Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship?
A Challenge for the Nation-state

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Abstract

This paper argues that in our global age we need a new type of citizenship education which challenges some commonly held assumptions about citizenship learning in schools. It examines the potential of education for cosmopolitan citizenship, which might be developed to replace current models of education for national citizenship, which sometimes risk being exclusive and ethno-nationalist. The author conceptualizes citizenship as status, feeling and practice. The paper draws on examples from Britain and from a range of international contexts to examine the limitations of current models, arguing that cosmopolitanism is not necessarily in tension with emotional ties to the nation but that the nation also needs to be re-imagined as diverse and cosmopolitan, if nation-states are to respond effectively to the pressures of globalization, labour migration and change. Rather than seeing diversity as a threat to democracy, the author argues it is essential to its vitality.
The impact of globalization on the demographics of different nation-states has led to a renewed focus on civic education which promotes national belonging and loyalty, often targeting, either explicitly or implicitly, students from minority or migration backgrounds. Official policies for education for democratic citizenship may address diversity, yet they tend to do so from a strongly national perspective.

This paper argues that in our global age we need a new type of citizenship education which challenges some commonly held assumptions about citizenship learning in schools. It examines the potential of education for cosmopolitan citizenship (Osler & Starkey 2003, 2005) a concept which has been developed both theoretically and in applied contexts, through research with young people (Osler & Starkey 2003, 2005).

1. Citizenship Education and the Nation-state

At the beginning of the twenty-first century and in our global age, citizenship education programmes typically remain focused on the nation and citizens’ supposed natural affinity to the nation-state. It is important to explore and theorize the relationship between civic or citizenship education and the nation-state, in the context of globalization. From this starting point, it is possible to propose an alternative approach to the education of young citizens, that of education for cosmopolitan citizenship.

To begin, the paper reflects on national citizenship as a status, a feeling and a practice (Osler & Starkey 2006). It examines some of the different ways in which education for citizenship is constructed to support a primary affinity to the nation, considering some of the pitfalls and tensions which arise when such policies are pursued. It considers scales of belonging, other than that of the nation, focusing on the local, regional and global. It then examines how official policies for democratic citizenship address diversity, reflecting on the relationship between democracy and diversity. This first part of the paper examines the potential of education for cosmopolitan citizenship (Osler & Vincent 2002; Osler & Starkey 2003, 2005).

2. Citizenship as Status, Feeling and Practice

Citizenship can be conceptualized as a status, a feeling and a practice (Osler & Starkey 2005). It is most commonly conceived by governmental bodies as a status. Citizenship as status is, in many ways, exclusive: although individuals can hold dual citizenship, so that, for example, an individual can be a Pakistani citizen and a British citizen (holding two passports), either a person is a citizen of a nation-state, or s/he is not. This conception of citizenship...
contrasts with the status of all individuals as holders of human rights. The status of human rights holder, unlike that of citizenship, is inclusive. All human beings, including those who are stateless, are holders of human rights.

Citizenship can also be conceived as a feeling or sense of belonging. The degree to which a person feels they belong is not necessarily related to formal status, although legal entitlements obtained through citizenship status may be among those goods which enable a person to feel they belong. Prerequisites for belonging are likely to include: access to services and resources; legal rights of residence; social and psychological security; an absence of discrimination and/or legal redress if discrimination occurs; and acceptance by others within the community.

Citizenship can also be conceptualized as practice. Citizenship as practice is the everyday citizenship engagement in which each individual can participate, in working alongside others to make a difference. Citizenship in this sense is the everyday political, social, economic and cultural activities in which people engage to shape the community, most commonly in the immediate locality or at the level of a town or city, but also at other scales, including national and global.

Citizenship as status, feeling and practice are interlinked: citizenship status may give an individual a sense of security and enable them to feel they belong and so enhance their engagement in the affairs of the community. Nevertheless, the three elements are also discrete; so, for example, it is not necessary to have citizenship status in order to be an active, contributing member of society, engaged in the practice of citizenship.

3. Education for Democratic Citizenship and National Belonging

Education for national citizenship focuses on one or more elements of citizenship, but tends to emphasize citizenship as status. So citizenship education programmes typically address knowledge about the constitution and the legal entitlements and duties of citizenship, such as voting, knowing and obeying the law and paying taxes (even though these responsibilities are not necessarily restricted to those who hold the formal status of citizen).

This emphasis on knowledge-based learning is sometimes seen by policy-makers and educators to stand in tension with that of education for citizenship as practice, which is often locally or community focused, and is likely to include community engagement or service learning. Education for citizenship as practice is sometimes targeted at students who are perceived to be less academic in their interests, or who are judged to be lower achievers. For
example, Scott and Cogan (2010) report that a course entitled ‘Community Civics’ was proposed in the United States during the second decade of the twentieth century. It aimed to prepare school-leavers to fulfill their roles in participatory citizenship. The proposal was in tension with what remains today a standard U.S. knowledge-based civics education almost a century later. The same tension between traditional civics and community-focused learning also continues in England at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where some teachers argue that lower-attaining students are better suited to locally based community learning than to knowledge-based citizenship courses focusing on the nation and beyond (Osler & Savvides 2009).

Nevertheless, education for national citizenship also stresses, in many contexts, citizenship as feeling as well as citizenship as status. Taking the case of Singapore, Baildon and Sim (2010) discuss the challenge faced by government of ‘managing identities’. They report that, in Singapore, official discourse stresses a sense of belonging as something critical to the national curriculum, and to ‘national survival’. According to this perspective, without such education, there is a real danger that young Singaporeans will pack their bags and take flight if they see better opportunities elsewhere. Therefore, they need to be encouraged to develop a stronger sense of national pride and learn ‘the Singapore story’, which recalls the struggles of political leaders and past generations. The aim is to encourage young citizens to recognize a duty and vital obligation in protecting their country, and overcoming its apparent vulnerability.

Senior politicians in Britain have also stressed the importance of a strong sense of national identity, through the study of British history and the British story of democracy, with such calls gaining momentum after the suicide bombings in London in 2005. In this development within citizenship education, a new emphasis is attached to the nation’s ethnic diversity. This development needs critical analysis, stemming as it does from a concern about terrorism (Osler & Starkey 2006), yet largely avoiding discussion of continuing barriers to democracy such as inequalities and racism (Osler 2008).

4. Democracy, Diversity and Hidden Histories

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, references to diversity within citizenship education policies usually imply ethnic and cultural diversity. Some policy documents celebrate the diverse populations of the nation-state, but fail to take into consideration the differential access that different groups encounter in accessing citizenship rights. They neglect to examine power relations or barriers to citizenship, historical or contemporary. So, for example, the founding document of the citizenship curriculum for England, The Crick
Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship? A Challenge for the Nation-state

report (QCA 1998), referred positively to diversity in the UK, particularly the diverse histories of England of the component countries of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but presented the citizenship project as complete. It did not acknowledge, for example, on-going political tensions and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, or the historical and on-going struggle for women’s equality across the UK, where women remain under-represented in parliament and in senior positions in industry, suffering a gender penalty in pay, despite equal opportunities legislation. Similarly, there was no discussion of racism in society or in education, or of the differences in examination outcomes between different ethnic groups in English schools, which impact on access universities and future employment opportunities. On-going struggles for equality of rights are overlooked. As Bryan (2008 & 2010) reminds us, citizenship education policies and other related policies addressing, for example, intercultural or multicultural education, need to be contextualized within a broader legislative framework relating to citizenship, immigration and social cohesion.

As we have seen, history is sometimes harnessed to tell a national story of citizenship, as in the Singapore story, and this telling of the national story can be found not only in school texts and promoted through formal education, but also in museums, where it is often presented in a compelling way, as in the National Museum of Singapore, where it is retold for children and adults alike, and for citizens, residents and, indeed, visitors and tourists to the country. Of course, in Singapore as elsewhere, there are many different histories to be told, and it is these different perspectives, when explored, that can engage young people as critical learners. In examining diversity, it is important to identify the silences around certain forms of diversity, particularly silences around gender and women’s citizenship. In national stories it would appear that the citizen is rarely gendered; that ethnic and cultural diversity is often portrayed either as new or as something which must be carefully managed. Political dissent is rarely seen as progressive, unless part of a struggle against a colonial power, or in a story where the nation has (re)-established democracy, after a period of dictatorship.

Interestingly, the British story of democracy is set largely within the territorial confines of the United Kingdom, and Prime Minister Gordon Brown calls for a new sense of patriotic pride, which aims to be inclusive and to avoid any basis in ethnic exclusivity and which will be realized through the teaching of British history. Unfortunately, the rhetoric ignores the multiple histories and perspectives of a diverse nation (Osler 2009). It also ignores the legacy of empire. The modern international institution of the Commonwealth remains a key forum for international dialogue for many member-states, significantly within Africa, with key meetings reported in the media and regular celebrations and holidays. Yet this institution is largely overlooked in the British media, receives minimum recognition among the British public, and receives, at best, passing mention in British schools. Commonwealth Day is
celebrated around the world by school children, but few join such celebrations in the United Kingdom.

5. Democracy and Diversity

National political and educational programmes in progress at the beginning of the twenty-first century continue to draw a line between rightful, deserving citizens and an alien Other; within this outsider grouping are some who hold citizenship status, but who are nevertheless portrayed as an alien threat. In such an atmosphere of fear, refugees and asylum seekers are no longer vulnerable people in need of assistance and with an entitlement to have their claims considered, but are portrayed as unscrupulous individuals exploiting both international law and those who rightfully belong. Reid and Gill (2010) show how the Australian government, under Prime Minister Howard, promoted such a message of fear, in the wake of the 2001 attacks on the United States, preventing migrants seeking refugee status from landing in Australia and making their claims.

In the revised national curriculum for citizenship in England (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2007) the British story of democracy is presented as a completed project, as it was in the curriculum’s important founding document, the Crick Report (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998), rather than a process which needs continual renewal. Particular groups are identified as ‘vulnerable’, less likely to identify with the nation and therefore in need of specific targeted compensatory education. British government funds are thus being set aside for programmes aimed at preventing ‘violent extremism’ and the radicalization of young Muslims (Home Office 2008). The official title of this funding initiative is ‘Prevent’. Some people call it ‘Provoke’, reflecting an anxiety that the labeling of young Muslims in this way will provoke antagonism, both within Muslim communities and towards them. Effectively, whole groups of citizens are classed as having a deficit in terms of their loyalty to the polity.

Sears (2010) considers education for citizenship within the context of diversity, observing that the reconciliation of different positions has always been part of the Canadian framework. Following Kymlicka (2003), he notes how Canada is distinctive in having to address three types of diversity (national minorities, immigrants and indigenous peoples). What is curious is that diversity in so many national contexts continues to be seen as a problem, or at best, a challenge, rather than an asset to democracy (Osler 2008; Parker 2002). The vision that democracy needs diversity (political, cultural and social) in order to flourish and regenerate is lost. There is little recognition that democracy has developed to accommodate and resolve differences of opinion and perspective, while at the same time
protecting the interests of minorities, and that if we all thought alike, there would be little need for democratic procedures and processes.

6. Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship and Human Rights

In our global age, not all young people at school are citizens of the nation-state in which they are studying. Citizenship education cannot be premised on the notion that all students are citizens or aspirant citizens. From 2002 to 2003, James Banks at the University of Washington in Seattle convened an international panel of scholars, who produced a report designed to inform teachers and policy makers and to act as a starting point for discussion in developing or reviewing citizenship education programmes appropriate for multicultural democracies in a global age. While all students may not necessarily be citizens, all are holders of human rights. It is partly for this reason that I would stress the principle of the Banks panel, that: ‘The teaching of human rights should underpin citizenship education courses and programs in multicultural nation-states’ (Banks et al. 2005). This principle, I would argue, should apply in all schools, regardless of the ethnic or cultural composition of the student population or the nation in question.

Recognition that all human beings are holders of human rights is also an underpinning principle of education for cosmopolitan citizenship. The human rights project is a cosmopolitan project, which assumes the equal entitlement to rights of all human beings. Education for cosmopolitan citizenship as a theoretical construct in which citizenship at all scales, from the local to the global, is reconceptualized, to enable young people to recognize our common humanity and express solidarity with others at all levels from the local to the global, accepting and valuing diversity at all these levels (Osler & Vincent 2002; Osler & Starkey 2003, 2005).

Education for cosmopolitan citizenship is thus conceptualized, not as an alternative to national citizenship education, nor, as has sometimes been interpreted, as a synonym for global citizenship education. It requires that we re-imagine the nation as cosmopolitan, and that we reconceptualize education for national citizenship so that it meets more adequately the needs of contemporary nation-states and the global community. It demands we acknowledge there are many ways of being Australian, Brazilian, British, Canadian, Japanese, Mexican, Singaporean, and so on.

Citizenship does not necessarily require a deep love of country; it requires minimally a commitment to the polity. It is policy and legislative frameworks designed to promote greater social justice and remove barriers to full participative citizenship which will allow individuals
to develop affective ties to the nation. Efforts by nation-states to promote national identity and affinity through education, in response to perceived threats, risk unintended outcomes, provoke concerns about propaganda and threaten, rather than secure, social cohesion and democratic participation.

Interestingly, within EU member states, an assumed binary between education for national and global citizenship (Marshall 2009) is troubled by the issue of European citizenship and belonging (Osler & Savvides 2009; Osler 2010). Evidence is also emerging that many young people do not identify primarily or exclusively with the nation-state but have flexible and shifting identities (Mitchell & Parker 2008; Osler & Starkey 2003). At all levels, national, region, global and especially at the local level, education for cosmopolitan citizenship responds to the realities of learning to live together and to develop a dialogue with those whose perspectives are different from our own. Education for cosmopolitan citizenship recognizes these realities and offers an alternative way of reconceptualizing education for citizenship in our globalised world and globalised communities.

References:


