

The Citizenship Foundation [1993]

The Citizenship Foundation was established in 1989, by solicitor Andrew Phillips, as an independent educational charity to extend the work of the Law in Education project. That had been largely funded by the Law Society in response to the growing awareness that schools were not meeting the needs of young people, in terms of preparing them to know and understand the nature of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. It now employs five full-time staff and one part-timer and has some additional voluntary help in running a wide range of projects.

The Foundation is based on the assumption that a properly functioning democracy needs well-informed and responsible citizens who respect the rule of law, understand their system of government and have the necessary skills to participate in the communities to which they belong.

That is clearly not the picture of current society which most readily springs to mind. A more accurate description would reflect a lack of understanding of the political and legal systems and certainly no sense of ownership or identification with the law. The majority of citizens have little confidence in their ability to affect what happens to them or their communities.

Against such a background the main purpose of the Citizenship Foundation is to enable people of all ages, but especially the young, to become more effective citizens by developing their capacity to understand social, moral and political issues, based on a concern for justice and the rights of others. It seeks to achieve these overall aims in a variety of ways.

A large part of its work is school-based with the development of all ability, law-related materials. In addition to *Understand the Law* for the 14-16 age group, *Living with the Law* for 11-14 year-olds has recently been published with funding from the Law Society and the National Curriculum Council. With support from the Home Office it is also developing materials for primary school children. There are five units, on Rules, Friendship, Property, Community/Environment and Respecting Differences. These encompass problems of moral and social responsibility and begin to look at certain law-related issues such as theft. In adult education the Foundation is producing a citizenship pack which is directed to increasing knowledge and understanding of such areas as the parliamentary and legal systems.

One aim, clearly spelled out, is that "the Foundation will seek ways of enriching provision for those for whom the quality of citizenship would otherwise be poor." In school terms this is the less able third who have been largely ignored in educational initiatives. The termly magazine *BUZZ* exemplifies the projects which have them particularly in mind. In its five issues it has covered some profound law-related issues in a popular way, making use of cartoons and colour.

Many schools take part in the Motorola Youth Parliament Competition, which involves 200 or more of their pupils across the whole ability range. A new project funded by the City Parochial Foundation will develop citizenship education materials for pupils with learning difficulties.

On the broader scene, there are many important and complex issues surrounding the law about which people (and not just the young) are bewildered. They do not feel they have a role to play in discussion, certainly no involvement in the decision-making process. The Foundation has particularly attempted to address this problem in relation to the Maastricht Treaty, potentially of enormous influence in the lives of most people, yet understood by only a handful. It produced, in conjunction with The European, a 50-page booklet *Maastricht Made Simple*. This was sent free to every school—as was the follow-up video. This offers impartial and informative explanations, with "thumbnail" summaries of the arguments for and against each section of the Treaty.

It is too soon to predict how far these seeds will spread: the evidence is that they are certainly taking root. Teachers find a positive response to the materials and young people using them demonstrably increase in the skill and confidence required to make their own judgments about moral, social and legal issues. At a practical level this has its most obvious manifestation in the Bar Mock Trial Competition, now about to go into its third year. Schools prepare a team of students to take on the roles of barristers, witnesses, defendants and juries. Specially written cases are presented to "real" judges in Crown Courts around the country. There is no sense in which this is designed to produce lawyers of the future. It is meant to give school students, most of whom turn out never to have been in a court before, a proper feel of how and why the legal process operates in the way it does—at least at one level.

A programme which is concerned to look at the fast-growing problem of those who have had direct experience of the law and the courts is the Young Offender Project. The previously identified, negative feelings and attitude towards the law, are magnified many times in those young people who are caught breaking it. So far the project has run some group discussions with young offenders, using existing materials. The hope is that these law-related materials might encourage greater moral awareness and help to correct what is often a distorted view of the law and society.

The knowledge and understanding gained through all these projects is now being shared with so me of the newly-democratic countries of Central and Eastern Europe. For different reasons, they have distrust and disillusionment with the old system of law and government, but considerable apprehension about what is being put in its place. There are suspicions about any attempt to create a new ideology. Yet for democracy to take root, young people, in particular, need to learn how to exercise their rights and responsibilities, whilst having respect for the rights of others. They also need to believe that justice and the rule of law can be a reality. These are tasks which require time and resources, both of which are in limited supply in the new democracies. With funding from the Law Society, the Foundation has offered to supply any of its materials which seem likely to help, plus training in using them. So far, the Foundation has worked with teachers and educators to adapt materials for schools and colleges in Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary. In Bulgaria, the law-related approach was particularly appealing to teachers who saw it as practical and less contentious than "education for democracy." They involved Bulgarian lawyers in some of their work. Some of the materials have been translated into Russian and are in use in Russian schools. There is also a longer term plan to work with teachers, lawyers and human rights workers in Russia, to try to establish an organisation along similar lines to the Citizenship Foundation.

The message from all of this is that maintaining civil society, based on the values of justice, respect for the rule of law and the rights of others, is a hugely difficult task in a pluralist community. The Citizenship Foundation rests on the assumption that it is not an impossible one.

Jan Newton, Chief Executive. Spring 1993