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Ethnicity, gender, social class and citizenship: comparative views from England and Sweden

Ralph Leighton and Laila Nielsen

This article compares initial findings of a project comparing the experiences of students and teachers of Citizenship Education in Sweden and England. Further publications are planned.

Introduction

The National Curriculum provision for Citizenship Education in England clearly requires that the subject must be taught throughout KS 3 and KS 4, with content indicated and a public examination available at KS4; until recently,

there was also an A level. In Sweden - where Citizenship Education is not a separate subject - the content is vague and teachers' interpretations of the assignment differ distinctively between the different schools and programmes. This contrasting provision between two countries which have both prided themselves on their welfare provision and policies of inclusive citizenship was considered ideal to examine the extent to which different approaches produce more or less aware, articulate and active citizens. We interviewed teachers and secondary school students, asking them about their experiences and opinions regarding Citizenship Education and the nature of citizenship. The following questions formed the core of the interviews:

- What knowledge and skills does a citizen need in a democracy and how is the meaning of citizenship connected to gender, class and ethnicity?
 - How are personal liberties affected by the citizen's gender, class and ethnicity, according to the respondents?
 - What are teachers' and students' experiences of Citizenship Education and how does school pay attention to citizens' developing citizens conditions based on gender, class and ethnicity?
- These questions were only the core, however. As researchers we didn't want to impose our world view or our version of events, so each interview

was constructed around the interests and preferred direction of those being interviewed. Our main theoretical reference was the work of T. H. Marshall¹ and his theory of Citizenship. The main thesis of this is that citizenship in Western industrialized countries could be divided into three forms:

- Civil Citizenship*, which is represented in equality before the law, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and other personal liberties;
- Political Citizenship*, typified by universal and equal suffrage
- Social Citizenship*, including the right to education, health care, and other conditions for social welfare.²

Civil and political citizenship are fairly self-evident but social citizenship requires clarification. Social citizenship concerns the extent to which the members of any socially constructed category have sufficient conditions and capabilities to be considered as full citizens, not only with regard to legal status but also their experiences in relation to those of other citizens and as seen by those other citizens. For example, equal pay and employment legislation needs to be reflected in people's daily experiences and to be accepted by all as natural and proper for social citizenship to be a reality.

We know from research in both countries, and elsewhere, that gender, class and ethnicity have determining influences on students' conditions and results in school to varying degrees. We also know that they have a significant impact on youngsters' future prospects as citizens and that the impact is inconsistent, depending on the combination of those variables. For example, a

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middle-class female student of Asian origin in England might not share her experiences and conditions of schooling and of life more generally with an English middle class girl of European origin, nor with a middle-class Swedish girl of Asian origin.

Summary of findings

Ethnicity

Students in both countries perceived that ethnicity can act as a hindrance to social citizenship, but not an insurmountable one. In Sweden, some of the students interviewed expressed anti-immigrant beliefs: e.g. preferential treatment for migrants, albeit presented anecdotally rather than on the basis of evidence. Respondents in both countries presented ethnicity as a social hierarchy, although students' attitudes to the importance of ethnicity for Citizenship differed between the two countries and within Sweden. All the English students, and those Swedish students studying academic programmes, expressed support for a multicultural society - aware that anti-immigrant views existed but they did not consider them widespread or deeply entrenched.

Gender

Perceptions of women's citizenship experiences are common to both countries, although the English students identified and condemned this irrespective of gender whereas in Sweden it was of greater concern to female students. Women were understood to be legally entitled to the full rights and obligations of citizens but the reality in both countries was that, especially with regard to wages and important positions in society, it is still men who make the most money and hold the greatest power. Students in both countries were confident that gender equality would improve when the generation currently in charge of society has handed over power to the younger generations.

Social Class

Among the English respondents, social class was considered less significant than income and opportunity. Teachers and students in England were largely in agreement, putting less emphasis on the importance of class and ethnicity for citizenship than was the case among the Swedish

respondents. The Swedish respondents had a clearer understanding of social class than their English counterparts. In Sweden class was identified as directly related to income and social status of occupation whereas, in England, students were more likely to refer to particular areas and stereotype attitudes and income but avoid the use of 'class' as a descriptor.

Differences in responses could be related to the students' class backgrounds rather than their national backgrounds, presenting one example of how different social locations can affect students' judgements of their own and others' perceptions and meanings of belonging.

Other general points

Political awareness

All respondents in both countries agreed on the importance of political knowledge in the sense of both understanding the system and knowing how to get involved and influence politics. English teachers, and the Swedish teachers of pre-university students, had a greater belief in their students' political awareness than was the case among the Swedish teachers on a vocational programme. We are aware that this could reflect the nature of the samples rather than being an absolute truth, as most the students in England had studied Citizenship Education and most of the teachers were subject specialists. There were therefore more opportunities for students and teachers to discuss political issues and to demonstrate their political knowledge.

Language skills

In the Swedish context, the importance of adequate language skills were discussed as a key issue both as an important general question for the integration of immigrants, but also as a tool to be able to participate actively in society.

Most of the students of Swedish as a second language had arrived as adults and so having a sufficient grasp of Swedish to access civil society was of particular importance to them.

The teacher on the university preparatory programme emphasised language in a different way, highlighting the need to equip students with sophisticated concepts and language so that they can take part in scientific, philosophical and political debates and discussions at a higher level.

Students in both countries were confident that gender equality would improve when the generation currently in charge of society has handed over power to the younger generations.

The issue of language was not raised by the students or teachers in England.

Citizenship Education as a subject

Students and teachers had similar experiences of Citizenship Education in general. Greater differences between the countries were observed, however when it came to paying attention to conditions based on class, gender and ethnicity. Students who were studying Citizenship at the Advanced Level in England and those on academic programmes in Sweden placed considerable emphasis on the importance of Citizenship Education for their further studies and adult lives, and did so to a significantly greater extent than was the case for other student groups.

Virtually all respondents were keen to develop and expand Citizenship Education. Within the teacher groups of both countries they believed that the inadequate teaching was caused by the lack of time and other resources, and that many did not feel fully competent for the task. Among the Swedish teachers this uncertainty was especially regarding issues of class, gender and ethnicity, which may be perceived as controversial to discuss in the classroom, whereas the specialists in England had been educated to teach about controversial issues – and did not regard class or gender as controversial.

School provision

The English students and students on the Swedish academic programme thought that their schools challenged stereotypes – particularly in relation to gender and ethnicity. The Swedish students on vocational programmes highlighted the importance of social class more, both regarding their own identity and conditions as well as the conditions of society in general. As noted above, both the Swedish teachers and students considered social class as a more important aspect for citizens' conditions than the English respondents.

The students' experiences in England were that stereotypical notions of ethnicity and gender were challenged in school. In the Swedish context the contents of education were more dependent on the access of time and the teachers' experience in the area. The teachers in both countries



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mentioned limited time and resources as the main reasons for not being able to develop their teaching as they wished.

Formal v real

When we discussed how equal citizens are before the law, we also got quite similar answers. Most respondents – both students and teachers – felt that formally we are all equal before the law, but in reality, we are treated differently. There are significant similarities in the responses from England and Sweden, as well as a few notable differences. The disparity between legislation and reality is a common perception, that the law might claim to treat all the same, but social reality does not present this as a lived experience.

Finally

During the interviews it became clear that the socially constructed categories of ethnicity, gender, and social class presented a too narrow forum for discussion. Teachers and students in both countries raised other categories which they felt were due consideration; categories we had decided not to include as they might make the interview process too complicated. [Note to selves – do not underestimate research respondents.] Amongst the categories we will need to consider in the next stage of research are sexuality, disability, and region. No doubt we will find others, both through self-reflection and by listening more carefully to our respondents.

To return to our starting point of T.H. Marshall's (1950) classifications of Citizenship – Civil, Political and Social – our findings indicate some degree of consistency within and between the two countries. While in England students appear to want more depth of analysis and more opportunities for social action, the students in Sweden differed more in their experiences according to the programme they studied. There is otherwise agreement that Civil and Political Citizenship appear to be present but that Social Citizenship is haphazard at best.

Reference

Marshall, T.H. (1950) "Citizenship and Social Class" in C. Pierson and E.G. Castles, *The Welfare State Reader* Cambridge: Polity, 2006.



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Youth Activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces

Ian Davies, Mark Evans, Marta Fulop, Dina Kiwan, Andrew Peterson and Jasmin B-Y Sim

This article explores the relationship between education and social engagement. It introduces an international project that should throw light on this process and how to increase the educational benefits of young people's civic activism.



Is it possible to suggest that a vicious rather than a virtuous circle exists between education and engagement?



It seems straightforward to suggest that well educated people are more likely than others to understand and play a constructive role in democratic societies. This is perhaps the central purpose of education and all schools are likely to want their students to develop their understanding of the world around them and to have the skills and dispositions to take part in ways that make that world a better place. We could go further and suggest that outside school (either after they have left or simply in their lives in communities during the time they are students) those people will continue to learn. Their citizenship education will outside school take on a less formal shape. Through their engagement they will understand more about key issues and be better able to make things happen. Thus a virtuous circle is established between education and engagement: one nicely reinforcing the other.

In this way it is no surprise that governments around the world are so keen to encourage (and at times insist) that schools play their part in the development of cohesive communities. But is everything so simple, straightforward and positive? Is it possible to suggest that a vicious rather than a virtuous circle exists between education and engagement? If schools and individual teachers look as if they are insisting that students should become involved in particular causes for specific purposes when do we

need to draw the line? When would we suggest that indoctrination is being attempted? Indeed many countries have enacted legislation to prevent such unprofessional behaviour. And what happens when those young people become actively involved in the 'real' world beyond school? Is it the minds of most activists? If they want to achieve a particular political goal and if understanding does not need to be secured for that to happen then why would they develop educational work?

These very different possibilities are always of vital importance. And perhaps now more than ever before we need to pay attention to the interface between education and engagement. The particular context that affects us is significant. Are we living through a time of economic crisis, austerity, renewed nationalism, neo-liberalism and populism? If so, towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, what sort of engagement is in the ascendant? Do we want young people to engage in a context in which nationalism is officially promoted? If so, would it be acceptable for us to clarify in what ways and for what purposes that engagement should occur? And if we do want them to engage what would be the key causal factors and the key motivational drivers that would increase involvement? Broadly, what explains people's willingness to engage and how can that be made to be educational?

For some the answers to what drives

engagement may be found by considering broadly based societal factors. Amnå and Zetterberg (2010) have drawn attention to 4 broad contexts in which key trends may drive engagement:

- **modernization** (as people become better off and better educated so they are more likely to want more of a say in public affairs);
- **public institutional hypothesis** (the design and performance of democratic systems may facilitate or hinder engagement);
- **social capital hypothesis** (the connections between individuals facilitate or hinder engagement);
- **civic volunteerism** (the resources available to people in the form of time, money and other things make possible engagement; the motivation that people have to be involved alone or with their friends, relatives and associates arise from personal factors leading to activity).

The above factors may suggest that educational professionals need to do little. Perhaps in Bernstein's classic phrase "school cannot compensate for society". The prevailing social and political forces will determine the actions that are possible and actually taken by young people. But not all, of course, would agree with removing agency from educational professionals. Many suggest that there are very obvious and practical things that may be done to promote informed and responsible engagement.

Research evidence on amounts and types of engagement tends to be rather inconclusive. Even identifying who is engaged is not easy. Many surveys give the impression that approximately 40% of young people are socially engaged but it is often unclear as to what that actually means. If a young person was to join the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Oxfam, Amnesty International it is likely that we would accept those activities as evidence of social engagement. But what if a young person was a member of a local football team? Is that social engagement? Is it educational? Is it really citizenship education? How far can we

stretch the idea of engagement and its educational potential? Would we see social engagement to be revealed through securing paid employment to support the family income; by translating for parents at school open days; by being a cheerful neighbour? Is it possible that some indications of social engagement are framed by imagined norms associated with social and economic status, gendered roles and so on? And, if so, are some people likely to be seen more readily than others as being engaged and, as a result, (depending on one's point of view) being better educated.

How one might go about encouraging social engagement is similarly problematic. There is mixed evidence about the effects of rewards (giving certificates; academic credit; work experience; salary etc. to people who 'volunteer'). Does it undermine or devalue engagement if it is rewarded and what impact would that have on educational potential? Peer group advocacy is said to be important by some for promoting engagement but not by all. Do we see some young people as being educators of other young people? Some put the emphasis not on young people but on those who work with them and so what should youth workers do? Should they publicise opportunities, develop an inclusive ethos, provide a welcoming physical environment and be willing to deal realistically and honestly with issues that affect individuals and communities in contemporary society? Would these things make them better educators or just better facilitators?

Many of the debates about social engagement and education have been seen at local and national levels. We are now increasingly seeing international and global efforts. This is exciting and provides even more complexity. Globalization is a reality for which people should be educated but it is framed through various perspectives (economically, culturally, politically etc.); it is variously expressed (concretely through institutions and vaguely as a means of expressing harmony and tolerance); and it is differentially influential (positive and negative as well as the degree to which it affects people). In these complexities what promotes educational social

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Mervelle Numbaa, a youth reporter from DRC, makes a pledge at #YouthForChange photo courtesy of DID Thier

engagement? What can we – what should we – expect young people to do?

An international team has been established to explore these key ideas and issues about the ways in which young people participate in society and what implications that has for education.

A Leverhulme Trust funded project will explore the meanings of youth activism and engagement to young people, professionals/policy makers; patterns of participation across individuals and groups; and, how education may promote forms of civic activism and engagement congruent with democratic pluralism in a range of different socio-political contexts. This will be done using comparative perspectives with insights derived from Australia; Canada; Singapore; Hungary; Lebanon and the UK. The changing experiences of youth activism and how these experiences influence education and youth policy and practice will be discussed. During the life of the project we will organize academic seminars, workshops and events involving a range of contributors (politicians, activists, teachers, community-based educators and academics).

Our research focus is about how youth civic activism is changing, why and with what implications. As such our research questions are as follows:

- How do young people, their educators and policy makers understand and construct their civic activism, including different forms, spaces,

expectations, aims, and learning and teaching processes?

- What are the mobilizing factors and inhibitors of such engagement?
- What are the educational benefits and drawbacks of young people's civic activism principally regarding identity, capacity and efficacy for individual and social benefit from the local to the global?
- What educational processes are apt for optimising the educational benefits of young people's civic activism?

The team members are:

- Professor Ian Davies, University of York
- Professor Mark Evans University of Toronto
- Professor Maria Fulop, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Eötvös Loránd University
- Professor Dina Kiwan American University of Beirut
- Professor Andrew Peterson, University of South Australia
- Professor Jasmin B-Y Sim, National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Many of the debates about social engagement and education have been seen at local and national levels. We are now increasingly seeing international and global efforts.

Those who wish to know more about the project are encouraged to view our web pages (<https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cres/researchthemes/citizenship-education/leverhulmeyouthactivism/>) and contact us by email (education-youth@york.ac.uk)