being able to provide a list of specific places or top sources that research participants got their political knowledge from, the repeated themes in the data inferred that the sources of political information participants could trust were the most important. The BBC was notable in this regard for holding, a not totally uncontested, but strong position of trust with research participants.

There was a definite expectation from research participants who identified the BBC as a source that it was able to provide impartial political information. In contrast to newspapers who were generally considered useful but who were regularly perceived as having partial, partisan agendas. The problems of hidden bias has already been contemplated relation to the expectation that the BBC is impartial in reporting. Understanding or accounting for why the BBC is able to maintain such trust with research participants is interesting and may rest on a range of reasons beyond the scope of my study.

Any cursory study of media production will locate the role of directing public attention through framing and agenda setting. There is not enough space to critique the last two referendums (Alternative Vote, 2011 and European Union, 2016) held in Britain properly but suffice to say that the majority of political and media coverage was narrowly defined, derisory, used basic dichotomies to present what should have been nuanced debate, lacked context and access to impartial relevant information. There are two possible explanations, the tone is being set by people who do not know any better rather than by people who are informed and on top of their brief. Or a divisive, acrimonious, mean society is sought by leading opinion makers. Available evidence suggests it is a mixture of both.

The common mistrust and dislike associated with politician's policies and decision making was widespread, found all across discussions about events and experiences in the research

participants lives. From watching the effects of social security uncertainties on friends and family to the stress of increased exam pressure through to government inaction on policies that participants related directly to their safety. Knowing if commonly held negative associations were due to a collective inability or tendency for the public being unable to see the positive effects of policy is problematic. The data highlighted the Cambridgeshire Busway anomaly where an unpopular and expensive political decision actually did have positive consequences for the community but this positive view of local politician's decision making was the only instance in all the data gathered.

7.6 Summary

The data showed research participants uncertainty over politics was a complex and nuanced phenomenon. Of course if someone says that they don't know anything about politics that may well be the case but my findings illustrated a number of areas for consideration that made claims of uncertainty not altogether reliable.

A lack of self-confidence shown by many participants' responses indicated, on an immediately apparent level that the young people in my sample group did not think they were very informed about politics or that they knew much. However my research found that expressed uncertainty over politics was unlikely to be an entirely accurate reflection of a person's political knowledge or abilities *most* of the time. Where uncertainty was most strongly expressed and observed in a participant was where self-confidence appeared lowest. Problems arising from socio-economic effects associated with basic literacy and the space to develop and practice private confidence before having the ability to show public confidence in speaking up give much to consider in this area. The high levels of uncertainty found amongst research participants illustrated a lack of confidence in knowledge or ability that would be useful to find out more about.

My study showed that the claim of uncertainty was more likely to be found in relation to formal politics rather than about informal politics. Maybe unsurprisingly as informal politics appeared more accessible and usually more relevant to participants, although informal routes of action were taken to challenge the formal political system. Observing good levels of political interest and engagement amongst participants in my study, and further afield were valuable to see. From my youth work experience I would have liked to assume that at least some of the research participants were willing and able to be involved in political activities of

some sort. Therefore the widespread and diverse nature of participants' involvement was excellent to observe, with eight out of the ten group interview participants active in informal politics in some way, local youth councils, town councils and student unions were providing opportunities for young people to get involved in Cambridgeshire and a wealth of national, online politics was also in evidence, albeit in different stages of development.

Structural problems, in education, in politics and with the media threaded through the fieldwork transcripts. Making sense of widespread mistrust, disillusionment and frustration was difficult to assess and keep apart from my own thoughts and opinions in this area, which meant I had to keep the data as near to participants' responses to maintain the reliability of my findings. The opinions expressed in the findings chapters were carefully presented to ensure the young people's voices were being expressed not my personal viewpoint about what they had said.

It may require some time to study the psychology of human responses in order to figure out if it is just part of the human condition to recollect negative aspects of life easier than the positive aspects. But structural problems with the public sphere were seen to cause difficulties for the research participants' knowledge and understanding of politics. Misrepresentation of publics was a source of frustration to research participants', suspicion around bias in the mass media and a lack of trust, only partially mitigated by the veneration showed to the BBC, is of great concern to deliberative ideals of democracy.

Political scientists have discussed deliberative and participatory styles of democracy and the rights and responsibilities of citizens at length and the conversation requires acknowledgement and response from political and media representatives, who sadly maintain a tardy unwillingness to commit to accountable talk. The legitimacy of the representative democratic system hangs in the balance on this issue.

In Conclusion

“The one who rides the donkey does not know the ground is hot” - Ghanaian Proverb

8.1 Aim of research

This study has been an interpretative exploration into young people’s political literacy. The two key research questions were “How informed did young people think they were for political engagement?” and “What sources supported their political understanding?” My original contribution to knowledge has resulted from an in depth consideration about how informed research participants thought they were to politically engage and what sources they thought supported that engagement.

The sentiment contained in the opening Ghanaian proverb illustrates my underlining rationale, whereby listening and including research participants was integral for exploring their perceptions of politics, and understanding how informed they thought they were for political engagement. My research approach was inclusive and challenged any easy assumptions I could make about research participants’ political engagement and knowledge and included the voices of young people to construct and share meanings with them about their world.

With this research I have added to the body of knowledge that exists about young people, their political knowledge, interest and engagement that exists somewhere in the overlapping space between political science and education, which included contributions from geography, history and media studies. My political sociology (Nash, 2000) of understanding regards a multiplicity of interdependent interactions between state and society to consider the political literacy of young citizens as they reach the age of enfranchisement. Understanding how young people viewed their political understanding and what supported that understanding benefits any democratic society aspiring to comprehend and improve the quality of young people’s political engagement.

8. 2 Original Contribution to Knowledge

Uncertainty over political knowledge

Through this research I established that research participants were often uncertain and unable to express much confidence about their political knowledge. The prevalence of uncertainty found amongst research participants was especially pronounced in relation to knowledge about formal politics and politicians, in what is often considered in Britain to be a representative Parliamentary democracy.

Accounting for research participants' uncertainty over politics established a range of impacts identified on micro and macro levels. Observations from the field, emphasises and contradictions from data analysis, conclusions from background data, and key themes linked with relevant research, provided a deeper understanding about central features of the prevalence of uncertainty. The list of impacts presented here do not presume to be an exhaustive list of contributing factors but allow for an unpicking of the various factors;

- i. Self confidence
- ii. Rational ignorance
- iii. Social and educational opportunities
- iv. Trust, bias and representation of political issues in media
- v. Negative perceptions of politics/politicians

Indeed there remains no one simple answer as to why research participants were so uncertain about politics, as a combination of factors were typically identified. For instance the importance of socio-economic opportunities affecting the self-confidence of participants in poorer communities (Kellet, 2009) was seen with group interviewee George. Whilst negative perceptions of formal politics contributed to levels of rational ignorance over politics, expressed by Sadiq and Tom in not needing to know about politics until they felt they could use that knowledge. These examples illustrated overlaps between the different factors contributing to uncertainty.

Associated with mass uncertainty must be the poor levels of received citizenship education established by my research. These were a great cause for concern as many research participants were not recognising or accessing basic statutory educational opportunities expected from the National Curriculum. The space and support to develop as citizens currently appears to have far less importance attached (Chapter 2:21) to it than more pressing

requirements for young people to be exam ready and employable. My findings established that not only did research participants require much better prospects for improving their personal political literacy in terms of their political self-confidence and the educational opportunities available to them, effective action was also needed to counter the widespread negative perceptions of British politics and the mass media.

Reporting on the ‘real world’.

Participants generally had low levels of trust in political and media organisations, except for a more trusting attitude shown towards the BBC. Improved standards of transparency and accountability from the Government and associated institutions are essential if the idea that these organisations have a duty to the public is to be sustained. That is if there is a social expectation that the Government and media outlets have a duty to educate and properly inform citizens about current affairs. Notwithstanding that human rights already exist in this area for young people over receiving good quality information that is not harmful to them (UNCRC, 2010). British citizens have repeatedly asked to see an improvement in political and media practices (Power, 2006; Hansard Audit of Political Engagement, 2009; Papadopoulos, 2010; Leveson, 2012; Stoker, 2013; Girl Guiding UK, 2015; UK Statistics Authority, 2015) yet clear progress in this area remains very difficult to see in spite of the parliamentary reports, research and inquiries just mentioned.

Problems with inaccurate claims or distorted evidence made by politicians in Parliament or released to the press appear rife. From false claims made by ministers about education statistics (Stewart, 2014) or the EU referendum debate (Hawkins and Arnold, 2016) through to the House of Commons Work and Pensions select committee holding an inquiry over a minister’s misuse of statistics in making false claims about benefits in press releases (Eaton, 2012) the public have little confidence 28% in the honesty of Government presentation of official figures (UK Statistics Authority, 2015).

Lord Justice Leveson was concerned that the recommendations from Part 1 of his in-depth report (2012) into the culture and ethics of the press in Britain would be ignored. Sadly this appears to be the case, even though a Royal Charter was established about the self-regulation of the press in 2013, David Cameron declined to enact the requisite legislation, whilst the body for regulating the press, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) has been set up by many of the publishers themselves maintaining clear conflicts over genuine regulation of the press.

Encouragingly the space to challenge the dominance of government and elite mass media sources that support them has opened up through technological advances of the internet. Although research participants still recognised newspapers and broadcast media, particularly the BBC as key sources of political knowledge, perceptions of bias, misrepresentation, omission and spin were associated with the national media and criticised by research participants for damaging their political understanding and knowledge. My research cannot claim a direct causal link between poor media practices and the political uncertainty I found. But responsibility for diminishing citizens understanding of politics must lie in some part at the door of Government and mainstream media sources. There is a strong argument to be made (Osborne, 2005; Lewis et al., 2005; Alexander, 2010; Dean, 2012) that informing citizens in a democracy has been impoverished by widespread practices of dishonesty, over-use of basic dichotomies, misrepresentation, derision and meaninglessness repeatedly found in media content from Government and media organisations in the public sphere (Hendricks et al., 2008; Garthwaite, 2011; Pilkington, 2012; Eaton, 2012; Valentine and Harris, 2014).

A lack of commitment to the basic principles of accountable talk from politicians has polarised politics in the public sphere, mainly to the disadvantage of citizens and their political understanding. Uncertainty about the knowledge provided by Government or the media, over the veracity and reliability of reporting, is at the very least unhelpful to citizens attempting to negotiate the public sphere. Unfortunately it may rest with individual citizens and protest groups to continue to put pressure on media outlets to improve their ethical practices, if successive Governments prefer courting influential media proprietors rather than enforcing the public right to good quality information as recommended by the Leveson Inquiry.

Politically Active Research Participants

In contrast to the uncertainty shown the data showed a clear tension between the widespread phenomenon of uncertainty typically at odds with research participants actual political interest and knowledge of politics in their own experience. Research participants were often found to be politically engaged or planning to engage in a wide variety of ways, with the emphasis primarily on informal political action. Where issues were related to formal politics, engagement was typically occurring in the informal spaces participants had immediate access to, such as networking through on-line social media or through choosing educational opportunities in the local community.

Finding good levels of informal political interest and engagement amongst research participants not only displaced common assumptions about politically apathetic young people it also illustrated the need for a fundamental shift in thinking toward more fluid and dynamic conceptions of politics. A conception of politics that includes and values personal, private or informal politics as much as formal methods of governance, on local, national and global levels. This shift is necessary to meet the complex mix of changing social expectations, technological advances and the steady fragmentation of traditional two-party politics in Britain (Mair, 2013), within the representative style of Parliamentary democracy.

Understanding that a right to a voice in how society is governed means more than voting for a representative once every five years – once you are considered old enough for the responsibility is elusive in practice. Although new ways of mass political action such as connecting with political elites or organisations through online petitions or *Twitter* storms that can be reported in the national media. The onus remains with political elites who need to be seen developing their listening skills and responding effectively if they are to retain their legitimacy and remain relevant for citizen's needs.

These conclusions were drawn from my data taken from an ethically executed, multi-strategy research approach, with a methodical analysis of the data gathered and careful consideration of the different social contexts the young people in the sample group may have been experiencing. In the following section I determine the fit of my methodological approach.

8.3 Methodological Advantages

My interpretive and transformative paradigm was suitable for the subject matter under investigation. Democracy whether defined as principles for guiding society or as a system of governance, be it participatory, deliberative or representative, requires a commitment to participation, inclusion and fairness. My research approach acknowledged the ways society is based upon layers of mutual interdependence and I sought to include multiple realities of knowledge from the point of view of less visible people in leading social narratives. In this case young people primarily between 16-19 years of age, although the voices of 14-21 year olds were included. I focused on the experiences of young people who are typically excluded from making important political decisions in society on issues that affect them, yet who often appear the principal beneficiaries of the consequences of political decision making.

In seeking answers to my questions about how informed young people thought they were for political engagement and what sources supported their knowledge I was keen to create a collaborative account of perceived realities. I understood this to be taking a participatory, emancipatory approach that heavily incorporated a youth work framework of education, empowerment and equality along with young people's participation, to co-create reliable knowledge from research participant's perspectives. This approach sought to unpick inequalities arising from disproportionate power relations in society and discover the how, what and why of these inequalities upon young people's political understanding. My research approach was unusual for the topic area for involving young people as much as possible in the research processes and I was looking to co-create knowledge about political literacy with the help of a small group of young people as co-advisors.

The broad range of data gathered from three research methods provided detailed information regarding what young people, predominantly aged 16-19, from across Cambridgeshire, thought about politics. The advantages from having three sets of data to analyse gave two particular strengths to my study.

Depth and Breadth of Data

Firstly using three methods helped to account for weaknesses in each of the research methods used. For example the survey was useful for painting a broad picture of the sample group's characteristics, such as providing an overview of what participants knew about formal politics, indicating what their experiences of citizenship education were like or gauging how interested participants were in politics. I was able to draw conclusions about some of the socio-economic experiences of different groups of research participants based on the type of educational establishment they were attending.

On the other hand the survey data was not detailed or rich enough to provide any depth of information about useful sources of political information or what participants thought about these sources. Only a small amount of basic background data about participants was gathered from the surveys. Whereas data from the group interviews, although from a considerably smaller group of young people was richer and provided deeper context about the research participants. Such as how research participants thought about politics, how informed they thought they were and what sources supported them to be politically informed. The group interview data gave form to the uncertainty that had surrounded discussions with potential participants during survey fieldwork, prior to young people agreeing or not to participate. An

uncertainty that was not evidenced in the collected survey data and only recorded at that stage from observations made in the field.

The richness of experience uncovered through the group interviews and on-line case studies illustrated the wide range of political activities the group interview participants were involved in or were considering being involved in that was missing from the survey data. Although young people's involvement in Town councils and local politics was notable in discussions with the gatekeeper and participants during fieldwork preparation carried out in *College Three* it was the data from group interviews that firmly established the phenomenon.

Secondly the ability to compare and contrast data from three data sets during the analysis raised repeated themes or identified anomalies in the data, which allowed for stronger conclusions to be drawn, rather than from using one method alone. Analysis of the different data sets reinforced findings, such as the on-line case studies helped to identify issues young people were choosing to talk about rather than being influenced by my pre-ordained survey or group interview questions. No matter how open or semi-structured the questions were designed in order to limit researcher influence on the outcomes, my priorities showed through. For instance analysis of emphasis and silences in the data illustrated the importance of sex and relationship education (SRE) to participants that was in contrast to my focus on the role of citizenship education in their lives. Although research participants did discuss democracy and government, the idea of citizenship education per se was not mentioned once during three months of on-line observation, a silence that emphasised the lack of recognition of the subject amongst research participants.

Comparing data led to strong conclusions that overall more research respondents thought the voting age should remain at 18 rather than 16; that citizenship education where it was received was generally held in low esteem; that there were good levels of interest in politics although a gap appeared over formal political knowledge; that personal politics and informal political networks were integral to understanding young people's politics, and the national media was perceived as a biased and often untrustworthy source of political information.

Clarifying Reality

Alongside the research fieldwork process I was fortunate to have the support of the research group co-advisors for twelve months to help clarify the realities of their lives in Cambridgeshire. Although the group as a whole did not survive the transition from school to college particularly well. Occasionally their contributions raised more questions than we were

able to answer, such as James questioning how decisions were prioritised in Parliaments (UK or European) or understanding why none of their female friends were prepared to join in with the project, beyond that they were perceived as being uninterested in politics by the co-advisors. Working with the co-advisors helped me to pick out anomalies in the survey data, learn more about young people and the facilities available to them in the local area, recognise the limited impact of the *National Youth Parliament* in Cambridge and observe close-up the pressures and transient natures of their lives that had a clear tendency to follow the demands of the education system until they left it. The co-advisors deliberated over the direction of my research question and were integral to planning and setting up young person friendly group interviews that incorporated activities into the schedule.

Problems with maintaining the group came down to space, time and resources. The transition to college being the final straw for James and Tim's participation but exams, revision, holidays and family commitments all had an effect at some point on the co-advisors ability to attend. Throughout the meetings I had difficulties in providing enough support or space for my young colleagues to contribute without seeming to take over the direction of the meetings. This also appeared as tensions between what was agreed with my co-advisors and what my supervisors thought afterwards was more appropriate, such as agreeing on a snowball sampling method in a meeting, yet being dissuaded from using it by the supervisory team. That said when Sam was asked for feedback about his role in the research, aside from finding the whole topic of interest and NYA research exercises useful for his college work he felt his contributions were taken seriously and incorporated into the study.

What follows now is a brief conclusion about the key limitations of my study.

8.4 Methodological Disadvantages

There were several limitations to my research that in the main are a problem for most researchers. Obviously recognising exactly how personal bias has affected the interpretation of my study is sometimes difficult to see. I am an idealist and have a tendency to appear quite passionate and fixed about ideas of fairness and inclusion, which after all are only ideas and subject to flux and change. I have tried to minimise this certainty in my writing but do not always see where modification is needed.

Along with my certainty of conviction there have been times where I have found rigid academic definitions difficult to deal with. Crick's description of democracy being an ambiguous word as it means different things to different people, often appears apt. My idea of participatory research, coming from a youth work practice background of many years was at times viewed quite differently from that of experienced colleagues in academia. I can only look to Reason (1994:4) in this regard who advised researchers taking the participatory route to "*develop your own approach, there is no one right way to go about it*". In my defence I sought to reflexively engage and collaborate with young people to gather my research findings and did so with varying amounts of success at different stages, with high and low levels of involvement from different young people, as measured against various degrees of engagement (Figure 4.1:54).

Recruitment problems were inevitable for each of the methods used. Young people did not want to engage with the first two methods for a number of reasons, from not have enough time in the college timetable or prior life commitments, to not seeing the point in being involved or viewing politics as boring, through to shyness or lack of confidence to participate. Furthermore at whatever point I attempted to access colleges for fieldwork collection there were problems with my timing, from holidays, construction work and students varied days of attendance for different lessons, through to fitting in around anxious first weeks of term for students trying to conform against anxious final weeks of exams.

I also struggled to be fully inclusive of a broad cross section of society with my sampling strategy certain young people such as those with disabilities or young parents were not particularly well represented in the sample group. The topic of politics itself appeared off-putting to many potential participants and the prevalence of uncertainty over the subject could not be discounted as a barrier to participation.

Although I pitched the *Understanding Politics* survey content (and format) in an accessible and inclusive way to elicit views from a broad sample group, a couple of participants from *College Two* expressed scorn over the easiness of survey questions, yet I found a number of young people in other colleges who were unable to read or barely literate. Two of the survey questions did appear easy but not one of the questions received a 100% correct response rate.

A criticism raised on several occasions arose over my aims for developing the co-advisory participation group. Questions asked by other PhD students in seminars queried the originality of my work if I was fully including and presenting young people's ideas, opinions

and advice as part of my study. For me creating an artificial barrier between myself and research participants, to consider myself separate from them in order to create some sort of 'objective' knowledge ran the risk of negating their contributions to my research as somehow less valid than mine. Fundamentally this research reflects my own original contribution to knowledge but my approach has ensured that the voices of research participants have shaped and directed the final product to develop an authenticity that went beyond my basic assumptions.

8.5 Future Research

There are a number of areas of further research to unpick in understanding young people's political literacy and how informed young people think they are for political engagement.

The role of self-confidence upon the high levels of uncertainty found in research participants certainly requires far more consideration than my study gave it. Likewise any effects of gender expectations with regard to self-confidence and political knowledge were not conclusively shown by my data as sample sizes were either too small or provided anonymously. The effects of socio-economic disparities upon political confidence outcomes were indicated by the low levels of received citizenship education amongst research participants and diverse levels of educational experience, as was identified from the background data. As self-confidence has to be accounted for alongside the rest of the factors impacting upon research participant's political knowledge and understanding this is a complex area to unpick.

My study only briefly touched upon uncertainty over politics from the vantage point of rational ignorance. How rational ignorance appeared in the data was fleeting but specific, weighing up the limited influence or impact an individual could have upon the increasingly centralised political system must be a major consideration in the uncertainty found. But give people good reason to be involved in deliberating politics and they are more than capable (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004:7) What was obvious was that from co-advisors in the research group through to the hundreds more young people approached for my study there was a 'time poor' element to their lives. The educational system takes priority over young people's lives for many years until they are deemed qualified enough for the workplace, even as Dewey (1897:77) argued that learning was the process of living not preparation for future living.

The question remains, do young people have enough time and constructive, supported space to learn and develop their citizenship or political knowledge in? Especially if the perception is that there is little effect from this engagement on the outcomes? That research participants were making choices to get involved with politics and increase their political knowledge was apparent but opportunities had to be identified as relevant in some way and accessible.

The idea that future citizens need space and support to practice their public confidence was important for education policy but has relevance to other areas of the public sphere.

Understanding how best to nurture critically literate citizens can find much direction and clues provided by educational research. My research strengthened the link between dialogic teaching and accountable talk with the practices of politics and media but there is a rich seam of discovery over the best ways to develop the public confidence needs of citizens.

The effect of the widespread disaffection with formal politics was combined with an ongoing erosion of the legitimacy traditional political power. The rise of online citizen forums to challenge the Government is a feature of the 'new' flexible politics that is attempting to emerge. Understanding better the effects of this disaffection upon people's willingness or ability to participate. In this regard my study may have benefitted from investigating the functions and realities between rural and urban spaces, although many research participants were seen to move in multi-level environments.

8.6 Implications for Policy Makers

The implications of my findings for policy makers are found at local, regional and national levels, and concern education policies, fundamental changes to the way Government works as well as legislation to hold national media to account. My study reiterates that the perspectives of young people should be included and responded to, especially over *affairs which properly concern them*. The right of young people to have a voice on issues that concern them in turn requires their voices are consistently heard and genuinely responded to by policy and law makers. To not do, as we have seen over the appalling abuse cases in Rotherham can be construed as an act of violence upon them and undermines the principles of democracy.

Recommendations arising from my study for education policy are broad and varied. It is unfortunate to say the least that the last two decades of positive action and growth in informal citizenship opportunities have been drastically curtailed by the narrative of austerity that has

crippled local youth services and youth support in Britain. The replacement National Citizen Service cannot provide enough depth or continuity of experience for young people across British communities, existing as it does for six weeks of summer activities for a narrow age group. Therefore my first recommendation would be sustained, long-term investment in the National Youth Parliament, Student Unions and Youth Forums, or other avenues of informal civic engagement to maintain community links with young people and support their critical political learning are key to supporting better political literacy for young people. Society wastes great political potential when it does not engage with young people and provide opportunities to develop public confidence in their political abilities.

The second recommendation regards statutory citizenship education (CE) policy. It was clear that at a local level young people in Cambridgeshire faced a hit and miss approach to their CE, with half the sample group not receiving the subject at all. Where participants were taught citizenship there were problems with how or what they were being taught. The '*political football*' of CE remains at risk from Government decisions (Tonge, Mycock and Jeffery, 2012:599) and is struggling to maintain what little status it does have. Hence establishing CE on the curriculum requires a strong, unambiguous commitment from Government to ensure young people at a local level get better education opportunities in their skills for life.

The third recommendation, in brief, is that the Government needs to be more responsive to citizens. The long running, increasingly strong argument for better, statutory SRE (Sex and Relationship education) opportunities in school was repeatedly blocked by MPs and Lords over the last decade, showing democracy to be a tedious, unresponsive process. Despite tremendous support from certain MPs and Lords on the issue, no headway was made and prior to my viva this was still the case (See footnote 4, p.167). The idea that representative democracy represents the requirements of huge, diverse populations repeatedly fails and needs updating if it is to retain any legitimacy.

Of the 30 considered and largely commendable recommendations proposed by the (Power Inquiry 2006) to make democracy more responsive and inclusive of the public, most unfortunately have not come to fruition. Recommendations 23 and 24 respectively that put a duty on the Government and public bodies to include citizens and, the right of citizens to initiate legislative processes, inquiries and hearings into Government and public bodies would greatly support a more responsive Government.

Finally, research participants are greatly troubled by the practices of the national media. Echoing the Leveson Inquiry, and recommendations from numerous Select Committees it is vital that the unethical and intrusive practices of British media giants who fail to practice responsible journalism must be addressed. I recommend a respect for truth, obedience to the law and upholding citizen's rights must be seen to be of paramount importance. As self-regulation clearly does not work compliance of proprietors, editors and journalists to their code of practice must be legislated for.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

I realise, along with some of the research participants that I may be missing the point of politics in wishing for better, more ethical practices from politicians or media organisations. Hoping that abundant power and influence can be used responsibly, accountably and with some integrity may be too idealistic but it is no exaggeration to claim the future of humanity is at stake if we cannot get our collective act together. The survival of our species will depend on our ability to have informed collective debates and deliberate to reach long-term decisions that benefit everyone, not just the select few who resist regulation and sustainable development (Diamond, 2005:522; IPCC, 2014). The 800 plus stone heads on Easter Island are a stark testament to humanity's ability to reify one activity over all others and ignore the consequences of over-exploiting resources and eco-systems until it is too late (Diamond, 2005:118), which in this case led to the demise of the Polynesian society at the time.

It is sad that for all humanities technological and communication brilliance there remains great resistance to having reasoned, deliberative, equitable politics that are able to embrace and include a diverse range of collective interests rather than the off-putting antagonism, scorn and derision that prevails in the House of Commons and much of the British press.

Uncertainty over politics is understandable and perhaps an unavoidable facet of life, and politics cannot escape our inability to predict or know for certain how the future will work out. In the case of young people feeling politically informed though, my research showed elements of the public sphere could be significantly improved in order to facilitate deeper learning and deliberation to advance a truly inclusive, democratic society.

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Appendix

Appendix i Political Literacy Toolkit by Sam Collis

Appendix ii Understanding Politics Survey

Appendix iii Understanding Politics Data

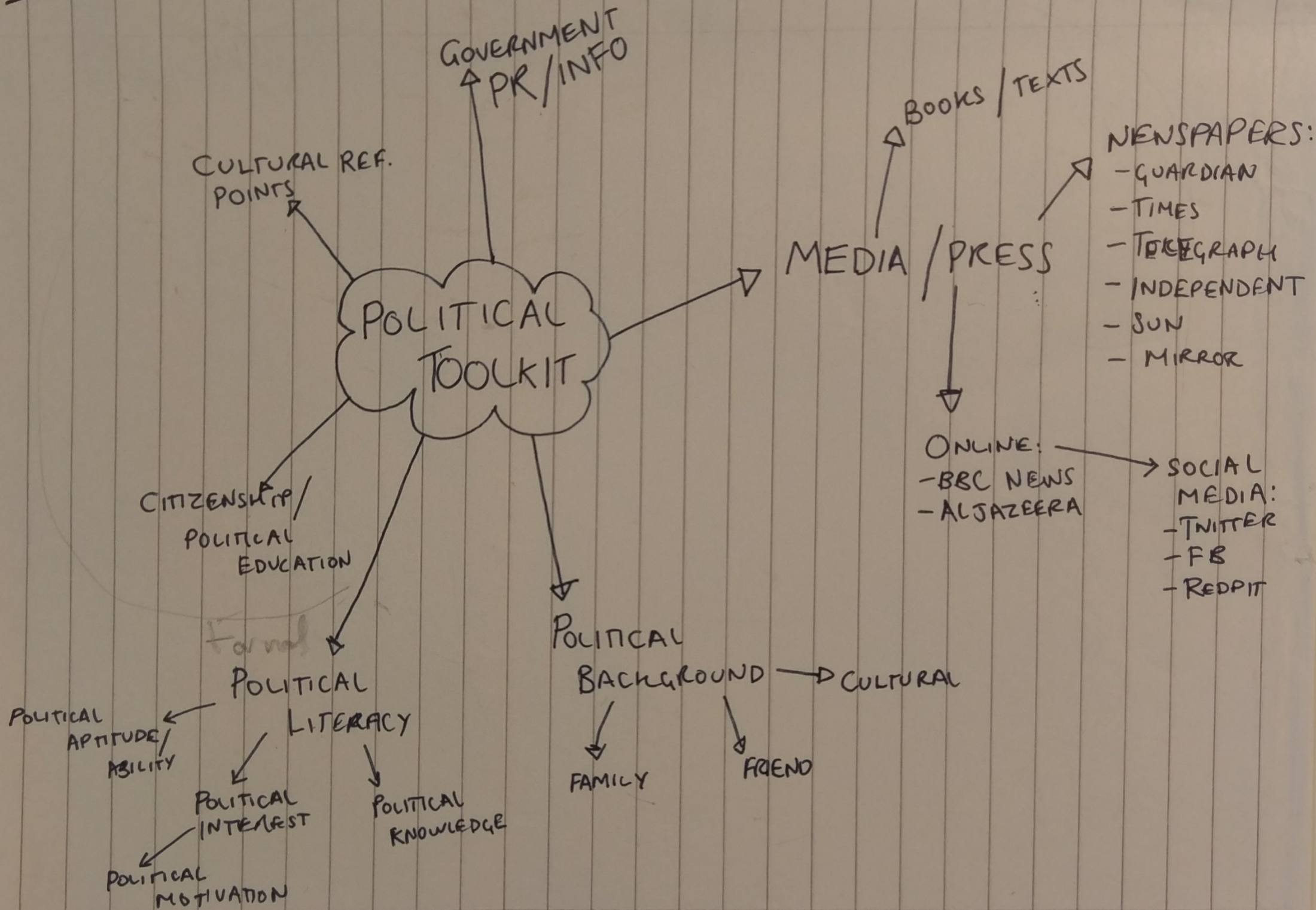
Appendix iv Code Book

Appendix v Participant Information Sheet

Appendix vi Interview Schedule

Appendix vii Pictures for Activity One

Toolkit © Sam Wainwright Collis.



Please circle the number on the scale that best represents how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Politics					
I am interested in local politics	1	2	3	4	5
I think politics are boring and irrelevant	1	2	3	4	5
Politicians are respected in society	1	2	3	4	5
I am interested in national politics	1	2	3	4	5
Voting					
Voting is the best way to influence change	1	2	3	4	5
I am looking forward to voting in the next general election	1	2	3	4	5
My local MP represents my views very well	1	2	3	4	5
I would like to have a stronger influence on decisions that are made in Parliament	1	2	3	4	5
Rights					
With rights, you have responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
I know a lot about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child	1	2	3	4	5
Human Rights are a waste of time	1	2	3	4	5
There are no need for rights, we live in a fair society	1	2	3	4	5
Equality					
Young people should pay full adult fare on public transport at 16 years old	1	2	3	4	5
Young people are respected in society	1	2	3	4	5
Young people should not be entitled to the full adult minimum wage until they are 21	1	2	3	4	5
Adults always know better than young people about young people's priorities	1	2	3	4	5

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH



**Anglia Ruskin
University**

Cambridge & Chelmsford

Understanding Politics

Questionnaire

**For Young People
Aged 16-19 years old**

September 2011

PLEASE FILL IN AND RETURN

Please answer the questions either on the lines provided or by circling the correct word or letter

1. How old are you?.....
2. Are you **Male** or **Female**?
3. What is your ethnic background?
4. Do you consider yourself disabled in any way?.....
5. What are you studying?
6. Did you have Citizenship lessons at school? Yes No
If no please go to Q10
7. Were they combined with PSHE lessons? Yes No Don't Know
8. a) How long were the lessons?
b) How frequent were they?.....
9. If you **did have** citizenship education please say how useful you think it has been for you.
.....
.....
.....
10. Please say what you think the best sources are for you to get political information from
.....
.....
.....
11. What do the letters MP stand for?
12. a) Which is the legal age to vote in Britain... 16 18 20 21
b) Do you agree with this? Yes No
c) Why?.....

WA 11

13. Does the word democracy mean...
a) Government by a small group of PR consultants
b) An absence or lack of government
c) The rule of society by the wealthy
d) Government by the people or their elected representatives
14. What is accountability...
a) Good money management
b) To be responsible for your actions
c) A term used in business for creating accounts
d) To receive praise
15. If someone is lobbying in Parliament what are they doing?
a) Trying to influence someone on behalf of a particular interest
b) Throwing a ball to someone in a long slow arc
c) Having an argument in the House of Lords
d) Keeping records of parliamentary expenses
16. What is a constitution?
a) Walking in the morning to keep healthy
b) Where constituents live or work
c) A fundamental set of rules or principles for government
d) A proposal for a new law in Parliament
17. Is a referendum...
a) A chance for referees to meet
b) A vote on an issue of public importance
c) Something you send with a job application
d) To direct the attention of someone to a reference
18. What is the Cabinet?
a) A very old cupboard in the House of Lords
b) A group of ministers with influential positions in government
c) Where voting papers are kept in the House of Commons
d) An ornate room where politicians meet the Queen
19. Please match each political party with its traditional approach to politics
a) Conservative Party is **W)** Socialism (Left-Wing)
b) Green Party is..... **X)** Social liberalism
c) Labour Party is..... **Y)** Environmentalism
d) Liberal Party is..... **Z)** Neo-liberalism (Right-Wing)

**Data from the *Understanding Politics* Survey
2011-2012**

Research by Karen Badlan

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1. Sample Group Demographics

Total Sample Size
200 respondents between 15 and 20 years of age

<i>Gender</i>	
Female	112
Male	88

<i>Age</i>	
15	3
16	64
17	91
18	29
19	8
20	5

<i>Identity</i>	
British	165
European	14
Asian	5
Mixed Race	6
No Info	10

<i>Disability</i>	
Yes	10
No	185
No Info	5

<i>Studying</i>	
A levels	77
A levels inc Politics or Sociology	57
Vocational inc ESOL	64
No Info	2

<i>College</i>	
College One	42
College Two	96
College Three	62

<i>Received Citizenship Education</i>	
Female	58
Male	44
Total	102

2. Knowledge and Interest Data Tables

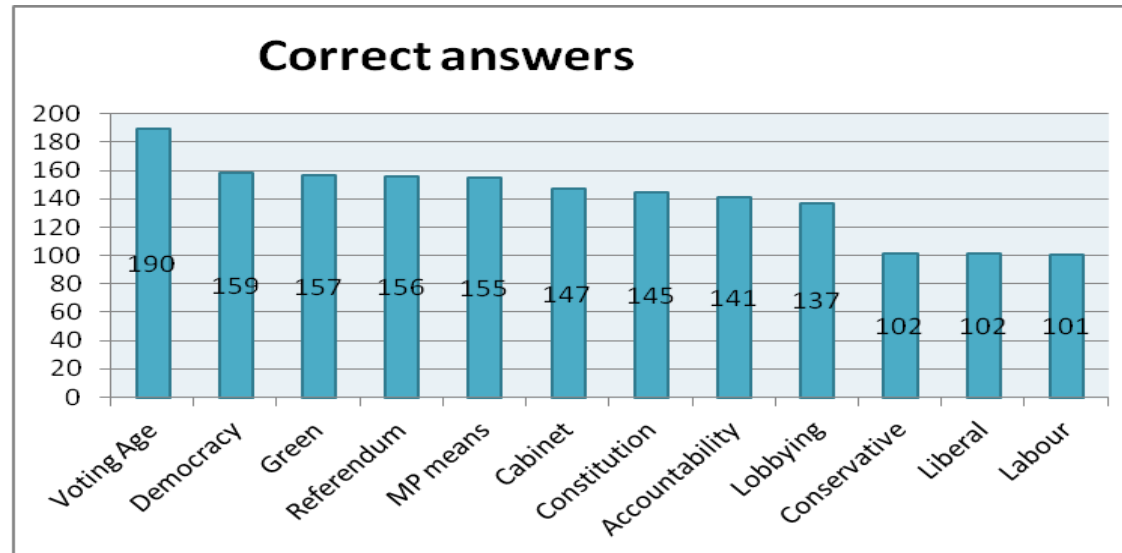


Table 1 – Correct Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

Table 1 shows correct responses for each of the twelve multiple choice questions (MCQ). The mean response was 141. The top response with 190 correct answers, was to the question, what is the legal voting age? Followed by 159 respondents correctly identifying or guessing the correct definition of democracy.

The third highest scoring answer was one part of a four part question asking survey participants to match political parties with the parties' traditional approach, 157 responses correctly identified the Green party with environmentalism. Other questions with over three quarters of correct replies were what does MP stand for and what is a referendum? Although 20

participants did not answer the question what do the letters MP stand for this remained a high scoring answer with 155 respondents correctly stating Member of Parliament.

Less than three quarters of respondents knew what either the Cabinet (n=147) or a constitution (n=145) was. Respondents were even less likely to know the correct answer to what accountability (n=141) or lobbying (n=137) meant. Only half the respondents (n=102) correctly connected the three main political parties with their traditional ideological approach. Responses to these questions were the lowest given in the multiple choice part of the survey.

<i>Age and Gender</i>	<i>Group size</i>	<i>All 12 Q's</i>	<i>11 Q</i>	<i>10 Q</i>	<i>9 Q</i>	<i>8 Q</i>	<i>7 Q</i>	<i>6 Q</i>	<i>5 or less correct</i>
15 Female	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
16 Female	36	10	2	5	5	3	4	2	5
16 Male	28	6	0	4	3	2	3	3	7
17 Female	48	12	3	6	4	5	5	2	11
17 Male	43	20	4	3	3	4	4	1	4
18 Female	18	7	0	0	1	1	2	2	5
18 Male	11	6	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
19 Female	5	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	1
19 Male	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
20 Female	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
20 Male	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Totals	200	63	9	19	20	25	18	10	42
<i>Cumulative Totals</i>		<i>63</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>111</i>	<i>130</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>158</i>	<i>200</i>

Table 2 – Multiple Choice Answers by Age and Gender groups

Table 2 shows the breakdown in responses to the twelve multiple choice questions by age and gender groups. Sixty-three young people from 200 in the sample group achieved a maximum of twelve correct answers. Ninety-one respondents got ten or more questions correct. Nearly three quarters of respondents got seven or more questions correct.

Out of 112 female respondents, 29 got all twelve questions correct (26% of females). With five or less correct answers were 26 females (23% of females). 26% females got twelve questions correct

The cumulative total illustrates that over half of the participants were able to answer nine or more questions correctly (n=111). Three quarters of the sample group (n=158) answered six or more questions correctly. Less than a quarter of the sample group (n=42) got five or less questions correct with the lowest score being three questions out of twelve correct.

Out of 88 male respondents, 34 got all twelve questions correct (39% of males). With five or less correct answers were 16 males (18% of males). 39% males got twelve questions correct

Political Statements			<i>Don't Know</i>	No Info
i) With rights you have responsibilities	170 agreed	13 disagree	14	3
l) There are no need for rights we live in a fair society	164 disagreed	16 agree	17	2
k) Human rights are a waste of time	159 disagreed	13 agree	24	4
b) I think politics are boring & irrelevant	122 disagreed	53 agree	23	2
h) I would like to have stronger influence on decisions that are made in Parliament	110 agreed	37 disagree	50	3
d) I am interested in national politics	106 agreed	59 disagree	33	2
f) I am looking forward to voting in the next general election	102 agreed	55 disagree	40	3
a) I am interested in local politics	81 agreed	91disagree	27	1
j) I know a lot about the UN Convention on Rights of a Child	55 agreed	89 disagree	52	4
g) My local MP represents my views very well	31 agree	74 disagree	93	2
p) Adults always know better than young people about young people's priorities	162 disagree	18 agree	17	3
o) Young people should not be entitled to the full adult minimum wage until they are 21	154 disagree	16 agree	27	3
m) Young people should pay full adult fare on public transport at 16 years old	153 disagree	23 agree	22	1
n) Young people are respected in society	150 disagree	19 agree	29	1
e) Voting is the best way to influence change	101 agree	60 disagree	38	1
c) Politicians are respected in society	92 disagree	57 agree	49	2

Table 3 - Political Interest Statements

Table 3 shows data from 16 statements measured on a Likert scale. The first ten shaded statements, in the left-hand column, were the responses used for the political interest score.

Three statements regarding Human Rights had high responses. The highest was 170 young people who agreed that with rights come responsibilities, followed by 164 who disagreed there were no need for rights as we live in a fair society and 159 who disagreed that Human Rights were a waste of time. Further statements which gained over three quarters of responses were in relation to discrepancies with

the minimum wage (154) and public transport fares (153), as well as disagreement that young people are respected in society (150). One hundred and sixty two survey participants disagreed that adults always know better than young people about young people's priorities.

Just over half survey participants agreed (101) that voting was the best way to influence change and that they were looking forward to voting in the next general election (102). Over half of the participants (106) agreed they were interested in national politics and 110 wanted more influence on decisions made in Parliament.

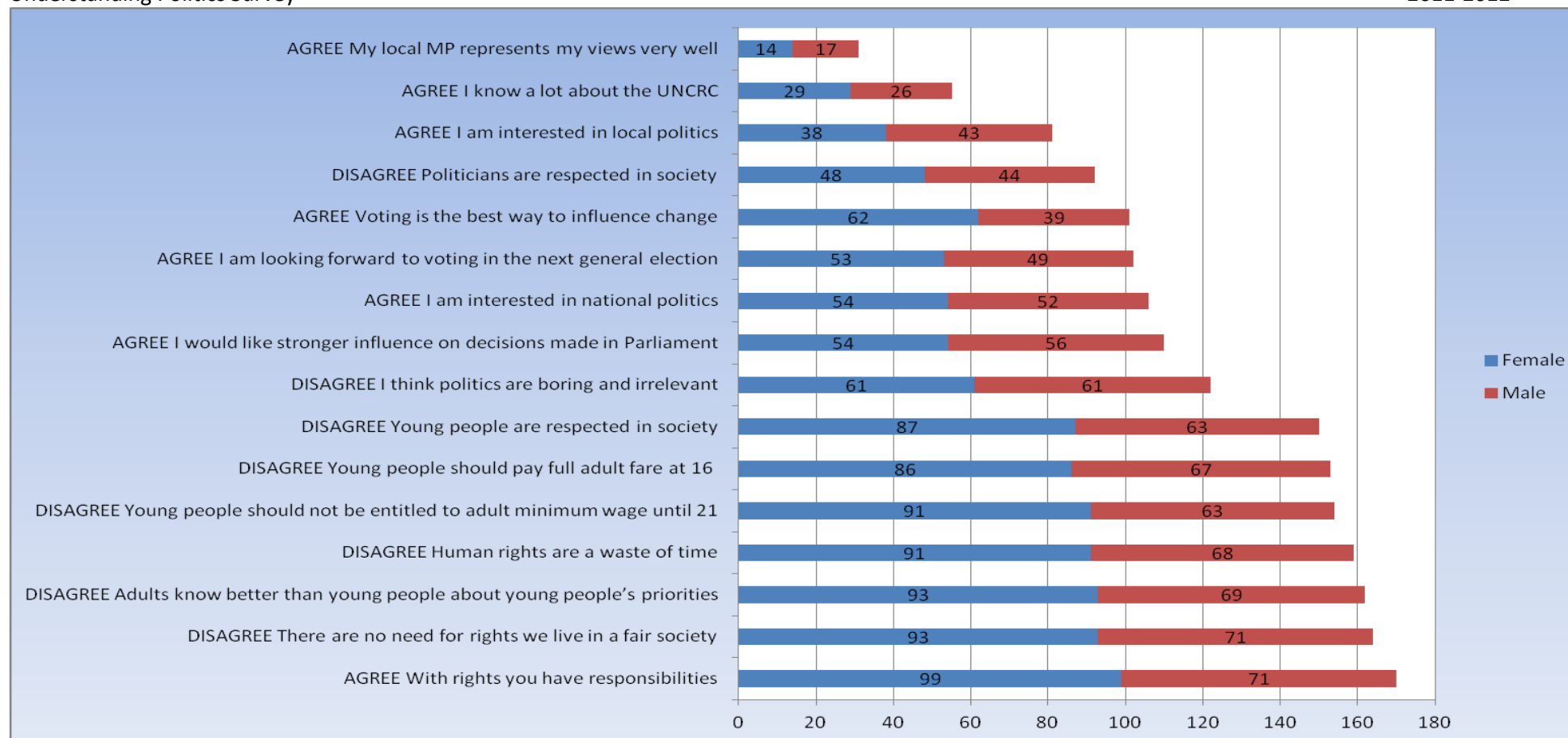


Table 4 – Political statements and replies by gender

Table 4 illustrates replies given to each statement by gender group. 112 young women and 88 young men responded to the survey. Each statement had on average at least two no responses and 27 don't

knows. Except for the notable 93 'don't know' responses to the statement "My local MP represents my views very well".

Score Distribution	<i>Average score or above 14-22</i>	<i>Below average score 3-13</i>	<i>Total</i>
No. of Respondents	116	84	200
Female	61	51	112
Male	55	33	88
College One	24	18	42
College Two	72	14	96
College Three	10	52	62
Citizenship education received	72	31	103
Citizenship education not received	44	53	97

Table 5 Score Distribution

Table 5 illustrates survey participants overall scores from the multiple choice questions and political statements. The table illustrates distribution of scores between genders, college attended and received citizenship education.

Out of 200 respondents to the survey 112 respondents were female and 88 respondents were male. The overall mean score was 14. The median score for females also worked out at 14, whilst the median score for males was 2 points above average at 17.

116 survey participants scored the average combined score of fourteen or above, which was 61 females and 55 males. Males had higher scores (62.5%) than females (54%). Whilst 84 young people scored below the average, which was 51 females and 33 males. Females had lower scores (46.5%) than males (37.5%).

Average or above scores by college attended, 24 were from College One, 72 were from College Two and 10 were from College Three. Below average scores by college attended, 18 from College One, 14 from College Two and 52 from College Three. Scores appeared associated with the type of college attended.

Of the 116 participants in the average or above score range, 72 said they received citizenship education, whilst 44 said they did not receive citizenship education. Of the 84 participants who scored below the average score, 31 said they received citizenship education, whilst 53 said they did not receive citizenship education.

The evidence presented here does not claim direct association between a person receiving citizenship education and levels of political literacy. However the data showed those who did receive citizenship education achieved higher scores than those who did not receive citizenship education.

3. Qualitative Data

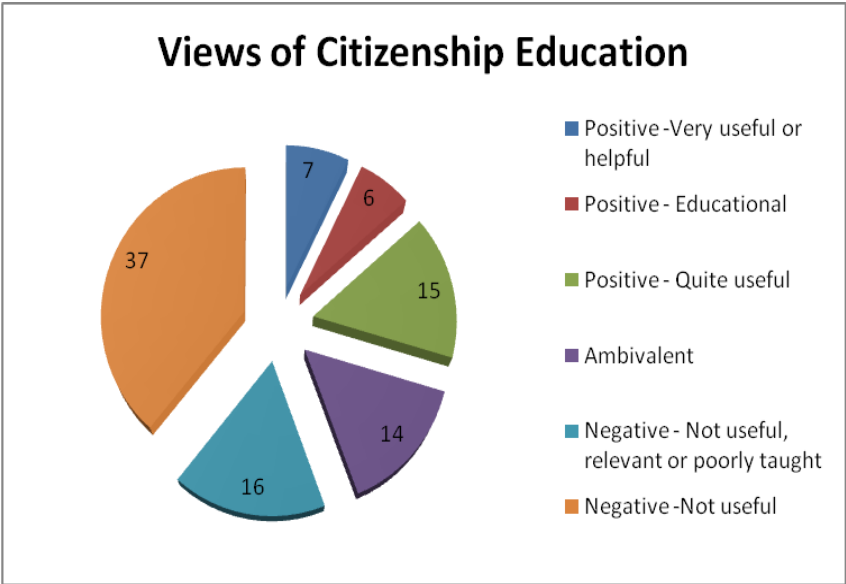


Table 6 Perceptions of Received Citizenship Education

Out of 200 just over half (102) said they received citizenship education despite it being a statutory subject in England and Wales since 2002. Table 8 shows responses from 95 survey participants who indicated how useful citizenship education in school had been to them. Females were more likely to give a positive viewpoint (27 responses in 58) than males (16 responses in 44) to the question of *‘how useful was citizenship education to you?’*

Overall 28 respondents had a positive view of the citizenship education they had received, from considering the lessons quite useful, through to being very useful. Six respondents mentioned things they had learnt about or praised it for the educational content. “You get to think differently and see a different point of view”. More positive comments were; Male 17 “Very useful. Helped to educate me

on important issues in society”, Female 17 “Very useful in learning about the ways things work within a society” and Female 17 “It has told me how to vote, about the government, what I could do as a citizen and how to be a good citizen”.

Yet the majority viewpoint was that citizenship education was not a useful experience (n=53) with many young people having a negative view of the subject. Sixteen young people took issue with the way it was taught or the relevance of what was taught. Some responded it was not taught in an interesting way or they remember that no-one paid any attention in the classes.

Thirty-seven young people described citizenship education as not useful, six of these saying not useful at all. Others said it was pointless

or rubbish. A selection from the 53 negative comments made; Male 16 - “Absolutely useless”, Female 15 - “It makes you think about things in a bad way”, Female 16, - “Rubbish”, Female 16 - “Not very useful, not taught in an interesting way”, Male 17 - “I can’t remember them so not very useful” and Male 18 - “Pointless, mostly Religious Education and wasn’t useful”.

Fourteen respondents were ambivalent about the subject lessons, some was ok but not all of it was useful or relevant. Comments such as Male 16 “It was combined with R.E (Religious Education) and I found that more informative”, Female 17 “Some of them were very insightful, whereas some seemed a bit of a waste of time”

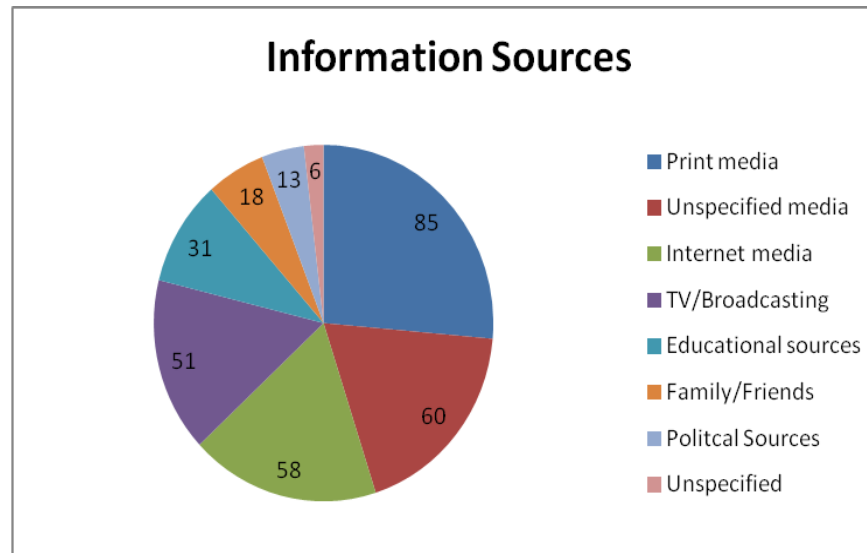
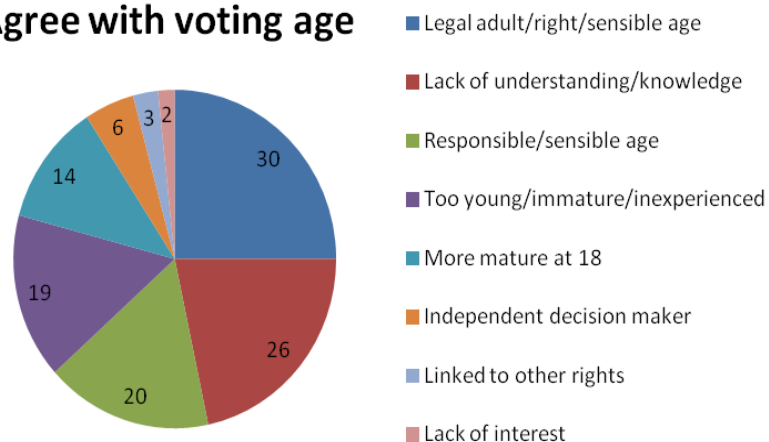


Table 7 Information Sources

‘What are the best sources for you to get political information from?’ Table 7 illustrates 8 categories generated from 322 responses given to, “what are the best sources to get political information from?” Newspapers were the single largest response with 64 specific mentions, making print media including books and magazines the largest overall category. Internet media drew 58 responses along with

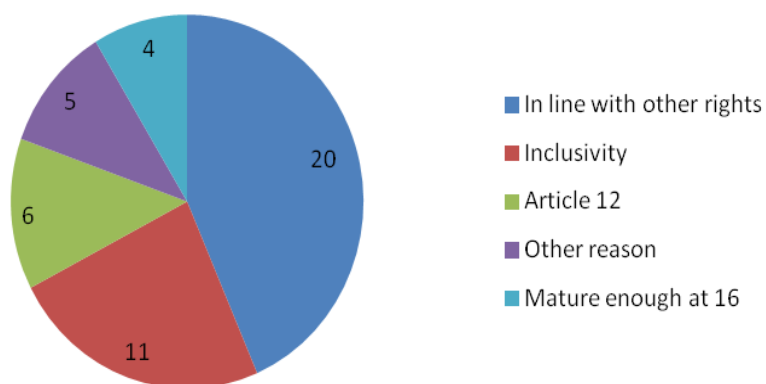
TV and broadcasting’s 51 illustrating the influence of the public sphere.

However much of the data gathered was not specific enough to draw conclusions from, with ‘news’, ‘news media’ and ‘media’ being commonly cited without specific reference to a particular source. This means the information presented here must be treated with extreme caution as it represents only a partial picture.

Question Do you agree with the voting age? Why do you or why not?**Agree with voting age**

Pie Chart 2 gives the eight themed responses from the one hundred and twenty respondents who agreed with the legal age of voting in Britain. Occasionally answers potentially included two or three themes this chart reflects the predominant theme.

Thirty respondents stated variations of eighteen as being, a sensible or suitable age, a good or right age or the legal adult age. Twenty-six respondents stated people younger than 18 have a lack of understanding or knowledge or they are uninformed before the age of eighteen. Twenty respondents agreed with 18 as the legal voting age because they think that is when people are responsible or sensible. Three respondents linked the age of eighteen to other rights at that age.

Disagree with voting age

Pie Chart 3 shows themed comments from the forty-six respondents who disagreed with 18 as the voting age. Commonly they thought the age should be younger, usually given as age sixteen although one respondent said the voting age should be ten. The main reason given for disagreeing with the voting age was that it should be in line with other rights (no taxation without representation)

Four respondents disagreed with the voting age of 18, but did not respond why this was so. Nine respondents got the original, 'what is the legal voting age?' question (N) wrong but an examination of the data showed the majority of these incorrect answers belonged to young people who were studying English as a second language.

4. Additional Information

Chi-square for Table 1 data

Category	Observed	Expected	Square Expected Value
1)			
Voting Age	190	153.75	
Democracy	159	153.75	
Referendum	156	153.75	
MP stands for...	155	153.75	
Cabinet	147	153.75	
Constitution	145	153.75	
Accountability	141	153.75	
Lobbying	137	153.75	0.256344504
2)			
Conservative	102	115.75	
Liberal	102	115.75	
Labour	102	115.75	
Green	157	115.75	0.000205

Young people were asked multiple choice questions to find out about their political knowledge.

The low value for the chi-square in 2) $\sum 0.000205$ indicated a high correlation between young people and a lack of political knowledge regarding the three main political parties.

CODE BOOK Questionnaire Information and Variable Allocation

Excel Column	Questionnaire Text	Words or the letter <i>y</i> in italics indicates the correct answer to question
B	1. How old are you?	
C	2. Are you Male or Female?	
D	3. What is your ethnic background?	
E	4. Do you consider yourself disabled in any way?	
F	5. What are you studying?	
G	6. Did you have Citizenship lessons at school? Yes No If no please go to Q10	
H	7. Were they combined with PSHE lessons? Yes No Don't Know	
I	8. a) How long were the lessons?	
J	b) How frequent were they?	
K	9. If you did have citizenship education please say how useful you think it has been for you.	
L	10. Please say what you think the best sources are for you to get political information from	
M	11. What do the letters MP stand for?(<i>Member of Parliament</i>)	
N	12. a) Which is the legal age to vote in Britain... 16 18 <i>y</i> 20 21	
O	b) Do you agree with this? Yes No	
P	c) Why?	
Q	13. Does the word democracy mean...	
	a) Government by a small group of PR consultants	c) The rule of society by the wealthy
	b) An absence or lack of government	d) <i>Government by the people or their elected representatives y</i>
R	14. What is accountability...	
	a) Good money management	c) A term used in business for creating accounts
	b) <i>To be responsible for your actions y</i>	d) To receive praise
S	15. If someone is lobbying in Parliament what are they doing?	
	a) <i>Trying to influence someone on behalf of a particular interest y</i>	c) Having an argument in the House of Lords
	b) Throwing a ball to someone in a long slow arc	d) Keeping records of parliamentary expenses

CODE BOOK Questionnaire Information and Variable Allocation

T	16. What is a constitution?
	a) Walking in the morning to keep healthy
	b) Where constituents live or work
	c) <i>A fundamental set of rules or principles for government</i> y
	d) A proposal for a new law in Parliament
U	17. Is a referendum...
	a) A chance for referees to meet
	b) <i>A vote on an issue of public importance</i> y
	c) Something you send with a job application
	d) To direct the attention of someone to a reference
V	18. What is the Cabinet?
	a) A very old cupboard in the House of Lords
	b) <i>A group of ministers with influential positions in government</i> y
	c) Where voting papers are kept in the House of Commons
	d) An ornate room where politicians meet the Queen
	19. Please match <u>each</u> political party with its <u>traditional</u> approach to politics
W	a) Conservative Party isz W) Socialism (Left-Wing)
X	b) Green Party is..... y X) Social liberalism
Y	c) Labour Party is..... w Y) Environmentalism
Z	d) Liberal Party is..... x Z) Neo-liberalism (Right-Wing)
	Please circle the number on the scale that best represents how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.
	1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree.
	Politics
AB	I am interested in local politics
AC	I think politics are boring and irrelevant
AD	Politicians are respected in society
AE	I am interested in national politics
	Voting
AF	Voting is the best way to influence change
AG	I am looking forward to voting in the next general election
AH	My local MP represents my views very well
AI	I would like to have a stronger influence on decisions that are made in Parliament

CODE BOOK Questionnaire Information and Variable Allocation

	Rights
AJ	With rights, you have responsibilities
AK	I know a lot about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child
AL	Human Rights are a waste of time
AM	There are no need for rights, we live in a fair society
	Equality
AN	Young people should pay full adult fare on public transport at 16 years old
AO	Young people are respected in society
AP	Young people should not be entitled to the full adult minimum wage until they are 21
AQ	Adults always know better than young people about young people's priorities

Variable Allocation

Excel Column	Description	Allocation Information				
A	Case No. Eg: 11160109 (Area 1, female, 16, CE, score 9)	Area 1 W 2 C 3 H	Gender 1 Female 2 Male 9 No Info	Age 14 -20 09 No Info	Citizenship Education 01 Yes 02 No 09 No Info	Political Knowledge 01 -12 00 No score
B	Age	14 – 20 years old				9 = No Info
C	Gender	1 = Female	2 = Male	9 = No Info		
D	Ethnicity	1 = British	2 = European	3 = Asian	4 = Mixed Race	9 = No Info
E	Disability	1 = Yes	2 = No	9 = No Info		
F	Studying	1 = A levels	2 = A levels with politics or sociology	3 = Vocational	9 = No Info	
G	Citizenship Education	1 = Yes	2 = No	9 = No Info		
H	With PSHE	1 = Yes	2 = No	3 = Don't Know	9 = No Info	
I	Length	1 = 50-60 mins	2 = Day	9 = No Info		
J	Duration	1 = Weekly	2 = Fortnightly	3 = Termly/Monthly	9 = No Info	
K	Usefulness	1 = Positive	2 = Negative	3 = Ambivalent	9 = No Info	
L	Sources					
M	Qone	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info		
N	Qtwo	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info		
O	Agree voting age	1 = Yes	2 = No	9 = No Info		
P	Why					
Q	Qthree	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info		

CODE BOOK Questionnaire Information and Variable Allocation

R	Qfour	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
S	Qfive	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
T	Qsix	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
U	Qseven	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
V	Qeight	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
W	Qnine	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
X	Qten	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
Y	Qeleven	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
Z	Qtwelve	1 = Correct	2 = Incorrect	9 = No Info
AA	Total Score	From 1 - 12		
		Collapsed scale - 1 = Strongly Agree/Agree; 2 = Disagree/Strongly Disagree; 3 = Don't Know		
AB	Politics 25	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AC	Politics 26	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AD	Politics 27	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AE	Politics 28	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AF	Voting 29	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AG	Voting 30	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AH	Voting 31	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AI	Voting 32	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AJ	Rights 33	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AK	Rights 34	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AL	Rights 35	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AM	Rights 36	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AN	Equality 37	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AO	Equality 38	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AP	Equality 39	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info
AQ	Equality 40	1 = Agree	2 = Disagree	3 = Don't Know 9 = No Info

About the Research Project

This project is called '*Understanding Politics*' and is a study looking at young people's knowledge and understanding of politics. You are invited to take part in the study to help us better understand what supports or hinders political understanding and knowledge.

Purpose and value of study

This research is concerned with establishing how ready young people are to be politically engaged and what support they need to engage. In particular young people aged 16-20 who are nearly or have just reached the legal age to vote.

Invitation to participate

If you are a young person between 16-20 years of age we would greatly value your views and invite you to attend a ninety-minute focus group meeting run at a location to suit you. The focus group will run for **no longer** than an hour and a half and will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time.

Who is organising the research

My name is Karen Badlan, I am a PhD Research Student at Anglia Ruskin University, in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education. This research is supported by a small team of co-researchers from Cambridge. This research has gained ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Panel and is being completed as part of my PhD studies .

What will happen to the results of the study

The results of the study will be presented in journals or at seminars to further understanding about young people's political engagement. A brief resume of the findings will be emailed to all participants at the end of the study.

Source of funding for the research

This research is funded through an Anglia Ruskin University studentship.

Questions about your involvement...

Why have I been asked to take part?

As a young person almost, or recently eligible to vote we would like to know how ready you are to politically engage and what supports or prevents your engagement.

Can I refuse to take part?

Your involvement in this project is *entirely voluntary* and it is your decision to take part. At no point should you feel pressured to stay involved in the project and *you have the right to withdraw at any stage* of the research process.

Can I withdraw at any time, and how?

You can leave the focus group session at any point you choose and you do not have to give a reason why. Please just tell the organiser you are leaving -thanks.

What will happen if I agree to take part in the focus group?

The focus group session will take about an hour and a half to run . It includes a brief registration form, a welcome and introduction and a debrief at the end. The purpose of the focus group is to generate discussion in three areas—about politics, political sources of knowledge and political interest or engagement.

With your permission we would appreciate being able to sound record the focus group discussion. After a week there will be an opportunity for participants to attend a paired follow-up interview.

What risks are there and what will be done to ensure my wellbeing?

The subject of politics can raise strong feelings, the focus group will be run on the understanding that everyone is respectfully entitled to their opinion - even if others disagree with that opinion. Ground rules will be negotiated during the introduction.

The focus group is designed to be an enjoyable and interesting experience for you. Your participation is not expected to have any negative impact on your studies.

Why should I take part in the research?

This study is an opportunity for young people to have a voice in research which focuses on young people's understanding and engagement with politics. Your opinion will add to existing research aiming to support young people's political involvement. Your involvement is time to reflect on your personal political values and to hear what other people have to say about theirs.

Your involvement continued...

What will happen to information that is collected from me?

All the data collected from the focus group session will be kept confidential and secure—in locked rooms, locked filing cabinets and on password protected computers. After one year, or earlier if you withdraw from the focus group, all data and any personal information collected will be securely destroyed.

The discussion data will be written up into a research report and will form part of my PhD thesis.

How will my participation in the project be kept confidential?

Confidential data will be securely stored as outlined above, your college will not be named or made easily identifiable in subsequent reports. Your real name will be replaced by a substitute name in all reports written about the research to protect your anonymity.

Contacts

Researcher

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Thank you very much for your time and co-operation



Anglia Ruskin
University

Cambridge & Chelmsford

Understanding Politics

Participant Information Sheet

Focus Group

2014

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR
FUTURE REFERENCE

Phase II - Focus Group Schedule | 2013

Check all participants have signed and returned consent form

Background information sheet to be filled in prior to focus group starting:

Name, age, gender, citizenship education, political experiences, type of engagement.

Welcome and Introduction

15mins

- Who we are and why we are here.
- Key points off PIS – voluntary informed consent, ground rules including confidentiality
- We would like to record this activity is that ok? To identify participants' voice/position in circle for sound recording. My name is.... My favourite.....is..... (prompt cards)

Discussion One	Defining Politics	20mins
Questions – What do you think politics is? What counts as being political?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures Discuss your own picture or choose one off the display to discuss how or why it represents politics to you. What do you all think about what X just said? 		
Discussion Two	Political Knowledge	20mins
Questions – What do you think supports your political knowledge? What hinders your political knowledge?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we all think of one source (headers) of political information that supports your interest or knowledge (chart of previous groups responses) 		
Discussion Three	Political Opportunities	20mins
Questions - Are you interested in being politically active? What ways would you be politically active?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree/Disagree Statements <i>I am politically active</i> <i>I will vote in the next GE*</i> <i>I think young people should get to vote at sixteen</i> <i>I know who my local MP is</i> <i>My MP represents my views well</i> <i>Politicians (local/national)are easily accessible</i> 		

*GE –General Election

Debrief

15mins

- Turn off recorder
- Any comments or questions? Copy of findings will be emailed to participants when research finished.
- Need a week to reflect before coming back to do paired interviews. Look in pack for PIS and consent forms to participants, discuss interviews, the pairing process and potential dates.

Thank you very much for taking part



One of two Singaporean Cambridge graduates who were accepted to study double-deck buses on the ground having been asked to open later this year
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April 2009



